

# **Reciprocity in English**

Historical Development  
and Synchronic Structure

**Florian Haas**



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# Routledge Studies in Germanic Linguistics

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## **15. Reciprocity in English**

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Reciprocity in English: An Overview of the Facts and Previous Research</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3 Historical Development</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>4 Intransitive Verbs Expressing Reciprocity</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>5 Reciprocity in English: A Comprehensive Perspective</b>	<b>115</b>
<i>Notes</i>	141
<i>Primary Sources and Corpora</i>	151
<i>Bibliography</i>	153
<i>Index</i>	165



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# 1 Introduction

The linguistic expression of reciprocal situations is a phenomenon that pervades different levels of description, including morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Furthermore, it provides a challenge for several approaches to language, because the semantics of reciprocal situations is rather complex—two (or more) events which are mirror images of each other—and the fact that the nature of reciprocity is, strictly speaking, not compatible with the linear nature of syntax (Haiman, 1985b) is reflected in different ways. Besides these challenges, there are other properties that place reciprocal sentences in a hybrid position with respect to a number of dichotomies normally taken to be categorical. These include the fact that two (or more) participants each fulfil two roles and also that the subevents making up a reciprocal situation may be regarded by speakers and hearers as a single event.

In fact, the main focus of this volume will be on aspects of reciprocity that have in some way to do with this hybrid position that reciprocity adopts with respect to a number of related parameters: intransitive–transitive, single event–distinct events, collective–distributive. The focus is also on these aspects due to the scarcity of previous research, which has instead concentrated on working out a fine-grained categorization of the situation types compatible with the reciprocal expressions *each other* and *one another* and on explicating all of the interpretative possibilities in a formal language. The expressions *each other* and *one another* have also been much discussed in the framework of Binding Theory, with a clear focus on their locality constraints. In contrast to the rich literature on the aforementioned topics, an analysis of the grammar of reciprocity in English which takes into account the hybridity with respect to transitivity, the collective–distributive contrast and event construal has not yet received more than cursory treatment in the literature.

The same holds for investigations on so-called ‘symmetric predicates’, Gleitman et al. (1996) being an exception. What is still lacking today is a comprehensive study that brings together different issues, such as the meaning and grammatical behaviour of symmetric predicates, the choice between reciprocal situation types, the competition between reciprocal strategies for the expression of a given state of affairs and the historical

## 2 *Reciprocity in English*

development of reciprocal markers. With the present study I want to make a step in this direction.

It will be argued that the constructions that express reciprocity in Present-day English are not distributed randomly, but rather form a system in which different forms compete with each other. (The details of this idea will be laid out in Chapter 5.) In Chapter 3 we will track how this system has developed in the history of English. To be sure, it would of course be misleading to claim that Present-day English has a regular system of expressing reciprocity, whereas the linguistic expression of such situations in older stages of English was unsystematic. At every stage of the language there was *some* kind of system of reciprocal constructions. Yet, from the point of view of grammatical constructions becoming more fixed formally, on the one hand, and the number of different constructions being gradually reduced to a well-organized subset on the other, we can indeed observe a change. This change involves at least the following aspects: what will be called the ‘basic reciprocal construction’, the construction containing the expression *each other/one another*, emerges as a result of grammaticalization and lexicalization. Furthermore, the basic reciprocal construction does not become too specialized semantically and as a result interacts with the two other main types of reciprocal construction in such a way that in all contexts a functional differentiation is possible.

The phrase ‘reciprocity in English’ does not restrict us to a particular type of linguistic expression, since the semantic concept of reciprocity may be encoded by various formal expression types, including—among other things—verbs part of whose lexical meaning is a reciprocal relation, specialized markers like *each other* and *one another* and several non-specialized ways of spelling out the reciprocal situation, e.g. clause conjunction. One aspect that has been approached mainly in the context of typological research is the relation between reciprocity and other semantic concepts such as collectivity and reflexivity. It has been observed that in many languages reciprocity, on the one hand, and one of the latter two concepts on the other, are expressed by the same marker (see, for instance, Lichtenberk, 1985; Dench, 1987; Seidl and Dimitriadis, 2003; Maslova and Nedjalkov, 2005; Bril, 2005). Given that in English there is no inflectional affix expressing collectivity and given that reflexive pronouns do not serve as markers of reciprocity, studies on reciprocity specialized on English have not normally been concerned with the relation between these domains. The relationship between reciprocity and collectivity in particular will be a major focus of my study.

### RECIPROCITY AND SYMMETRIC PREDICATES: A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Reciprocal situations may be linguistically expressed by a variety of grammatical as well as lexical means, both across languages and within a single

language (for overviews of cross-linguistic variation, see König and Kokutani, 2006; Evans, 2008).<sup>1</sup> In English the expression of reciprocity is not restricted to a single strategy either. We will see, however, that in the course of the history of the language some strategies became impossible (e.g. the reciprocal use of reflexive pronouns) and others have received a specialized meaning that the default strategy—the ‘reciprocals’ *each other* and *one another*—is not able to convey. The latter point concerns, for example, the adverb *together* and strategies of the type *each . . . the other*.

What we seem to find in every language is a limited set of predicates which contain a reciprocal component within their lexical meaning (‘symmetric predicates’) and often do not (have to) combine with a grammatical reciprocal marker. These predicates denote concepts such as social interaction (‘meet’), similarity (‘be similar’), local relations (‘intersect’, ‘be next to’) and kinship (‘cousin’). Predicates which are prototypically used for reciprocal situations (hence ‘prototypically reciprocal predicates’) without entailing symmetry in their meaning often behave similarly. These include verbs like English *kiss* and *embrace*.

In English, symmetric and prototypically reciprocal predicates are characterized by their special syntactic behaviour: they alternate between different argument realization patterns and do not require the reciprocal (*each other/one another*) as an object argument. It depends on one’s perspective whether the use of symmetric and prototypically reciprocal predicates counts as an independent reciprocal strategy or not (see Evans, 2008), but in any case they interact and compete with the unquestionable reciprocal strategies and should therefore be included in a comprehensive analysis.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Introduction

In my view, theories should be evaluated both in terms of their fundamental principles (and the conceptual and empirical justification of the latter) and the way in which they cope with specific phenomena. Although these two ways of evaluating a theoretical framework are clearly related in that for a theory to be successful it should be necessary for both of them to be convincing, it is nevertheless helpful to examine them one by one. In this way I will make clear in the following why from a general theoretical point of view this book should be guided by the assumptions of the usage-based model. In the remainder of the book, the focus will rather be on specific analyses and facts, abstracting away from more general theoretical issues.

Symmetric predicates and reciprocal constructions have received a great deal of attention from linguists working in the generative grammar

#### 4 *Reciprocity in English*

tradition and those working in the field of formal semantics. In fact, most of the studies dealing with English display these points of view. Formal semantic treatments of symmetric predicates and reciprocal sentences are numerous and often very informative. The fact that my own use of formal meaning representations is rather modest is not meant to suggest that the relevant studies are useless. Very often, however, the relevant semantic distinctions can be described equally well in a more informal manner and a formal semantic representation would arguably not add insights into the issues that I will be dealing with in this study.<sup>2</sup> As far as the generatively oriented literature is concerned, a number of generalizations presented in this book will take issue with generative analyses of reciprocal constructions. In order to get the basic issues out of the way, let me point out in the following why I consider this framework problematic from a more general point of view.

#### **Language Acquisition and ‘Plato’s Problem’**

Many of the principles and much of the machinery of Mainstream Generative Grammar (MGG)<sup>3</sup> rest on the conjecture that the linguistic input that children get is not sufficient for acquiring the complexities of syntax. The supposition is commonly called ‘poverty of the stimulus’ or ‘Plato’s problem’. On the basis of the seemingly axiomatic status of this hypothesis, the innateness of a Universal Grammar (UG), including a number of well-known principles and abstract structures has been postulated (cf. Boas, 1984: 19–22). However, as has repeatedly been pointed out (cf. Pulum and Scholz, 2002; Tomasello, 2003, 2005; Clark, 2009: 394–396) the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument is contradicted by child language research showing that infants actually receive sufficient input in order to construct a grammar. Their language acquisition involves a gradual process of abstracting away from concrete patterns heard in the input and in this way building up a system of more abstract patterns without having to revert to innate structures (cf. Bates, 1998; Tomasello, 2003, 2005; Goldberg, 2005: 69–92).

#### **Underlying Structures and Derivational Operations**

Abstract categories and multilevel sentence representations are an essential component of MGG. The need for representations in which a sentence is represented on different levels, the surface form of the sentence being derived from a more basic or ‘underlying’ structure, rests upon a number of hypotheses concerning the relation (or ‘interface’) between the form and the meaning of a sentence (cf. Culicover and Jackendoff, 2005: 46–50; Moravcsik, 2006: 180–183). The need for derivations including movement operations and abstract categories as well as the problems arising from

this type of analysis vanish if one accepts that the relation between form and meaning is more direct, viz. syntactic structures bear meaning in the same way that words bear meaning, although the meaning is typically less abstract in the latter case.

### Linguistics as a Cognitive Science

A major aspect of the so-called ‘Chomskyan revolution’ (see Koerner, 1994) in linguistics concerned the status of linguistics as a science examining the human language faculty. An important new insight was that language is a psychological phenomenon and had to be treated as such in linguistic investigation. Accordingly, the speakers’ linguistic competence has to be characterized with reference to the psychological processes that are responsible for language production and comprehension as well as its mental representation. Interestingly, generative linguistics does not seem to have contributed very much to this research programme. The actual analyses and the design of the grammatical models have become farther and farther removed from a plausible account of the psychological processes and representations involved, including both higher-level mental operations and what we know about the structure of the human brain (this point is made from different perspectives in Bates and Goodman, 1997; Jackendoff, 2002; Ritter, 2005; Lieberman, 2005; Itkonen, 2005: 44–45, 131; Dąbrowska, 2006; Culicover and Jackendoff, 2006: 415). Lieberman (2000), for example, concludes that ‘[g]iven our current knowledge concerning neural plasticity and phenotypic organization of the details of neural circuitry, it is most unlikely a detailed Chomskyan Universal Grammar is instantiated in the human brain’ (69).<sup>4</sup>

### The Description and Explanation of Typological Variation

Although it would be incorrect to say that MGG has been worked out on the basis of English exclusively (see Newmeyer, 1980: 48–49; 1983: 67–72; 2005: 28–72), the bulk of work which has led to assumptions concerning the architecture of the human language faculty has been carried out on a rather small number of languages including English, German, Dutch, Italian and French. In this way a large number of fine-grained observations and generalizations have been made. Yet, the problem is that one of the aims of MGG has always been to give a characterization of UG, that is, the human linguistic competence underlying all possible—and thus of course all existing—languages. It has been argued that the architecture of UG would look very different if a more ‘exotic’ language had been taken as a starting point (Van Valin and LaPolla, 1997; Croft, 2001: 29–47; Van Valin, 2005). Furthermore, if one investigates the structural properties of a large number of languages, representing the variety that exists, the assumption of a small

number of innate categories and structures becomes highly problematic, or they would have to be very abstract (see Croft, 2001). Accordingly, proposals for an actual list of parameters in the sense of Principles and Parameters Theory differ markedly (see Newmeyer, 2005: 81–83; Haspelmath, 2008b: 80–86).

### **The Locus of Language Change**

Generative grammar takes child language acquisition to be the only place where languages change: children get triggers from the linguistic input and in conjunction with their innate knowledge build up their grammatical system. From time to time children misanalyze the structures they hear and keep the wrongly analyzed structures in their grammar. In this way the grammar of a speaker undergoes a change. There are serious problems with this view. Firstly, child language research shows that children do misanalyze their input, but do not usually retain these analyses (Clark, 2009: 393–394). Secondly, sociolinguistic investigations into language change have demonstrated that it is adults rather than children who innovate, retain and propagate linguistic changes (e.g. Milroy and Milroy, 1985; see Croft, 1995: 520; 2000: 46–59; Aitchison 2001: 210 for summaries of the relevant studies and discussion).

### **The Usage-Based Model**

My view of the phenomena under discussion—reciprocal constructions—follows the assumptions of the usage-based model (for a concise summary of arguments in favour of this approach, see Bybee and McClelland, 2005) and (usage-based) construction grammar (cf. Goldberg 1995, 2005; Croft, 2001; Michaelis, 2003). Construction grammar takes grammar to be a structured inventory of form-meaning pairings, i.e. constructions.

The principles advocated in these frameworks that will turn out to be relevant to my discussion of symmetric predicates and reciprocal constructions are the following:

- (1) Grammar is shaped by language use. Therefore, an adequate explanation of the observed patterns can only be achieved if conditions of use are taken into account.
- (2) Linguistic competence involves knowledge of both item-specific information and abstract patterns, whereby there is not a categorical but a gradual difference between the two types of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>
- (3) The frequency of complex words and constructions in speech affects the way in which they are represented and processed.
- (4) Subtle semantic and pragmatic differences between variant grammatical structures are highly relevant to the analysis of syntax, including their mental representation and processing.

The generalizations that will be made in the remainder of this book will be led by the aforementioned assumptions. Accordingly, issues like the search for semantic contrasts between reciprocal constructions will be more prominent than in many of the previous studies on reciprocity. In turn, some other aspects like conditions on ‘binding’, i.e. the syntactic relation between the reciprocals *each other/one another* and their antecedent, or the semantics of reciprocal situation types, will be touched on only in passing. The following section outlines the structure of the book.

## OUTLINE AND OBJECTIVES

After a descriptive survey of reciprocity in Present-day English (henceforth PDE) (Chapter 2), including pointers to previous research, I present a synopsis of the historical development of reciprocal strategies (Chapter 3). Here, the focus will be on the changes that are responsible for the situation in PDE: reduction of competing strategies and thus the ongoing grammaticalization of the ‘basic reciprocal strategy’ involving *each other* and *one another*.

Chapter 4 concentrates on those verbs in English that are able to express reciprocal situations without special formal marking: symmetric and prototypically reciprocal predicates. Specifically, I will explore the different factors that determine the use of the different possible argument structures that these verbs may occur in. After critically summarizing previous research on this issue, I will consider corpus data of the verb *meet*. Given a number of observations on the interaction between the meaning of symmetric verbs and the constructions they occur in, I will reconsider the notion of ‘symmetric verb’ and argue that on closer inspection the class of verb (uses) that can be characterized as ‘symmetric’ in the logical sense commonly employed is more marginal than one might expect.

Chapter 5 focuses on the status of the reciprocal *each other* and its relation to other reciprocal strategies in the grammar of PDE. It is shown that an adequate analysis of the meaning of the reciprocal can only be achieved if we examine its competition with other reciprocal strategies and the motivations for choosing one or the other strategy in a given context. In this regard I will relate the distribution of the English reciprocal to typological observations on middle marking and event construal. Specifically, it is argued that a major determining factor in the choice between reciprocal strategies is the construal of a reciprocal situation as a single event (typically correlating with a collective interpretation of the participants) or as distinct events (typically going together with a distributive interpretation of the participants).

One of the strategies that are part of this system is the use of symmetric or prototypically reciprocal predicates without dedicated reciprocal marking as discussed in Chapter 4. The conditions on the use of symmetric and



## 8 *Reciprocity in English*

prototypically reciprocal verbs and the constructions they occur in will be related to those of the basic reciprocal construction and other strategies of expressing reciprocity.

A summarizing section of the end of Chapter 5 will conclude this book, relating the findings of the preceding discussion to each other and in this way attempting an integrative view of how English grammar deals with the concept of reciprocity.

## 2 Reciprocity in English

### An Overview of the Facts and Previous Research

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter firstly offers a descriptive overview of how reciprocal situations are expressed in PDE and also relates certain phenomena to previous research. The subsequent chapters will then address more specific issues, either by building on the data presented in this chapter or by adding more data. This chapter will thus constitute the descriptive basis on which later generalizations will be made.

As far as the data in this chapter and the remainder of the study are concerned, I will for the most part avoid using constructed examples and employ authentic data instead. These come from a number of contemporary British and American novels, as well as PDE corpora, mainly the British National Corpus (BNC),<sup>1</sup> and the Internet.<sup>2</sup> If I carry out frequency counts in order to support a point, I will mainly use the BNC and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)<sup>3</sup> for PDE data and the Helsinki Corpus as well as the Lampeter Corpus for older stages of English (see the respective chapters for details). If not marked otherwise, references are to the BNC.

#### 2.2 TERMINOLOGY

##### The Expression of Reciprocal Situations

In this study, the means of expressing a reciprocal situation are generally termed CONSTRUCTIONS. Thus it is acknowledged that, strictly speaking, reciprocity is never expressed by a single, isolated expression, but by a syntactic configuration of which a RECIPROCAL MARKER is only a part. In this way, ‘reciprocal marker’ is merely shorthand for the most salient part of a reciprocal construction.

Again abstracting away from the fact that their reciprocal meaning only arises when they are part of a larger syntactic configuration, I call the reciprocal markers *each other* and *one another* RECIPROCALS. Sentences that—by whatever means—express a RECIPROCAL SITUATION are referred to as RECIPROCAL SENTENCES. Defining the semantics of a ‘reciprocal situation’