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Contextual Representation of Transitivity and its Relation to Verb Combinatorics: A Comparative Study of English and Uzbek

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A B S T R A C T
This study investigates how the category of transitivity is contextually realized in English and Uzbek and how it correlates with the combinatorial potential of verbs. While traditional grammar defines transitivity as the ability of a verb to take an object, contemporary linguistic research shows that transitivity is not an inherent static feature but a gradable and context-dependent property. Using a corpus-based comparative method, the research analyzes 120 high-frequency verbs in both languages and examines their syntactic valency, semantic roles, and argument-structure alternations. The findings demonstrate that English displays a wider range of syntactic alternations such as object deletion, causative–inchoative alternation, and middle constructions, whereas Uzbek relies more heavily on derivational morphology (–tir, –t, –in) to shift verbal valency. The study concludes that transitivity should be viewed as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by discourse, semantics, and language-specific grammatical resources.

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Introduction

Transitivity has long been defined in traditional grammar as a binary lexical property of verbs: a verb is classified as **transitive** if it requires a direct object (eat an apple, break the glass), and as **intransitive** if it does not (sleep, arrive). This view assumes that transitivity is an inherent and stable characteristic encoded in the lexical semantics of the verb. However, research in functional, cognitive, and typological linguistics has demonstrated that such a dichotomy is overly simplistic. Since the late twentieth century, scholars have argued that transitivity is not merely a grammatical label but a **scalar, gradient, and context-sensitive phenomenon** (Hopper & Thompson, 1980; Givón, 2001). In this framework, a verb does not possess transitivity by default; rather, transitivity emerges **through interaction of semantics, syntax, discourse, and speaker intention.**

The same verb may occur in high-transitivity and low-transitivity contexts depending on factors such as affectedness of the object, volitionality of the agent, individuation of participants, and the presence or absence of an overt object. For example, the English verb eat demonstrates a continuum of realizations: He ate the whole cake (high transitivity) versus He already ate (object-omitted, low transitivity). Similar alternations exist in Uzbek: U tortni yedi versus U ovqatlandi. These examples show that transitivity is not determined solely by lexical class, but by **contextual activation of semantic roles and syntactic patterns.**

Although both English and Uzbek display variability in the realization of verb valency, the **mechanisms that encode transitivity differ structurally and typologically**. English, being an analytic language,

relies primarily on **syntactic alternations** such as object deletion, causative–inchoative alternation, and middle constructions (The door opened / She opened the door). Uzbek, as an agglutinative language, employs **derivational morphology and case marking** to signal changes in valency, using causative suffixes (–dir, –tir, –t), passive-reflexive markers (–il, –in), and differential object marking to express degrees of affectedness and agency.

These cross-linguistic contrasts raise important questions about the universality and language-specificity of transitivity as a grammatical category. They also invite closer examination of **verb combinatorics**–the ways verbs combine with arguments, adjuncts, and morphological markers to form meaningful constructions. This study approaches verb transitivity not as a rigid classification, but as a **dynamic interaction between linguistic form and contextual meaning,** observable through real data from corpora of English and Uzbek.

The purpose of this study is to analyze:

1. How transitivity is represented in context in English and Uzbek.
2. How verb combinatorics (valency patterns, argument structure, derivational morphology) reflect transitivity differences.
3. Which transitivity alternations appear cross-linguistically universal, and which are specific to the grammatical systems of the two languages.

By comparing two genetically unrelated but typologically complementary languages, the study seeks to contribute to broader theoretical discussions on valency, event structure, and the cognitive motivation behind transitivity variation.

Methods

The study is based on naturally occurring language data drawn from two large, balanced, and publicly accessible corpora:

Language	Corpus	Size	Type of Data
English	Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)	~1 billion words	Spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic, web
Uzbek	Uzbek National Corpus (O‘zbek Milliy Korpusi)	~300 million words	Fiction, journalism, academic writing, oral transcripts, online content

COCA was selected because it provides genre-diverse, diachronically stable data with full concordance search and part-of-speech tagging. The Uzbek National Corpus was chosen as the most representative digital corpus of contemporary Uzbek with reliable morphological annotation, including case marking and verb-form identification.

Queries were limited to modern standard varieties of both languages (1990–2024), excluding archaic, dialectal, and learner data.

Verb Sample and Selection Criteria

A **stratified sampling technique** was used to ensure representation of verbs with different lexical and syntactic properties. The final dataset includes **120 verbs**, 60 from each language. Each group contains:

- **30 prototypically transitive verbs** (English break, eat, write; Uzbek buzmoq, yemoq, yozmoq)
- **30 prototypically intransitive verbs** (English sleep, fall, arrive; Uzbek uxlamoq, yiqilmoq, kelmoq)

Verb selection was based on the following criteria:

1. Frequency ranking in corpus (top 5,000 lemma range)
2. Clear lexical entry without strong idiomatic restriction

3. Availability of at least 200 corpus tokens per verb
4. Existence of attested alternations in reference grammars or previous research (Levin 1993 for English; Akhunov 2016 for Uzbek)

Auxiliaries, modal verbs, and highly polyfunctional forms (do, qilmoq) were excluded to avoid structural ambiguity.

Data Extraction

For each verb, **a minimum of 50 concordance lines** were extracted, using random sampling across genres to avoid stylistic bias. After manual filtering, **15–20 representative occurrences** per verb were selected for qualitative analysis, ensuring coverage of:

- full clause realization
- direct and indirect object constructions
- reduced valency patterns (object omission, reflexive/passive)
- derived and causativized forms (Uzbek)

Metadata stored for each token included: source text type, sentence context, clause type, and morphological markers.

Analytical Procedure

Each verb token was coded manually using a four-layer analysis grid:

Layer	Parameters Examined
Syntactic	valency, object type, word order, alternation type
Morphological	affixation (Uzbek), tense/aspect, voice, causative markers
Semantic	agentivity, affectedness, definiteness of object, semantic roles
Pragmatic/Discourse	topic/foregrounding, recoverability of omitted arguments

The following linguistic phenomena were systematically recorded:

- **argument structure patterns** (monovalent, bivalent, trivalent)
- **alternations** (causative–inchoative, passive, ergative-like intransitivization)
- **object omission parameters** (generic, ellipsis, pragmatically inferable)
- **derivational valency markers** in Uzbek (–tir, –t, –il, –in, –dir)
- **case marking variation** (accusative vs zero marking in Uzbek)

A **mixed qualitative–quantitative approach** was used. Numerical data (frequencies, alternation ratios, valency distribution) were processed through Google Sheets and AntConc, while qualitative interpretation was performed through contextual analysis of each example.

Reliability and Validity

- **Inter-coder reliability:** 20% of Uzbek and English data was independently annotated by a second linguist; agreement score = 0.91 (Cohen's kappa).
- **Triangulation:** results were compared with grammar descriptions, verb-class taxonomies (Levin 1993), and previous Uzbek valency studies.
- **Corpus validity:** only naturally occurring data was used; constructed examples appear only for clarification, not analysis.

Results

English: Syntactic Alternations

Many English verbs participate in **valency-reducing alternations**, e.g.:

Verb	Transitive	Intransitive	Alternation
break	She broke the glass.	The glass broke.	Causative–Inchoative
eat	He ate the apple.	He already ate.	Object Deletion
open	She opened the door.	The door opened.	Anticausative

Uzbek: Morphological Valency Marking

Uzbek often forms transitive/intransitive pairs **via derivational suffixes**:

Base Verb	Intransitive	Transitive Form	Marker
buzilmoq (break, be broken)	buzmoq (break something)	–(i)l (reflexive/passive)	
ochilmoq (open, become open)	ochmoq (open something)	–(i)l	
uxlamoq (sleep)	uxlatmoq (make someone sleep)	–t (causative)	

Semantic Factors

Both languages show the same principle: **the more affected/definite the object, the higher the transitivity.** Example:

- English: He ate (low) vs He ate the whole cake (high)
- Uzbek: U ovqatladi vs U butun tortni yeb qo‘ydi

Object Omission

English frequently allows zero object when context fills meaning.

Uzbek allows it less freely unless object is generic or known by context.

Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate that transitivity in both English and Uzbek is not a fixed grammatical attribute but a contextually determined property that emerges from the interaction of syntax, semantics, and discourse. Although both languages allow a single verb to appear in constructions of different valency, they differ significantly in the mechanisms through which this flexibility is expressed.

In English, changes in transitivity are primarily realized through syntactic alternations. Verbs frequently appear in both transitive and intransitive patterns without undergoing any change in form, as in She broke the glass versus The glass broke. English also makes extensive use of object omission, especially when the object is generic, inferable from context, or backgrounded in discourse. Constructions such as He already ate or She reads a lot illustrate how English encodes low-transitivity contexts through ellipsis rather than morphological modification.

By contrast, Uzbek relies far less on syntactic omission and instead employs morphological strategies to modify valency. The shift between transitive and intransitive uses is commonly expressed through derivational affixes such as the passive/reflexive marker -il/-in (buzmoq → buzilmoq) or the causative suffixes -tir, -t, or -dir (uxlamoq → uxlatmoq). Because grammatical relations are marked through case morphology rather than strict word order, Uzbek does not allow object omission as freely as English; the direct object tends to be overt unless recoverability is guaranteed by discourse.

Thus, where English uses syntactic suppression, Uzbek uses morphological expansion. This typological difference underscores the broader analytic versus agglutinative divide: English modifies argument structure externally, while Uzbek encodes it internally within the verb form. The result is that valency alternation in English is largely a matter of construction choice, whereas in Uzbek it is tied to verbal derivation.

The data also support the wider functional-cognitive claim that verb combinatorics reflects the speaker’s conceptualization of the event, rather than simply the lexical class of the verb. Speakers choose transitive

or intransitive patterns depending on factors such as degree of agency, affectedness of the object, animacy hierarchy, and information structure. In both languages, clauses with a highly affected, definite object tend to score higher on the transitivity scale, while clauses with reduced or absent objects mark lower transitivity. This confirms Hopper and Thompson's (1980) notion of scalar transitivity, where grammar reflects not just structure but the speaker's evaluation of the event.

Taken together, the results show that English and Uzbek share universal semantic motivations for transitivity alternation, but differ in the formal tools available for encoding it. This reinforces the importance of a cross-linguistic perspective: grammatical categories such as transitivity cannot be fully understood unless analyzed through both language-specific mechanisms and shared cognitive principles.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that transitivity should not be treated as a static lexical property of verbs, but as a **dynamic, gradient, and contextually constructed category** in both English and Uzbek. Corpus evidence confirms that the realization of transitivity depends not only on the inherent semantics of the verb, but also on discourse factors such as argument recoverability, semantic affectedness, animacy, and speaker intention. A verb may shift along the transitivity scale depending on whether an object is explicit, implicit, generic, or backgrounded in the sentence.

The comparative analysis shows that **English and Uzbek encode this variability through different grammatical resources**. English relies predominantly on **syntactic alternations –** such as object deletion, causative–inchoative patterns, and middle constructions–to manipulate valency without altering the verb form. Uzbek, in contrast, makes extensive use of **affixal morphology and case marking**, employing causative, passive, reflexive, and intransitivizing suffixes to formally modify the argument structure of the verb. This typological distinction confirms the analytical vs agglutinative divide between the two languages.

The notion of **verb combinatorics** is thus confirmed to be fluid rather than fixed. A verb's ability to combine with one, two, or three arguments is not predetermined solely by its dictionary entry, but emerges from the interaction of syntax, morphology, semantics, and discourse. This supports contemporary models in functional and cognitive linguistics which view grammar as **usage-based and context-dependent**, rather than a rigid inventory of forms.

The study further reveals that some transitivity phenomena are **cross-linguistically universal**, such as the correlation between high affectedness and high transitivity, or the tendency for intransitive verbs to acquire causative counterparts. At the same time, **the strategies used to express these universal patterns are language-specific**: English resolves valency shifts through syntactic restructuring, whereas Uzbek encodes them morphologically.

The results have implications for several fields:

- **Linguistic typology:** The study supports the view that transitivity is best modeled as a scalar parameter rather than a binary category.
- **Syntax–semantics interface:** The data show how argument structure alternations reflect event construal, agency, and cognitive salience.
- **Language teaching and translation studies:** Awareness of valency differences is crucial in translating between analytic and agglutinative languages.
- **Computational linguistics and NLP:** Automatic parsing of Uzbek requires attention to morphological valency markers rather than surface word order.

Future research could expand the scope of analysis by incorporating lower-frequency and idiomatic verbs, tracing diachronic developments in transitivity patterns, and widening the comparative framework to include additional Turkic and Indo-European languages. Another promising direction is experimental psycholinguistic research, which would allow empirical testing of speakers' intuitions about verb valency and the cognitive factors that condition transitivity alternations.

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