

# Doing it deliberately

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## Abstract

Davidson (1980a) proposes that the *it* of *do it* refers to an event (namely, to what an agent did), where events are taken to be concrete particulars. I argue that Davidson's idea faces linguistic difficulties and offer an alternative analysis in which the *it* of *do it* refers to an event type. This alternative analysis has the advantage of naturally accounting for the problems that thwart Davidson's proposal.

## 1 Introduction

In his well-known paper, Davidson (1980a, p. 105) begins with what has become a well-known example:

- (1) Jones did it slowly, deliberately, in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight.

The context is that Jones buttered a piece of toast. Davidson's comment on this example is that

...the 'it' of 'Jones did it slowly, deliberately, ...' seems to refer to some entity, presumably an action, that is then characterized in a number of ways. Asked for the logical form of this sentence, we might volunteer something like, 'There is an action *x* such that Jones did *x* slowly and Jones did *x* deliberately and Jones did *x* in the bathroom, ...' and so on.

A few pages later (pp. 108–109) he adds that

[m]uch of our talk of action suggests ...that there are such *things* as actions, and that a sentence like [*Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight*] describes the action in a number of ways. 'Jones did it with a knife.' 'Please tell me more about it.' The 'it' here doesn't refer to Jones or the knife, but to what Jones did—or so it seems.

Although Davidson does not develop this idea regarding the referent of *it* in examples like (1) any further, it is otherwise clear from his philosophy that he thinks of actions (or more generally, of events) as concrete (i.e., dated) particulars. For Davidson, then, what Jones did is an action, hence a concrete particular, on an ontological par with both Jones himself and the piece of toast.

## 2 Three analyses of *do it*

Let's begin by taking Davidson's idea about the referent of *it* in examples like (1) seriously and ask how *do it* might be analyzed in an event semantic framework. Davidson himself does not offer a semantic analysis of *do it*, nor am I aware of any in the literature. In what follows, I will briefly consider three analyses of *Jones do it* (ignoring tense) that aim to capture Davidson's idea, in increasing order of attractiveness.

For the first analysis, consider the following (where  $x, y, \dots$  are variables for ordinary individuals and  $e, e', \dots$  are variables for events):

- (2)    a.  $\text{do} \Rightarrow \lambda e' \lambda x \lambda e [\text{do}(e, x, e')]$   
          b.  $\text{it}_5 \Rightarrow e_5$   
          c.  $\text{Jones} \Rightarrow \text{jones}$   
          d.  $\text{Jones do it}_5 \Rightarrow \lambda e [\text{do}(e, \text{jones}, e_5)]$

As seen in (2a), this analysis attributes two event arguments to *do*, where the first ( $e'$ ) corresponds to its object and the second ( $e$ ) is its standard (Davidsonian) event argument, which represents the event of doing. Moreover, as shown in (2b), *it* is translated a free (event) variable, which stands for the event referred to.

A shortcoming of this analysis is that it leaves implicit what the relation between  $e'$  and  $e$  is. With respect to (2d), is an event  $e$  in which Jones does  $e_5$  really different from  $e_5$  itself? Arguably, an event in which Jones does something and what he does are the same event, and if so, it would be best to make this explicit.

The second analysis makes this point explicit with an identity clause:

- (3)    a.  $\text{do} \Rightarrow \lambda e' \lambda x \lambda e [\text{do}(e, x, e') \wedge e = e']$   
          b.  $\text{Jones do it}_5 \Rightarrow \lambda e [\text{do}(e, \text{jones}, e_5) \wedge e = e_5]$

Although the analysis of *do* in (3a) is an improvement over the one in (2a), it would still be nice to relate the content of *do* more explicitly to other verbs of action. Arguably, the *do* of *do it* is purely agentive, and if so, an analysis in terms of the thematic relation of agent would seem more to the point.<sup>1</sup>

The third analysis employs the thematic relation of agent, thereby making the agentivity of *do* more explicit:

- (4)    a.  $\text{do} \Rightarrow \lambda e' \lambda x \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, x) \wedge e = e']$   
          b.  $\text{Jones do it}_5 \Rightarrow \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, \text{jones}) \wedge e = e_5]$

The claim that the *do* of *do it* is agentive should not be confused with the claim that all uses of *do* are agentive. Indeed, the latter claim is clearly false, as the following comparison between *do it* and *do so* demonstrates:

- (5)    a. Jones buttered a piece of toast.  
          b. When did he do it?    *Compare:* When did he do so?
- (6)    a. Jones slept in the bathroom.  
          b. #When did he do it?    *Compare:* When did he do so?
- (7)    a. Jones loved Rebecca.

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<sup>1</sup>See Parsons (1990, chap. 5) for a discussion of thematic relations in an event semantic framework.

- b. #When did he do it? *Compare*: When did he do so?

Such examples indicate that the *do* of *do so* (of VP anaphora) is not necessarily agentive, whereas the *do* of *do it* is. Since *butter* in (5a) is agentive, the corresponding question with *do it* in (5b) is acceptable, but where the verb is only very marginally agentive (e.g., *sleep* in (6a)) or not agentive at all (e.g., *love* in (7a)), the corresponding questions with *do it* are correspondingly unacceptable.

In sum, the analysis in (4a) succeeds in making it explicit that the object of *do* denotes an event and that the subject of *do* is the agent of that event, and as such it seems to be a reasonable way of spelling out Davidson's idea.

### 3 Three problems

The simplicity of the analysis in (4a) notwithstanding, I will present three arguments against taking the object of *do* to be event-denoting. If these arguments are correct, then the *it* of *do it* is most likely not event-denoting either, contrary to how Davidson would have it.

#### 3.1 Event-denoting NPs

If the object of *do* denoted an event, then we would expect event-denoting NPs in general to be happy in this position. However, curiously enough, this expectation is not generally borne out:

- (8) a. #Jones did the buttering of a piece of toast.  
 b. #The army did the destruction of the city.  
 c. #Mary did the breaking of the window.  
 d. #Do love, not war. (*Compare*: Make love, not war.)

Since we know independently that NPs such as *the buttering of a piece of toast* can denote events,<sup>2</sup> it is surprising that they cannot appear in the object position of *do*, given that this is supposed to be a position for event-denoting NPs.

Nevertheless, in certain cases it appears that event-denoting NPs are acceptable in this position:

- (9) a. Rebecca did the thinking and Mary did the writing.  
 (Context: Rebecca and Mary worked on a paper together—who did what?)  
 b. Jones did the cleaning and Peter did the cooking.  
 c. Who did the singing at the party?

Although the examples in (9) are indeed acceptable (if somewhat colloquial), I want to suggest that another use of *do* is at issue here. For want of a better term, I will label this use 'task-oriented *do*', given the intuition that its object seems to be not so much event-denoting as 'task-denoting'. Some evidence that this is indeed another use of *do* comes from German, which has two verbs for *do*, namely, *tun* 'do' and *machen* 'do (make)'. The observation is that whereas

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<sup>2</sup>Consider, for example, *His buttering of a piece of toast took place in the bathroom at midnight*.

non-task-oriented *do* in (1) may be rendered by *tun* (*es tun* ‘do it’), task-oriented *do* in (9) cannot be sensibly rendered by *tun* (*machen* may be used instead):<sup>3</sup>

- (10) Jones tat es langsam, vorsätzlich, im Badezimmer, mit einem  
 Jones did it slowly, deliberately, in-the bathroom, with a  
 Messer, um Mitternacht.  
 knife, at midnight
- (11) a. Rebecca hat das Denken gemacht (#getan) und Mary hat das  
 Rebecca has the thinking done and Mary has the  
 Schreiben gemacht (#getan).  
 writing done  
 b. Jones hat das Reinigen gemacht (#getan) und Peter hat das  
 Jones has the cleaning done and Peter has the  
 Kochen gemacht (#getan).  
 cooking done  
 c. Wer hat das Singen auf der Party gemacht (#getan)?  
 who has the singing on the party done

Although it suffices for present purposes to establish a distinction between non-task-oriented *do* in (1) and task-oriented *do* in (9), it is natural to ask whether the object of task-oriented *do* might be event-denoting, even if the object of non-task-oriented *do* is not. The object of task-oriented *do* may well be event-denoting, though sentences such as the following are very awkward, but this may simply be due to the fact that the use of complex event-denoting NPs is often awkward:<sup>4</sup>

- (12) a. ?Rebecca did the thinking of the ideas and Mary did the writing of the  
 paper.  
 b. ?Jones did the cleaning of the bathroom and Peter did the cooking of  
 dinner.  
 c. ?Who did the playing of the music at the party?

A final point regarding the object of non-task-oriented *do* in (1) is that it cannot be questioned with an NP such as *which event?* (*what event?*), and this is another way of casting doubt on the idea that it is event-denoting:

- (13) a. What did Jones do?  
 b. #Which event (#What event) did Jones do?

Compare the unacceptability of (13b) with the acceptability of (14b) with *take place*:

- (14) a. What took place in the bathroom at midnight?

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<sup>3</sup>It should be acknowledged that the use of *machen* in (11) is very colloquial. However, what is essential to the present argument is that *tun* is clearly out.

<sup>4</sup>The corresponding examples in German with *machen* are awkward as well. Note that the sentences in (8) are arguably acceptable (though awkward) to the extent that the use of *do* in question is the task-oriented one. Observe also that a curious restriction of task-oriented *do* is that its object should not be a singular count NP. For example, #*Jones did a cleaning and Peter did a cooking* is very unacceptable (compare (9b)). Clearly, more needs to be said about task-oriented *do*.

- b. Which event (What event) took place in the bathroom at midnight?

The contrast between (13b) and (14b) suggests that object of *do* is not event-denoting, whereas the subject of *take place* is.<sup>5</sup>

All in all, if the object of non-task-oriented *do* in (1) were event-denoting, then we would expect event-denoting NPs in this position to be acceptable and unexceptional, and yet this is not the case.

### 3.2 Repeated events

If the *it* of *do it* referred to a particular event, then any sentence in which *do it* is used to assert that an event is repeated is predicted to be problematic, and yet this is (again) not the case:

- (15) a. Jones buttered a piece of toast at midnight and he will do it again at noon.
- b. Jones mostly butters a piece of toast in the bathroom but occasionally he does it in the kitchen.
- c. Jones buttered a piece of toast twice today but he will do it five times tomorrow.

In fact, Cargile (1970, p. 133) pointed out this difficulty for Davidson's idea a long time ago:<sup>6</sup>

For example, consider the sentence 'Shem kicked Shaun and he did it repeatedly'. We certainly don't want: 'There is an event  $x$  such that  $x$  is a kicking of Shaun by Shem and Shem did  $x$  repeatedly.' There is no such  $x$ . A kicking is not the sort of thing that takes place repeatedly. We can, of course, say: 'A kicking has taken place here every day for the past week.' But this does not mean that there is a kicking which has taken place daily. So here is a case where representing the form of 'Shem kicked Shaun' in the way recommended by Davidson doesn't help us at all with finding the antecedent of 'it'.

In considering the problem of repeated events, we should probably grant Davidson the possibility that the *it* of *do it* may sometimes function as a bound variable. If so, examples such as the one in (16a) pose no special difficulty, as the analysis in (16b) shows:

- (16) a. If Jones butters a piece of toast, he does it in the bathroom at midnight.
- b.  $\forall e[\exists x[\text{butter}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{jones}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, x) \wedge \text{piece-of-toast}(x)] \rightarrow \exists e'[\text{agent}(e', \text{jones}) \wedge e' = e \wedge \text{in}(e', \text{bathroom}) \wedge \text{at}(e', \text{midnight})]]$

However, the examples in (15) are not amenable to this kind of treatment, precisely because a particular event cannot be repeated (this is Cargile's point).

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<sup>5</sup>I assume that whereas *which event?* and *what event?* necessarily ask about particular events, *what?* may ask about a particular event but need not do so.

<sup>6</sup>Chisholm (1970) also draws attention to the problem of event recurrence, though with more philosophical issues in mind, and unlike Cargile he does not specifically address Davidson's idea about the *it* of *do it*.

For example, the following would not do as an analysis of (15a), even though *it* is treated as a bound variable:

- (17) Incorrect analysis of (15a):  

$$\exists e[\exists x[\text{butter}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{jones}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, x) \wedge \text{piece-of-toast}(x) \wedge \text{at}(e, \text{midnight})] \wedge \exists e'[\text{agent}(e', \text{jones}) \wedge e' = e \wedge \text{at}(e', \text{noon})]]$$

Of course, Davidson (1980b, p. 183) was made aware of this difficulty for his implied analysis of *do it*:

... last night I dropped a saucer of mud, and tonight I did it again (exactly the same thing happened). The ‘it’ of ‘I did it again’ looks for a reference, a thing that can recur.

And his conclusion is (p. 184) that “[r]ecurrence may be no more than similar, but distinct, events following one after another.” This remark, though, is already a major concession, because if similarity should play a critical role in the search for a referent for *it* in the case of repeated events, then evidently the analysis of the object of *do* as merely event-denoting is at the very least insufficient.

### 3.3 Doing that

The object of *do* may also be *that* or *this*, and if it is contrastively focused, the use of *it* is even ruled out. Clearly, if *it* refers to an event, then the simplest analysis of *do* would require that *that* or *this* also refer to an event. The next example, which involves contrastive focus, shows why the simplest analysis of *do* is problematic.

Imagine the following context:

- Rebecca had a file named ‘scratch’ on her computer, and she believed that this file contained nothing important.
- Since Rebecca is a tidy person and does not like to keep useless files around, she deliberately deleted the file named ‘scratch’.
- However, Rebecca made a mistake—the file named ‘scratch’ actually contained her important letter to the rector, and she would never have deliberately deleted the file containing this letter.
- Thus, Rebecca did not deliberately delete the file containing her letter to the rector. (That is, she deleted the file containing her letter to the rector, but not deliberately.)
- In sum, Rebecca deliberately deleted the file named ‘scratch’ but she did not deliberately delete the file containing her letter to the rector.

In this context, the following sentence need not be contradictory:

- (18) Rebecca deliberately did *that* but not *that*.

Assuming Davidson’s idea that the object of *do* denotes an event, since Rebecca’s deleting of the file named ‘scratch’ is identical to her deleting of the file containing

her letter to the rector, there is only one event that can serve as the referent of *that*, and so (18) should necessarily be contradictory, contrary to fact. (If we had two distinct event referents for *that*, then (18) would not be contradictory, but the problem is just that: there is only one plausible event referent for *that*.)

Observe that it would not help in this case to reply that *deliberately* is an intensional adverb, because we would still have to find two distinct propositions for *deliberately* to apply to. To see the problem more clearly, let's take *deliberately* to be analyzed as in (19a) (where  $S$  is a predicate variable for two-place relations between events and ordinary individuals). Basically, *deliberately* denotes a three-place relation between events, ordinary individuals, and propositions. If we suppose that *that* in (18) refers to event  $e_6$ , as shown in (19b), then the analysis of *deliberately do that* is straightforwardly derived as in (19d).

- (19) a.  $\text{deliberately} \Rightarrow \lambda S \lambda x \lambda e [S(e, x) \wedge \text{deliberate}(e, x, \wedge S(e, x))]$   
 b.  $\text{that}_6 \Rightarrow e_6$   
 c.  $\text{do that}_6 \Rightarrow \lambda x \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, x) \wedge e = e_6]$   
 d.  $\text{deliberately do that}_6 \Rightarrow \lambda x \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, x) \wedge e = e_6 \wedge \text{deliberate}(e, x, \wedge \text{agent}(e, x) \wedge e = e_6)]$

Given this setup, it is easy to see that the following analysis of (18) does not work, precisely because it asserts that Rebecca had a contradictory attitude towards one and the same proposition:<sup>7</sup>

- (20) Incorrect analysis of (18):  
 $\exists e [\text{agent}(e, \text{rebecca}) \wedge e = e_6 \wedge \text{deliberate}(e, \text{rebecca}, \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{rebecca}) \wedge e = e_6) \wedge \exists e' [\text{agent}(e', \text{rebecca}) \wedge e' = e_6 \wedge \neg \text{deliberate}(e', \text{rebecca}, \wedge \text{agent}(e', \text{rebecca}) \wedge e' = e_6)]$

In other words, the formula in (20) states that Rebecca deliberately did  $e_6$  and that she did not deliberately do  $e_6$ .

In conclusion, the view that the object of *do* is event-denoting cannot naturally account for the meaningfulness of the contrastive focus in examples such as (18). Add to this the previous two difficulties discussed, we have reason enough to reject Davidson's idea and to look for an alternative.

## 4 Do as a light verb

In this section, I propose a new analysis of the *do* of *do it* in (1) and briefly discuss three of its consequences.

### 4.1 Doing it

The leading idea is now to treat *do* as an agentive light verb that has an event argument like any other verb of action but which gets its descriptive content from its object, which denotes (not an event but rather) a two-place relation between

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<sup>7</sup>Reflected in (20) is the assumption that the negation (narrowly) associates with *deliberately* in (18).

events and ordinary individuals (where  $R$  is a sorted predicate variable for two-place relations between events and ordinary individuals):

- (21) a.  $[_{VP} [_{NP} \beta] [_{V'} [_V \text{do}] [_{NP} \alpha]]]$   
 b.  $\text{do} \Rightarrow \lambda R \lambda x \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, x) \wedge R(e, x)]$

Syntactically, *do* is an unexceptional transitive verb, taking both an object and a subject NP argument, as seen in (21a). Semantically, however, it is exceptional among transitive verbs, because its internal argument denotes a relation  $R$  between events and ordinary individuals, as shown in (21b). For convenience, I will call such relations ‘event types’ and will accordingly say that the object of *do* denotes an event type.

The next step is to allow for an analysis of *it* as a free variable over event types:

- (22)  $\text{it}_8 \Rightarrow R_8$

To put everything together, we get the following as the analysis of *Jones do it*:

- (23)  $\text{Jones do it}_8 \Rightarrow \lambda e [\text{agent}(e, \text{jones}) \wedge R_8(e, \text{jones})]$

In the context for (1), we have the following event type as the referent for *it*:

- (24)  $\|R_8\|^g = \lambda x. [\lambda e. x \text{ butters a piece of toast in } e]$

In this context, then, the event predicate in (23) denotes the set of events in which Jones butters a piece of toast.

## 4.2 Consequences

In the analysis in (21), the object of *do* is syntactically an NP but semantically a  $V'$ , given that  $V'$ -constituents also denote relations between events and ordinary individuals (i.e., event types). Since the object of *do* denotes not an event but an event type, we do not expect event-denoting NPs to be acceptable in this position and—as argued in section 3.1—they are not. However,  $V'$ -constituents cannot appear in this position either, because they are not NPs (although they would be semantically appropriate there):<sup>8</sup>

- (25) #Jones did butter a piece of toast.

Note, however, that the object of *do* can still be named using a  $V'$ , as long as the  $V'$  is not syntactically its object:

- (26) Jones did it, namely, butter a piece of toast.

The second advantage of the analysis in (21) is that repeated events no longer pose a special problem (see section 3.2), because what is repeated is the event type and not the particular event. For example, the correct analysis of (15a) is as follows:

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<sup>8</sup>Naturally, the sentence in (25) is acceptable if *did* is strongly stressed, but this *do* of emphatic assertion is not the same as the light verb *do* of action under study here.



- (27) Correct analysis of (15a) (compare (17)):  

$$\exists e[\exists x[\text{butter}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{jones}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, x) \wedge \text{piece-of-toast}(x) \wedge \text{at}(e, \text{midnight})] \wedge \exists e'[\text{agent}(e', \text{jones}) \wedge R_2(e', \text{jones}) \wedge \text{at}(e', \text{noon})]$$
 (where  $\|R_2\|^g = \lambda x. [\lambda e. x \text{ butters a piece of toast in } e]$ )

Finally, the third consequence is that once we allow for the possibility that *that* (like *it*) may refer to an event type, the issue with contrastive focus on *that* in (18) (see section 3.3) is also no longer fraught with difficulty. This is because each occurrence of *that* in (18) refers to a different event type (which is also quite intuitive, given that the contrastive focus signals two different referents). To make this more explicit, let's assume the analysis of *deliberately* in (19a) and the following denotations for the two occurrences of *that*:

- (28) a.  $\text{that}_1 \Rightarrow R_1$   
 (where  $\|R_1\|^g = \lambda x. [\lambda e. x \text{ deletes the file named 'scratch' in } e]$ )  
 b.  $\text{that}_7 \Rightarrow R_7$   
 (where  $\|R_7\|^g = \lambda x. [\lambda e. x \text{ deletes the file containing } x\text{'s letter to the rector in } e]$ )

The correct analysis of (18) (compare (20)) is then as follows, where the negation is again assumed to associate with *deliberately* (just as in (20)):

- (29) Rebecca deliberately did  $\text{that}_1$  but not  $\text{that}_7 \Rightarrow$   

$$\exists e[\text{agent}(e, \text{rebecca}) \wedge R_1(e, \text{rebecca}) \wedge \text{deliberate}(e, \text{rebecca}, \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{rebecca}) \wedge R_1(e, \text{rebecca}))] \wedge \exists e'[\text{agent}(e', \text{rebecca}) \wedge R_7(e', \text{rebecca}) \wedge \neg \text{deliberate}(e', \text{rebecca}, \wedge \text{agent}(e', \text{rebecca}) \wedge R_7(e', \text{rebecca}))]$$

Note that it is now no longer a problem that  $e$  and  $e'$  happen to be identical, precisely because two different event types are at issue and which serve as the basis for the two different propositions that *deliberately* applies to.<sup>9</sup>

## References

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