

How cognitive/discourse factors can influence argument realisation: A case of object omission

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1. Introduction

In recent work a number of linguists have offered explicit and ambitious proposals for how semantic properties of verbs relate to the overt expression of arguments and predicates. These proposals have offered broad taxonomies that divide the lexicon into large semantically-uniform classes (e.g. Levin 1993). In this paper, I shall argue that these analyses underestimate the role of cognitive and discourse factors that cannot be generalised in those kinds of taxonomical analyses.

2. The Problem

For example, researchers have proposed that causative verbs obligatorily express the argument that undergoes the change of state in all contexts (Browne 1971; Brisson 1994; van Hout 2000; Ritter and Rosen 1996, 1998; Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998). This generalisation is too strong to accommodate real facts and the exceptional cases ultimately lead to a deeper understanding, from a cognitive point of view, of the general tendencies that exist. Causative verbs often do actually allow patient arguments to be omitted under certain discourse conditions:

- (1)
 - a. Dave *cut and chopped* until there was enough to fill a medium sauce pan with meat and a spicy barbecue sauce.
 - b. Tigers only *kill* at night.
 - c. Scarface *killed* again.
 - d. An old broom can *sweep cleaner*.

The phenomenon has been discussed under the headings of “unspecified object deletion”, “null objects”, etc. in the literature. Having acknowledged various approaches to this topic including Text Linguistics and Discourse Grammar (Allerton 1975; Brisson 1994; Cote 1996; Fillmore 1986; Lehrer 1970 among others), I give an account from the cognitive linguistic point of view. These counterexamples may be accounted for by the following Principle of Omission under Low Discourse Prominence in Goldberg’s (2005) Construction Grammar.

- (2) Principle of Omission under Low Discourse Prominence: Omission of the patient argument may be possible when the patient argument is construed to be de-emphasized/unprofiled in the discourse vis-à-vis the action.

What (2) claims is that the patient argument, when construed to be de-emphasised or unprofiled vis-à-vis the action, can be omitted contra Rappaport Hovav and Levin’s Argument Realisation Condition. That is, omission is possible when the patient argument is NOT TOPICAL (or focal) in the discourse, and the action is particularly emphasised (via repeated or habitual actions, strong affective stance, discourse topicality, contrastive focus, politeness strategies, etc.). However, one finds a paradoxical case in which a very HIGHLY TOPICAL patient is in fact omitted as in (3), with the sentence topic being defined as a “matter of [already established] current interest which a statement is about and with respect to which a proposition is to be interpreted as relevant” following Lambrecht (1994: 119). How do cases like (3) relate to the principle?

- (3) You wash, I’ll *dry* (“the dishes”). (In a context of washing-up) – Resnik 1993

Contrastively, topical elements are not allowed to omit the object.

- (4) What happened to that carrot?
I chopped *(it). – Fillmore 1986

3. The proposal

A cognitive analysis offered argues that cases like (3) illustrate the way in which emphasizing the action is inversely related to the prominence of the patient: the attention can be shifted away from the TOPICAL (definite) argument in favour of the action, if the action is sufficiently emphasised due to the patient argument being present and salient in the IMMEDIATE NON-LINGUISTIC CONTEXT. Thus, my analysis shows that this seemingly counterexample to (3) is subsumed under the principle in (3) and this principle extends to cases of (lexically conditioned) indefinite object omission. The analysis differs from previous analyses in that reference to the relative difference between the action designated by the verb and the patient argument alone is sufficient.

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