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ANALYSIS OF FUNCTIONAL - SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF ENGLISH VERB PREDICATES

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ABSTRACT

Verb predicates play a significant role in the grammar. One of our primary motivations for doing so was to avoid arbitrary lexical stipulations on each verb that could potentially occur in the construction. Through an analysis of linguistic structures, lexical items, and expressive devices, this study seeks to identify common patterns and variations in the expression of emotions across languages. Therefore it is worthwhile to see how much can be accounted for in a principled way by paying close attention to semantic constraints.

KEYWORDS

Predicates, lexical syntax, ditransitive, source, delimitable, description, transparent interpretation, constructions.

INTRODUCTION

Aspect of the syntax or semantics of ditransitive expressions are not predictable from other constructions existing in the grammar. First, to see that the construction contributes semantics not attributable to the lexical items involved, consider the verb bake when used ditransitively:

1. Sally baked her sister a cake.

This expression can only mean that Sally baked a cake with the intention of giving it to her sister. It cannot mean that Sally baked the cake so that her sister wouldn't have to bake it; nor can it mean that Sally baked the cake as a demonstration of cake-baking, 2. or that she baked a cake for herself because her sister wanted her to have one. Unless we associate the

"intended transfer" aspect of meaning to the construction, we are forced to say that bake itself means something like 'X intends to cause Y to receive Z by baking.' This "transfer sense" of bake would be posited only to avoid attributing aspects of the semantics to the construction.

Ditransitive expressions are syntactically unique in allowing two nonpredicative noun phrases to occur directly after the verb; the fact that English will allow such a configuration is not predictable from other constructions in the language.

The semantics of the ditransitive construction has not been studied, and this work owes a large debt to previous analyses, in particular to Catelli (1984), Green (1974), and Oehrle (1976) for their detailed discussion of hundreds of ditransitive expressions. There are certain semantic constraints on the ditransitive syntax which have not been incorporated into most theories of argument structure. The reason these constraints are often overlooked is that there appear to be exceptional cases. However, the exceptional cases form a delimitable class that can be seen to involve a general systematic metaphor (of the type described in Lakoff & Johnson 1980). It will be shown that the constraints do in fact hold in the source domain of the metaphor. To identify the first constraint, notice that each of the verbs described so far independently selects for a volitional subject argument. This generalization can be captured by assigning a

constraint on the nature of the subject argument directly to the construction. The volitionality must extend so that not only is the action described by the verb performed agentively, but also with the relevant transfer intended. For example, in 3 below, Joe must be understood to intend to give the picture to Sally. It cannot be the case that Joe painted the picture for someone else and later happened to give it to Sally. 3 Joe painted Sally a picture. Similarly, in 4 it cannot be the case that Bob told the story to someone else and Joe just happened to overhear. 4 Bob told Joe a story. This constraint also accounts for the ill-formedness of the following examples: 5 "Joe threw the right fielder the ball he had intended the first baseman to catch. 6 "Hal brought his mother a cake since he didn't eat it on the way home. 7 Joe took Sam a package by leaving it in his trunk where Sam later found it. This is no to say that the first or second object arguments of the ditransitive cannot be given a transparent interpretation. The description used to pick out the argument referent may be understood to be the speaker's description, not the subject argument's. For example, consider Ohara gave his mother a Kiss.

Joe gave Marya sweater with a hole in it.

This sentence is felicitous despite the fact that Ohara did not realize he was kissing his mother. Likewise for this statement is acceptable even if Joe did not intend to give Mary a defective sweater. Also, it is not necessarily contradictory to use "accidentally" in

ditransitive expressions; for example: Joe accidentally loaned Bob a lot of money [by mistaking Bob for Bill, his twin; without realizing that Bob would skip bail with it; instead of giving the money as a gift as he had intended]. While I do not attempt to untangle the relevant issues here, I appeal to the fact that the same possibilities of interpretation occur with other expressions that are generally agreed to require volitional subject arguments. For example, murder is a verb which is universally recognized as selecting for a volitional subject argument. Still, it is possible to say the following without contradiction: 1) Mary accidentally murdered Jane [although she had meant to murder Sue; although she had only meant to knock her unconscious]. What I am suggesting, then, is that whatever notion of volitionality is adopted to deal with verbs such as murder should also be used to capture the semantic requirement of the subject position of the ditransitive construction. The existence of this constraint has been obscured by examples such as these: a. The medicine brought him relief. b. The rain bought us some time. c. She got me a ticket by distracting me while I was driving. d. She gave me the flu. e. The music lent the party a festive air. f. The missed ball handed him the victory on a silver platter.

In these examples, the subject argument is not volitional. Even when the subject argument is an animate being, as in (c, d), no volitionality is required. However, these examples form a delimitable class of

expressions, as they are all instances of a particular conventional systematic metaphor, namely, "causal events as transfers."² This metaphor involves understanding causing an effect in an entity as transferring the effect, construed as an object, to that entity. Evidence for the existence of this metaphor independent of the ditransitive construction comes from the following expressions:

- a. The Catch-22 situation presented him with a dilemma.
- b. The unforeseen circumstances laid a new opportunity at our feet.
- c. The document supplied us with some entertainment.
- d. The report furnished them with the information they needed.

Further evident, both for the existence of the metaphor and for it motivating the ditransitive examples, comes from the polysemy of each of the predicates involved in those examples. The predicates bring, buy, get, give, field, and hand are used to imply causation, but on their basic sense they each involve transfer from an agent to a recipient. The link between these senses is provided by the metaphor. Bring, buy, get, give, lend, and hand here involve the metaphorical transfer of effect. Each of the examples implies that the subject argument is used of the first object argument being affected in some way by "receiving"

the second object argument. An additional semantic constraint is that the first object be understood to be a beneficiary, or a willing recipient. This constraint is needed to account for the following example from Green (1974). Sally burned Joe some rice. Following example unacceptable even if malicious intentions are attributed to Sally; however, it is acceptable in the context that Joe is thought to like burnt rice. Furthermore, one cannot felicitously say either of the following: Bill told Marya story, but she wasn't listening. Bill threw the coma victim a blanket.

In these examples, the first object is not understood to be a willing recipient; accordingly, they are unacceptable.

This constraint may also be responsible for the slight difference in meaning between the following two examples provided by Robert Wilensky (personal communication): a. She fed lasagna to the guests. b. She fed the guests lasagna.

Most speakers find the first example to be somewhat less polite than the second. Since feed is normally used with reference to the food intake of babies or animals, the impoliteness of the first example is not surprising; what requires explanation is the fact that the second example is interpreted to be relatively more polite. The constraint that the first object must be construed as a willing recipient can account for this, since the ditransitive version has the effect of imposing the

interpretation that the guests are willing agents, thereby according them more respect.

That the recipient is expected to be willing should not be confused with the idea that the recipient is expected to benefit from the transfer. Jack poured Jane an arsenic-laced martini. In some cases, however, the issue of the recipient's willingness or unwillingness is irrelevant to whether transfer is successful. These involve expressions in which actual successful transfer is implied: Ex: Bill gave the driver a speeding ticket. Bill gave Chris a headache. Bill gave Chris a kick.

Nonetheless, all cases in which the first object is required to accept the transferred object in order for transfer to be successful imply that the first object is assumed to be a willing recipient. Noticing that a recipient is involved in ditransitive expressions may be a first step toward motivating the double object syntax of the construction. Beginning with Jakobson, those interested in the semantics of the direct object have noted that recipients of force and effect make for good direct objects (Jakobson 1938; for recent discussion see, e.g., Langacker 1987; Rice 1987a). (Of course, this is not to say that all direct objects are recipients; clearly, the objects of cognition verbs such as believe, see, and know would present difficulties for such a claim.)

Finally, the construction has been shown to be associated with a scene of transfer. Describing the first

object as a "recipient" rather than "possessor" more adequately captures the dynamic character of this semantics.

To summarize, there is a general problem with attempts to account for caused-motion and resultative expressions by means of a simple concatenation of two independently existing predicates, the semantic interpretation being arrived at by general pragmatic principles. Such analyses do not account for the fact that such concatenation is allowed in the language in the first place. Unless we treat the secondary predicate as an argument or an adjunct, there are no preexisting means by which to concatenate the two predicates. Treating the secondary predicate as an argument of the matrix verb is tantamount to creating an extended sense of the verb.

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