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Report of the PhD thesis *Semantic analysis of gratification. Contrastive study in Polish and English – systemic and realizational aspects*, submitted by Ms. Katarzyna Kokot-Góra

1. Summary of the content

The dissertation presents an approach to the semantic-syntax interface of predicates. It argues that a formal grammatical representation of a predicate-argument structure has to be approached from the propositional (i.e. semantic) structure. It takes as a case study the verb *reward* and its various forms in Polish and in English, as prototypical of the semantics of gratification. It shows first that the semantic patterns organizing the valency corresponds to various "surface" syntactic patterns. It also demonstrates that the surface patterns, when they seem not to match propositional semantic structures, correspond to syntactic structures which "zero" (i.e. omit) realizations of some arguments, and that the options of doing so may be governed by contextual as well as communication-geared processes.

2. Original Contribution and Results

The thesis of the dissertation is clearly and explicitly formulated. It contends that predicates and their arguments generate a multidimensional relation linking their propositional structure (semantics) and their syntactic structures. The research is guided by the hypothesis that the combinatorial properties of predicates and their complements are encoded in their meaning, in what the author labels the "predicate-argument structure of a proposition". It aims at investigating the various components of this hypothesis, showing that there is a strong correlation between the semantic and the syntactic forms. The topic is thus a truly original contribution to the question of the semantics-syntax interface.

The work explores more specifically the constraints on the expression and realization of the predicate's arguments, focusing on the various cases of contextual and uncontextual zeroing of arguments. It therefore also offers a theoretical take at the question of

“unrealized” arguments, which has consequences not only on discussion of the respective contribution of semantics and syntax to a linguistic model, but also on the much debated issue of directionality of the relation between the two components. As such, it is a most welcome addition, in a novel perspective, to the bulk of studies in the field.

The topic is embedded in a large body of previous work, as shown by the extensive and careful state of the art. However, the approach is truly innovative from different perspectives. First, it is couched in Karolak’s semantic syntax framework, which claims that the predicate-argument structure, or proposition, is a core semantic component of the conceptual-linguistic system. As such, it proposes an exploration of the outputs of the theoretical approach, using the under-studied area of predicates involving a high number of arguments. The dissertation is thus also an extremely relevant contribution to the whole area of studies on event semantics which has emerged from Davidson’s work. Second, it focuses on the micro-analysis of a small set of predicates with very similar meanings, enabling thus an in-depth investigation of the “multidimensional” aspect.

Theoretically, the results are extremely valuable. They enable to integrate a notion of predicate-argument structure (or proposition) as the core of propositional meaning. More importantly, it brings strong arguments in favor of (i) a strict semantics-syntax interface approach, where one cannot survive without the other and (ii) more controversially, a clear indication that the interface relations are unidirectional, syntactic structure feeding into (abstract) semantic structures. Moreover, the comparative approach contributes to the investigation of the universals of languages, irrespective of the actual framework and working hypothesis of researchers. Therefore, the dissertation offers a very valuable contribution to linguistic theory.

Empirically, the results, focusing on a small set of predicates which involve several arguments, are also extremely convincing. The thesis explores, in a systematic way, the different argument structures and the possible realizations of the arguments in the syntactic structure. The semantic arguments are carefully analysed for each verb type, and the corresponding syntactic structure, with what the candidate calls contextually or uncontextually zeroed arguments, are shown to be derivable from the semantic structures. Again, the empirical contribution is valuable, in terms of individual language study, but also in view of a typological contribution to the field.

The overall results thus provide a good answer to the research question and open up new perspectives for a larger scale analysis. They are exportable to other predicates and ultimately, are relevant to all linguistic structures/forms. Moreover, they are accessible to different frameworks and, because of the relevance and ‘universality’ of the research question, they contribute to a deeper knowledge of language.

3. Methodology

The author demonstrates strong research competences. First, the thesis provides a well-defended and adequate application of a given framework and of the theoretical apparatus. It makes clear distinctions between the existing literature and the personal contributions, showing a great scientific rigor and honesty. Second, the choice of the empirical research is adequately supported by corpus work. Both the data collection and the treatment of the resulting corpus are done with the same care and respect of scientific criteria. The statistical treatment of the data provides information which is used adequately, enabling the author to construct a real scientific argument. Indeed, she does not only give bare figures, or draws statistical information. The results are carefully weighed against the theoretical expectations, and are used in a qualitative manner to confirm/invalidate some of the hypotheses. The overall result provides a clear, realistic picture, carefully steering away from idealizations, of the behavior of reward verbs and their arguments.

4. Remaining issues

While the dissertation addresses a complex question and provides clear answers to its research question, there are inevitably some issues that remain unaddressed.

First, the question of the ‘explicative’ approach would need to be discussed in more details. The term seems directly adopted from Karolak’s approach. Is it expected to provides a deep, grounded explicative power to the system, and if so, how is this achieved? Or, as it rather seems to emerge from the results, is it an observation-based approach leading to generalizations (not seeking deep explanatory power)? While the second is implicitly, if not explicitly, reached in the dissertation, there is actually no attempt to provide the first. This is not a problem per se, but it would be worth mentioning what the approach really seeks to do.

Another important issue, on the empirical side, arises from the contrast the author observes between NAGRODZIĆ/NAGRADZAĆ and WYNAGRODZIĆ, but also from the general affixation system of the chosen verbs in terms of ‘aspect’. Clearly, the argument structure is not only a property of the predicate, but also of its interaction with aspectual markers, as is well known for Slavic languages. Does the aspectual marking play a role in the argument structure? How is it integrated? What variations can therefore be predicted? There are a certain number of consequences of adopting an approach which integrates aspectual information, which is clearly independent from – but interacts with the core predicate meaning and the way it handles its arguments.

A third, smaller observation concerns the types of arguments. The author makes a distinction between causally involved agents and mentally involved agents. While the

system is presented as an inclusion relation, it is not clear how much of it is not overlapping. In other words, the distinction between causally and mentally involved agent does not seem to be a strongly motivated claim.

Another minor comment concerns the inclusion of a ‘purpose’ argument in the argument structure of “rewarding” events, of which I am not really convinced. It would be relevant to discuss this point further.

5. Form

The dissertation is organized in a very clear way. It presents the background information, as well as the theoretical framework, including terminological questions that will be useful throughout the discussion. It clearly shows the pedagogical as well as the scientific competences of the author. The conclusions are clear and well presented, and provide extensions for a broader set of questions, leaving room for future research. The style is also very clear and results in a very reader-friendly text. One small regret, though: it would have been useful to have a real summary of the findings in the concluding chapter.

In general, the dissertation goes into many minute details about each of the instances of the relevant predicates. While the methods and the results are absolutely relevant for an academic dissertation, I would recommend that in a future publication, an effort be made to synthesize some of the outcomes to make the work more accessible t a larger audience of researchers.

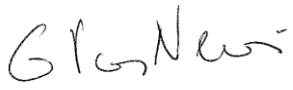
6. Conclusion

The dissertation presented here is a solid and original contribution to the linguistic field. The contribution is theoretical, with arguments supporting the hypothesis that the combinatorial properties of predicates and their arguments as well as some constraints on the realization of the latter, is encoded in the predicate-argument structure. It is also empirically, with a fine-grained analysis of verbs expressing rewarding from a comparative perspective. It provides the basis for a wider picture into the investigation of linguistically relevant aspects of semantics-syntax interface and the language system in general.

The author has demonstrated excellent capacities to conduct independent research, proposing personal and original ideas, which she defends in a rigorous way, with a clear methodology and scientific honesty. As it was mentioned, a few questions remain which deserve to be further discussed and developed, to increase the scientific impact of the research. However, none of them questions the grounds of the study nor its results. On the

contrary, they tend to show the relevance of the work and the potential it has for further developments, and will be the source of interesting exchanges during the defense. It is thus an authentic piece of research, whose theoretical and empirical reach go beyond the current results and are relevant to all linguistics interested in questions of interface and of the architecture of language.

I therefore deem the thesis ready for the defense.



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