The Form-Meaning Connection

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1 Introduction

• Semantics must be generative
• Structure is correlated with certain abstract meaning
• There is a difference between structure and encyclopedic/conceptual structure

(1) John saw the man with the telescope.
   Meaning 1: ‘John saw the man using the telescope as an instrument’
   Meaning 2: ‘John saw the man who had a telescope.’

The mapping between syntax and semantics poses major questions for the architecture of grammar and for the understanding of human cognition more generally.

Since so much of the mapping between structure and meaning in language seems to be universal, or at the very least show pervasive patterns, the following questions arise:
- To what extent are the similarities across languages due to similarity of cognitive uptake of the world across human minds?
- To what extent are these similarities of cognitive uptake specific to the structuring found in the linguistic symbolic system?
- Given that we are the only species that has a ‘generative semantics’, what aspect of structural semantics are special and innate to the human species?

2 Argument Structure Asymmetries

(2) (a) John broke the window.
(b) The strong winds broke the window.
(c) The iron key opened the old rusty lock.
(d) The drug lord murdered the witness.
(e) Mary dislikes horror movies.
(f) The blanket covered the baby
(g) John resembles his grandfather.
(h) The 1970s saw the rise of punk rock music.
Causation is expressed overtly as an affix on basic verbs in many languages

(3) a. makaan ban-aa
   house make-PERF.M.SG
   The house was built.

b. anjum-ne makaan ban-aa-yaa
   Anjum-ERG house make-aa-PERF.M.SG
   Anjum built a house.

(from Butt (2003))

Even in languages without overt causative morphological, causative alternations are pervasive

(4) a. The wind broke the window.
   b. The window broke.

(5) a. Mary danced.
   b. *John danced Mary.

No language has simplex verb forms where the undergoer of the change of state is expressed as ‘Subject’ and the causer of that change of state is expressed as ‘Object’.

(6) *The window blevvied the wind.
   (but, note The window was broken by the wind.)

Morphologically simple verbs seem to conform to a number of basic templates: Ramchand (2008) argues that the following structures exhaust the possible verb types in English, and possibly all languages.

(7) **Holding of a State:**

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    VP    
   /\     
  /  \    
 DP  V_   
   |     
  'John' 'resembles' 'his grandfather'
```

(8) **Holding of a Changing Property:**

```
    VP    
   /\     
  /  \    
 DP  V_ PP   
   |     
  'The cocoa beans' 'dried' 'in the sun'
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(9) *Holding of a Source Property Leading to Holding of Changing Property (via CAUSATION)*:

![Diagram of sentence structure](image)

(10) *Holding of a Changing Property Leading to Holding of Final Property (via CAUSATION)*:

![Diagram of sentence structure](image)

• *Open Research Question*

  Is the correlation of structural embedding with causation a property of our general cognitive capacities as human beings, or is it specific to language?

### 3 Tense-Aspect

When expressions of Tense (T) (e.g., future, present, or past) combine with expressions of aspect (Asp) (e.g., perfective, imperfective, progressive, durative, or habitual) the expression of Asp is overwhelmingly frequently closer to the verbal root than the expression of T. See (11) Chibemba (from Julien 2002b:202) and (12) Nahuatl (from Brockaway 1979:179).

(11) n- k’a- laa- boomba
    1sS- fut- prog- work
    I'll be working tomorrow

(12) ni- k- kak- to- s
    1sS- 3sO- hear- dur- fut
    I will be hearing it (North Puebla Nahuatl)
“Julien (2002b, Appendix 2) lists morpheme and function word order for 530 languages, organized into 280 different genera. Of those, 63 languages belonging to 47 genera are indicated as having both Tense and Aspect suffixes (counting Perf[ective] as Aspect and Fut[ure] as Tense). In all but three cases, Aspect is closer to the stem than Tense.” (Svenonius 2005)

(13) Kiparsky’s Generalization (2010)

a. When different orders have different meanings, they always mirror semantic scope.
b. When morpheme order is fixed, then either
   (i) The fixed order is ambiguous between two scopes (Bantu)
   (ii) Only the interpretation that reflects the fixed order is available (Sanskrit and Finnish).

References


• Butt, Miriam. 2003. ‘The Morpheme that Wouldn’t Go Away: Causatives in Hindi/Urdu.’, Talk on Urdu causatives, held at the Workshop on Pertinacity, Schloss Freudental, updated handout from March 2003


• Kiparsky, Paul. 2010. ‘Optimal order and scope: inside and outside the word’, Invited Talk, *What’s in a Word* conference, University of Tromsø
