Semantic conditioning of unspecified object deletion
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A staple of syntactic theory since Chomsky (1965) is that the argument structure of a verb is listed in its lexical entry as a stipulation, rather than being deriveable entirely from the lexical semantics of the verb (e.g., Jackendoff 2002). The verbs *eat* and *devour* are often taken as a case in point: *eat* allows unspecified object deletion, while in the case of *devour*, both the subject and the object are obligatorily expressed. In this paper I argue that even this difference is grounded in a meaning difference: *devour* expresses both manner and result, while *eat* expresses only manner.

It is well-known in the lexical semantics literature that certain aspects of verb meaning contribute to argument structure. First, the internal argument of a result verb cannot be dropped (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1998; Rappaport Hovav 2008). For example, the result verb *dim* cannot be used without an object (1a), nor can it be used in a resultative construction with an unsubcategorized object (1b) (Rappaport Hovav 2008:24):

(1)   a.   All last night, we dimmed *(the lights in the house).
          b.   *We dimmed the room empty.

Likewise, that the subject of a manner verb must be expressed, and cannot be replaced with an instrument or a non-sentient cause (Van Valin & Wilkins 1996; Reinhart 2002; Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2012). For example, with the manner verb *feed*, the subject must denote an agent, rather than an instrument or an inanimate cause (Reinhart 2002:230):

(2)   The father/*the spoon/*hunger fed the baby.

Other arguments can be dropped, given a suitable context (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1998).

Devour passes both of these syntactic tests: it requires an agentive subject (3a,b), and does not allow an unsubcategorized object (3c). *Eat*, on the other hand, can appear with an unsubcategorized object (3d):

(3)   a.   John/*a knife and fork/*starvation devoured the pizza.
          b.   *Rust devoured the metal of my car.
          c.   *John devoured the restaurant out of business.
          d.   John ate the restaurant out of business.

These tests show that *devour* specifies both manner and result, while *eat* specifies only manner; the selectional differences between the two follow from this difference in meaning.

This finding is contrary to the lexicalization constraint, the claim that a verb may express either manner or result, but not both (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1998, 2013, 2014; Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2010). This means that *devour* represents another class of counterexamples to manner/result complementarity (see Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2012). Time permitting, this paper will discuss the lexicalization constraint in light of these counterexamples.

References

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