

The difference between semantics and pragmatic/encyclopaedic knowledge in a constructional account of alternating constructions

Background

Several syntactic alternations have been investigated to determine the nature and semantic range of verbs and the constructions in which they occur. Recent developments in the syntax/semantics interface (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2008) and Construction Grammar (Kay 2005, 2013) suggest that coded meanings ought to be distinguished from inferred information (Levinson 2000, Carston 2012, Coene & Willems 2006) in constructional accounts.

Objectives

The aim of the paper is to determine how to distinguish coded *meanings* of verbs and constructions from non-coded *senses* that come about on the basis of pragmatic/encyclopaedic enrichment. To this end, we investigate the role of pragmatic/encyclopaedic knowledge in the use and interpretation of two alternating ditransitive argument structures in present-day German. In particular, we aim to determine whether the alternating structures in German are constructions in their own right with encoded semantic properties similar to the Double Object Construction ('caused possession') and Prepositional Object Construction ('caused motion') in English, or whether they are alternants of a higher-level argument structure construction with a general underspecified meaning.

Methodology

We conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of three common ditransitive verbs (*geben* 'give', N=1300, *senden* 'send', N=1000, *schicken* 'send', N=1300) that partake in the ditransitive alternation in German. Examples were drawn from the *Deutsches Referenzkorpus* (<http://www.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2/>). The alternation primarily concerns the way the RECIPIENT argument is expressed, viz. in the dative (a-sentences) or with *an* + accusative (b-sentences):

- (1) a. *Solarsteckdosen, die unterwegs **dem Handy oder iPod** wieder Strom geben.*
b. *Die Zentrale gibt ein Signal **an einen Minicomputer** am Handgelenk des Schiedsrichters.*
- (2) a. *Miura sendet **seiner Familie** Grüße vom Gipfel des Everest.*
b. *Klassenleiter Bernhard Graffe sandte einen Brief **an alle Vereine**.*
- (3) a. *Die Abteilungen schicken **der Tagesklinik** die meisten Patienten.*
b. *Sie schicken die Teststreifen nicht **an die Kinderklinik**.*

Results

Whereas it is generally acknowledged that the English Double Object Construction is dedicated to expressing transfer of an object to a sentient Recipient (cf. **Liza sends storage a book*, Goldberg 2003), animacy of the RECIPIENT does not appear to be a coded feature of the corresponding German argument structure, compare (1a), (3a), and (4):

- (4) a. *Sobald jemand **dem PC** eine elektronische Post schickt, leitet dieser die Nummer vollautomatisch an das Handy zum Abspeichern weiter.*

The analysis corroborates the typologically supported assumption (Bickel 2011) that the two alternating argument structures in German are not two systemic constructions characterized by discrete encoded semantic properties. They constitute two 'allostructions' (Cappelle 2006) of a general three-place GOAL-construction [NP_{AGENT} V NP_{THEME} NP/PP_{GOAL}] whose GOAL argument is underspecified (Frisson 2009) with regard to animacy. On the other hand, a host of variable factors such as animacy of RECIPIENT, pronominality of the arguments, specific verb sense, givenness, and length difference of the objects concur to yield strong preferences (including coercions) for one or the other alternating structure, without however being coded features of either alternant. Hence these factors are inferred

pragmatic and encyclopaedic properties of the *senses* associated with the allostructions, not encoded properties of any construction *meaning* proper.

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