

A frame-semantic approach to verbal valency patterns

An important question in research on the syntax-semantics interface involves how speakers represent and store information about verbal valency behavior. The assumption that a verb's meaning largely determines its syntactic properties has led scholars to account for this relationship using verb classes (Levin 1993), lexical rules (Pinker 1989), or principles of verb-construction fusion (Goldberg 1995). Despite their differences, these approaches share a view that little information is needed in a verb's lexical entry to determine its syntactic behavior. For instance, because *steal*, *shoplift*, and *filch* can be used synonymously in sentences like (1), one may attribute this grammatical behavior to the "theft" semantics shared by verbs and general linking principles. However, this view is challenged by examples in which near-synonymous verbs vary in their grammatical behavior, suggesting that speakers must also possess detailed, verb-specific valency information (Faulhaber 2011). That is, the verbs above do not pattern identically in all constructions, such as simple intransitive constructions (2), and their (non-)participation in such constructions must be stored for each verb independently.

(1) *Pat {stole/shoplifted/filched} something from the store.*

(2) *Pat always {steals/shoplifts/*filches}.*

Using data on English Theft verbs, I demonstrate how the inclusion of frame-semantic information in verbal lexical entries helps us model speaker's knowledge of both the systematic and idiosyncratic behavior of near-synonymous verbs. After introducing Frame Semantics (Fillmore 1985) and establishing its advantages over other verb classification approaches, I describe how Theft verbs are represented in FrameNet. I begin with a close-up analysis of individual Theft verbs, which reveals subtle differences in their meaning and grammar. While some differences may be attributed to detailed meaning components (e.g. the detailed semantics of *shoplift* allowing the stolen goods to be omitted under a generic interpretation as in (2)), most discrepancies cannot be tied to verbal meaning, as with the behavior of *steal* and *filch* in (1)-(2). Thus, a fine-grained analysis of verb classes shows that speakers require verb-specific valency information to accurately use these verbs.

However, a broader view of this class reveals similarities, including their association with the same set of participants (~frame elements) and their occurrence in a limited spectrum of closely related constructions. A brief comparison against verbs of Change (*turn*, *alter*) and Personal Relationships (*marry*, *engage*) shows that verbs of other classes are associated with a drastically different array of participants and constructions (e.g. none of these verbs appear in constructions like (1)) and that verbs in these classes differ from one another with respect to different semantic properties. These findings suggest that the detailed verb-specific information speakers possess can, to a large degree, be predicted from the verb's frame-semantic class membership.

To conclude, I propose lexical entries for several Theft verbs which include both systematic, frame-semantic information and idiosyncratic, verb-specific information which sets the individual verb(s) apart from others of the same frame, and compare these representations to entries proposed in previous literature.

References

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