

Near-synonymous verbs with non-uniform syntax: Change verbs in German and English

An important insight in research on the syntax-semantics interface states that verbs with shared meaning components exhibit similar syntactic behavior (Levin 1993: 1). This finding has led to the formulation of verb classes such as those in Levin (1993) and FrameNet (Ruppenhofer et al. 2010). However, the exact relationship between verb meaning and syntax is not entirely clear, nor how this relationship plays out across languages. My talk investigates subtle semantic and syntactic differences among verbs of Change in English (*turn*, *alter*) and German (*ändern*, *verwandeln*) to shed light on how form and meaning interact within and across languages.

I begin by presenting the methodologies for verb classification employed by Levin (1993) and FrameNet and their resulting classification(s) of English Change verbs, noting how different approaches to classification result in (sometimes quite) different classes. I then test the assumption that shared meaning implies shared syntax using English verbs of Change. In particular, I use data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English to analyze verbs of Change, particularly their syntactic behavior, semantic constraints, and aspectual properties. The analysis reveals that despite significant overlap, none of the verbs appear in the same range of contexts with equal frequency. For instance, *change* can appear intransitively while *turn* cannot (*He has changed/*turned.*), and *alter* is very infrequent with *into* PPs signifying the final state of the change (*??He altered it into something else.*). I demonstrate how these data challenge the aforementioned assumption and describe how Frame Semantics (Fillmore 1985) and Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995) may help to account for this behavior

In the second part of my talk, I investigate German verbs of Change and the degree to which they overlap with the English data. The German lexicon contains more verbs of Change than English, partially due to German's rich set of verbal prefixes, which can be appended to roots (*ändern*, *umändern*, *verändern*). The constructions associated with these verbs also exhibit syntactic differences, such as in preposition choice and transitivity properties. For instance, because German Change verbs are not used intransitively (**Er hat verändert.*), Change events in which the agent is backgrounded are often associated with a reflexive direct object (*Er hat sich verändert.*). An analysis of these verbs in the DWDS German corpus (www.dwds.de) reveals that the German verbs also differ in their semantic constraints on arguments and in the range of constructions they may appear in. I then discuss what factors may influence this behavior, such as the verbs' frame semantics, phonological factors, and the contribution of verbal prefixes.

To conclude, I stress the importance of reexamining the assumption of shared meaning and shared syntax and summarize how detailed analyses of verb classes, as well as conceptual tools from Cognitive Linguistics, may help in the reformulation of this assumption.

References

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