Lexical semantics, syntax, and event structure

Edited by Malka Rappaport Hovav, Edit Doron, and Ivy Sichel


Reviewed by Terry Malone
FUSBC-Medellín and Latin America Mission

According to the introduction, the contents of this book, a collection of papers, stem from talks given at a workshop in 2006 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, held in honor of Dr. Anita Mittwoch, who has worked chiefly on “the linguistic representation of temporality and its interaction with the lexical semantics of verbs and the syntax and semantics of arguments and modifiers” (p. 1). The papers represent a gamut of theoretical approaches, but the majority are couched in the Chomskyan tradition.

The editors have provided an excellent introduction (pp. 1–18) to the collection of papers. The basic issues are discussed, each paper is summarized and related to the issues at hand, and Dr. Anna Mittwoch’s life work is summarized. The introduction is worth reading just for its summary and discussion of “linguistic representations of event structure” (pp. 1–4), but in general is a useful guide to navigating through the variety of topics addressed throughout the book. The editors have divided the papers into three categories: (1) those that consider issues related to lexical representation; (2) those that deal with “the nature of argument structure, how the argument structure of verbs are derived and the relation of argument structure to morphology” (p. 8); (3) those that discuss the relationship of arguments, adjuncts, and auxiliary verbs with “the temporal/ modal dimension of the clause” (p. 12).

Within the first group of papers, Malka Rappaport Hovav and Beth Levin (Chapter 2: “Reflections on Manner/Result Complementarity,” pp. 21–38) argue that manner verbs and result verbs are complementary: “we suggest that all result roots specify scalar changes, while all manner roots specify non-scalar changes” (p. 28). The authors’ theoretical leanings are not clear; however, they are both known for their work in the field of lexical semantics, and the paper reflects that orientation. In the next paper (Chapter 3: “Verbs, Constructions, and Semantic Frames,” pp. 39–58) within the theoretic framework of Construction Grammar Adele Goldberg proceeds to blow their analysis apart, citing counterexamples and arguing that “the only constraint on the combination of events designated by a single verb is that the events must constitute a coherent semantic frame” (p. 39).
In contrast to the two previous papers, Nomi Erteschik-Shir and Tova Rapoport (Chapter 4: “Contact and Other Results,” pp. 59–75) use a structural approach to explain variation in argument relations for English verbs of contact such as hit, smear, splash, spray, splatter. They use what they call “Atom Theory” (summed up on pp. 61–67), in which “verbs are decomposed into atomic meaning components whose syntactic projection derives aspectual interpretation and argument selection,” using “a restricted universal inventory of atoms...: Manner (M), State (S), and Location (L)” (p. 61). The atoms are included in the lexical entries of verbs, and differences in argument representation for any given verb are occasioned according to where the atoms attach in the structural representation of the verb. The last paper in this group, by Martin Everaert (Chapter 5: “The Lexical Encoding of Idioms,” pp. 76–98), addresses “the question of how idioms are lexically represented in a generative theory” (p. 77). Everaert reaches a number of interesting conclusions concerning the nature of idioms and the lexicon (or lexicons) (see p. 98 for a good summary). His paper can be considered to be a further development of Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow 1994, a classic paper on idioms.

The second group of papers begins with Irit Meir’s “The Emergence of Argument Structure in Two New Sign Languages” (Chapter 6, pp. 101–123); the sign languages discussed are Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language and Israeli Sign Language. Meir concludes that “both languages end up developing grammatical means for encoding argument structure: in Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language a consistent SOV word order emerges, while Israeli Sign Language develops verb agreement” (p.105). “This difference between the two languages indicates that there is no one universal path for the development of argument structure marking” (p.120), although Meir suggests that the different origins of the two sign languages could contribute to the differences in argument structure marking. Elizabeth Ritter and Sara Thomas Rosen (Chapter 7: “Animacy in Blackfoot: Implications for Event Structure and Clause Structure,” pp. 124–152) argue against the traditional analysis of Algonquian “finals” (verb final morphemes that indicate the transitivity of the verb to which they are affixed), demonstrating that they are not consistent markers of transitivity, nor do they “encode aspertal distinctions” (pp. 126–133), nor do they “express argument structure” (pp. 133–138), nor are they just “inflectional agreement morphemes.” They argue that instead “the semantic contribution of the final is to determine whether an external argument is selected” (p. 147), and by implication, “different theta roles are assigned by different finals” (p. 148). They further propose that the finals are light verbs (pp. 147–151).

The papers in the second group continue with Julia Horvath’s and Tal Siloni’s “Lexicon versus Syntax: Evidence from Morphological Causatives” (Chapter 8, pp. 153–176), who argue, on the basis of a comparison of the behaviour of morphological causatives in Japanese and Hungarian, “that while certain morphological causatives are indeed formed in the syntax, others ought to be derived before any syntactic structure is available” (pp. 153–154), i.e. in the lexicon, suggesting “an active lexicon where generative mechanisms can apply,” as opposed to a lexicon composed of “noncomputational lists of items” (p. 154). The authors carefully exclude transitive-unaccusative pairs (“X breaks the pot; the pot breaks”—lumped by some researchers under the label “causative”) and use diagnostics (such as “causativization of coordinations,” etc.) to demonstrate whether or not causatives in each language have access to syntactic structure. In contrast, Artemis Alexiadou (Chapter 9: “On the Morphosyntax of (Anti)Causative Verbs,” pp. 177–203) discusses transitive-unaccusative pairs (she refers to them as “causative” and “anti-causative” pairs), arguing on the basis of data from Japanese, Modern Greek, Hindi, Turkish, Korean, and
Armenian. She divides languages into two groups with respect to morphological marking of the alternation: in group (1) “the type of root involved determines its behaviour in alternations”; in group (2) “all roots can participate in alternations, but the root classification correlates in part with morphological behaviour” (p. 180). The division is crucially based on her classification of roots: “a. agentive (murder, assassinate); b. internally caused (blossom, wilt); c. externally caused (destroy, kill); d. cause unspecified (break open)” (p. 179). In no language do agentive roots participate in the alternation, because an agent must always be present for this class of root.

The last paper in the second group is by Idan Landau (Chapter 10: “Saturated Adjectives, Reified Properties,” pp. 204–225), who proposes two operators, “Unselective saturation (SAT),” and “reification” (R) to account for pairs such as (1) below (his example (1), p. 204):

(1) a. John was very generous (to Mary).
   b. That tribute was very generous (of John) (*to Mary).

According to Landau, “SAT is nothing but the operation deriving passive verbs from active ones,” and “R is the operator that introduces the external argument of nominals” (p. 205). Later the author states that the SAT operator “unselectively saturates all argument positions in any predicate it applies to” and the R operator “introduces an entity that realizes the property denoted by its complement” (p. 223). “SAT is a lexical operation” (p. 214), whereas R seems to be included in “the semantic value of the adjectivizing head” (p. 216)—its status in the lexicon is not clear (at least to me). The author categorizes his proposal of SAT and R as “a step towards a more category-neutral view of argument structure” (p. 205). What struck me about the pairs in all the examples in this paper is that they can equally be viewed as alternations between animate and inanimate (surface) grammatical subjects, and this observation makes me wonder if some alternative analysis could be developed for the data, especially given the pervasive function of inanimate-animate oppositions in the grammars of some (non-Indo-European) languages.

In the third group of papers, “Syntactic and Semantic Content of Event Structure,” Fred Landman and Susan Rothstein (Chapter 11: “Incremental Homogeneity in the Semantics of Aspectual for-Phrases,” pp. 229–251) develop “the notion of incremental homogeneity...to account for the distribution of for-phrases” (p. 230) in examples such as their (1), on p. 229 ((2) below):

(2) a. John was happy for some weeks. (stative)
   b. Mary ran for two hours. (activity)
   c. Bill pushed three cars for two hours. (activity)

Secondly, they propose for the contrast between a-b and c in (3) (their example (2)) that for-phrases in accomplishment predicates which have bare plural or mass objects accept modifiers only because “the semantics makes reference to a kind, and the predicate involved is incrementally homogeneous” (p. 230):

(3) a. John ate apples for an hour.
   b. John ate bread for an hour.
   c. #John ate three apples for an hour.
In the course of their analyses, they propose an explanation for “why accomplishment verbs with bare plurals are atelic” (p. 239), and suggest that an “iteration event e can be regarded as an (abstract) incremental process of producing more and more witnesses for the iteration” (p. 250).

The next chapter (Chapter 12: “Event Measurement and Containment” pp. 252–266), in which Anita Mittwoch also discusses English for-adverbials, has a different emphasis: Mittwoch focuses more on implications of the traditional atelic-telic distinctions between for- and in-adverbials (in contrast to Landman’s and Rothstein’s focus on “kinds”), concluding that “while for-adverbials denote measure functions, in-adverbials are not measure functions, but rather denote container intervals” (p. 265). Both papers are significant, in that they propose alternative analyses accounting for the effects of nominal and/or adverbial qualities on verb aspect/Aktionsart, long a matter of concern to theoretical linguists.

Papers in the third group continue with “Draw” (Chapter 13, pp. 267–283), in which Christopher Piñon argues that the verb draw has three meanings, morphologically distinguished in Hungarian: (1) “the creation of a kind of drawing, ex nihilo...of no object in particular”; (2) “the creation of a drawing that depicts a particular ordinary individual, physical image, or mental image that the agent has seen”; (3) “the creation of a drawing that fits a particular description that the agent is acquainted with” (pp. 282–283). Geoffrey Horrocks and Melita Stavrou (Chapter 14: “Morphological Aspect and the Function and Distribution of Cognate Objects Across Languages,” pp. 284–308) analyze cognate objects (“he fought a fight,” “he wrote a writing”) in Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, Modern Hebrew, and English, concluding that while in Greek cognate objects “are normally fully referential transitivizing objects with argument status” (p. 307), in other languages such as Hebrew cognate objects “denote non-referring and non-argument activities (non-terminative) and events (terminative), and their primary role is to facilitate adjectival modification as a means of replicating manner adverbials in a language with very few lexical adverbs” (p. 308). English is a hybrid, using cognate object constructions “to form VPs capable of sustaining a telic reading” (as does Greek), but also to indicate “non-referring non-arguments” with the limitation that they only apply to “terminative unergatives” (pp. 307–308). The differences reflect the grammatical status of aspect: in Greek and Hebrew it is a grammaticalized inflectional opposition, whereas in English, which does not have this opposition, the aspectual character of verb roots must be specified in the lexicon.

Hagit Borer (Chapter 15: “Locales,” pp. 309–337) accounts for data indicating that “intransitive achievements...but no other telic [events], are licensed without a quantity DP...[and] these events, but no others, telic or atelic, allow a V-S-(XP) word order” (p. 313). She proposes that the two properties can be structurally related by invoking a “covert locale,” on the basis of the observation that “achievements which license V-S word order are presentational ones.” The “locale...has existential force which allows it to bind and existentially close the event argument. That very same locale may also bind, and existentially close, ASPQ,...the node responsible for the emergence of telic, quantity reading” (p. 314). In the last paper of the third group Nora Boneh and Edit Doron (Chapter 16: “Modal and Temporal Aspects of Habituality,” pp. 338–363) argue, using data from Hebrew, Polish, the Romance languages, and English, that “habituality is primarily a modal category, which can only indirectly be characterized in aspectual terms” (p. 339), i.e. habituality is not reducible to imperfectivity, although in some languages it is “imperfective by default” (p. 339). The authors discuss in detail the temporal and modal qualities of the habitual. The key to their analysis is the occurrence of the “retrospective habitual” (X used
to/would do Y) in some languages; this periphrastic verb form (contrasted with perfect habituals) allows the authors to tease apart the temporal, modal, and aspe ctual properties of habitu als in order to determine which properties are fundamental.

A major issue threads through the entire book: is semantic structure determined by syntactic structure, or is syntactic structure determined by semantics? The authors who use a Chomskyan approach beg the question, because they operate on the presupposition that syntactic structure determines structure. Naturally, those who assume that semantic properties determine structural properties also beg the question, simply because what one is trying to demonstrate is assumed as a foundational tenet. Because the papers assuming that structural properties determine semantic properties are more numerous, and for the most part, do not consider the same set of data as papers based on the opposite assumption, one can’t adequately compare the two approaches. Of course, this issue is not resolved in this book (even though the editors propose it as a major issue—see pp. 4–5). Nevertheless, this book did widen my awareness of the complex issues involved in untangling the relationships between lexical, syntactical, and event structure and was well worth reading (twice, and some parts more), just for that reason.

In spite of the importance of the nature of the lexicon for the majority of papers in the first two groups, most authors neglected to inform their reader of their theoretical assumptions concerning the lexicon. Where this was essential to processing the arguments of the paper in question, one either had to presume from knowledge of the authors’ previous work or just keep on wondering. Two notable exceptions were Martin Everaert (‘The Lexical Coding of Idioms’) and Julia Horvath and Tal Siloni (‘Lexicon versus Syntax: Evidence from Morphological Causatives’); in both cases their explicit discussions concerning the implications of their analysis on the nature of the lexicon make their papers more valuable.

In general the book is of high editorial quality, as one would expect from Oxford University Press; there were very few typos. There is a detailed table of contents (pp. v–x, including chapter sections and subsections), a section “Notes on Contributors” (pp. xiii–xvi), a combined list of references at the end of the book (pp. 364–391), a name index (pp. 393–396), a very brief index of topics (pp. 397–401), and an index of languages (p. 402).

Notes

1 In their introduction to their book Argument Realization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), the authors state that the “the semantic determinants of argument realization—be they lexical or not—need to be studied seriously in order for a theory of argument realization to be firmly grounded...We usually refer to lexical semantic properties and lexical semantic representations, but most of the discussion can be recast in terms which are not strictly lexical” (p. 6).

2 In all quotes italics and/or bold reproduce those of the authors of the papers in the book under review.

3 I cannot help but wonder what form this analysis would take using a verb classification like that proposed in Van Valin and Lapolla 1997.
4 This suggests that one could perhaps develop an alternate analysis of the Blackfoot data (Elizabeth Ritter and Sara Thomas Rosen, Chapter 7: “Animacy in Blackfoot: Implications for Event Structure and Clause Structure,” pp. 124–152), given that “Blackfoot transitive animate, transitive inanimate, and intransitive animate finals impose a semantic animacy requirement on external arguments” (p. 146). The authors discuss this animacy requirement in some depth (pp. 143–147), but as noted above, propose a strictly structural analysis.

5 The authors mention that in Ancient Greek some cognate objects “are analyzable as adverbial adjuncts” (p. 307).

6 Hovav and Levin (Chapter 2) consider data similar to that considered by Goldberg (Chapter 3), but both seem to operate on the assumption that syntactic structure is determined by semantics. Landman and Rothstein (Chapter 11) and Mittwoch (Chapter 12) propose analyses for similar data; in these papers the authors take no obvious stand concerning the relationship between semantics and structure.

7 Reinhart (2002) on p. 171 is listed as Reinhart (2000) in the references at the end of the book, also on p.172; I wasn’t able to check for the correct date. On p. 191 in example (23)a. “an ikse” should be “aniikse.” On p. 201 the translation of Old English gelimpen (‘cause someone to start having in perception’) suggests a typo at “in perception” (I have no idea what gelimpen really means, so have no way of guessing). On p. 210 in the gloss of example (19)a. “rudeness” should be “rudeness.” On p. 242 in example (15) “ate 1 apple” should be “ate 1 apple.” On p. 265 “in-adverbial” should be “in-adverbials.” The same glossing error appears on p. 322 in example (31)c,d and on p. 324 for example (35)c,d: in c of both examples “cat” should be “Kim,” “tree” should be “house,” and “climb” should be “build”; in d of both examples “cat” should be “Kim,” “tree” should be “cart,” and “climb” should be “push.”

References
