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Syntax beyond the noun phrase – a corpus-driven approach to valency

Abstract

Many models of valency theory used in Germanistik classify sentences such as *Sie beschlossen zu gehen* as consisting of a verb with two obligatory complements: a Nominativergänzung (*sie*) and an Akkusativergänzung (*zu gehen*). In VALBU (2004), for instance, infinitive clauses (which obviously have no case marking) are seen as realizations of the case-marked complements which could replace them.

It will be argued here that on the basis of corpus research an infinitival complement such as *zu gehen* should not be classified as an accusative complement and *sie* not as an obligatory complement. For English, corpus data reveal that *to*-infinitives make up more than 30 per cent of all occurrences of *appear* and with some verbs, non-noun-phrase patterns are even more common than patterns with NP-complements: in the case of *intend*, for instance, some 66% of all occurrences in the BNC involve a *to*-infinitive.

A similar bias towards noun phrases can be found in grammars which like the *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) identify a category of prepositional verbs which take noun phrase complements, whereas valency theory admits prepositional phrases as complements in their own right.

In this paper a model of valency theory will be introduced which emerges from a usage-based and corpus-driven analysis. In this model, which provides the basis of the *Valency Dictionary of English* (Herbst/Heath/Roe/Götz 2004), verb valency is seen in terms of valency slots (Herbst/Schüller 2008) which are characterised in terms of
   - the participant role it expresses
   - its possible formal realizations (complements such as NP, to_INF, on_NP etc.)
   - its degree of obligatoriness (obligatory, contextually-optional, optional).

By distinguishing between necessity at the different levels of valency, structure and communication, a truly lexical view of valency becomes possible. Since a valency slot is only considered obligatory if it has to be realised by a complement in every instance of occurrence of a lexical unit, corpus analysis is instrumental in describing valency. This approach towards determining the degree of obligatoriness of a valency slot (which contradicts those theories within the valency model or cognitive linguistics that determine obligatoriness or profiling on the basis of active declarative sentences) is based on the principle of making minimal assumptions about underlying structures (also formulated in linear unit grammar, Sinclair/Mauranen 2006).

Finally, it will be shown how this model of valency is applied in the project of the Erlangen valency patternbank for English, which at present provides online access to the pattern information contained in VDE and which will be expanded on the basis of further corpus research. The main purpose of the patternbank is to provide a research tool for linguists and to guarantee a data-driven analysis of valency relations. Since this is particularly relevant with respect to corpus-based research on the existence and characteristics of argument structure constructions (Goldberg 1995, 2006) the relationship of the role of corpus data in the analysis of valency relations and constructions will be discussed.

References

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