

Semantic (non-)compositionality and (re-)categorization in flexible languages

According to Evans & Osada's (2005) *Criterion of Semantic Compositionality*, in 'truly' flexible languages the semantic interpretation of a lexeme in a particular functional environment is fully compositional. In this paper we analyze data from various languages, which have figured prominently in the discussion about lexical flexibility.

We show that, on the one hand, these languages indeed satisfy the compositionality criterion. Consider for instance (1) and (2), which illustrate flexibility in Samoan, i.e. the compositional interpretation of action-denoting (1) and object-denoting (2) lexemes in predicative (a) and referential (b) function (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992, Mosel 2004). On the other hand, we make clear that such flexibility does not exclude the presence of zero-derivation with *unpredictable* semantic outcomes. Examples of this phenomenon in Samoan appear in (3). These forms can be regarded as the zero-marked counterparts of overt lexical derivations, as illustrated in (4). Lexically derived forms like those in (4) are still flexible: despite their 'nominal' semantics, they can still be used as the head of verb phrase, as in example (5). We show that these patterns are recurrent in languages genetically related to Samoan (Tongan, Maori, Kambara, Tagalog), but also in languages of different genetic descent, such as the Munda languages Kharia and Santali.

We explain these data in terms of the distinction between lexical and syntactic categorization in presumably flexible languages. Such languages do have lexical categories, but these are not defined in terms of phrase-structural possibilities. This stands in sharp contrast to the canonical lexeme classes 'verb' and 'noun', which are typically defined in terms of their respective functions: predication and reference. Since lexical categories in flexible languages are irrelevant for phrase structure, lexemes can be (zero-)derived, i.e. re-categorized, without losing their flexibility. These derivational processes may have semantically idiosyncratic properties, and as such do not satisfy the compositionality criterion. In contrast, and in accordance with Evans and Osada's claim, the ultimate assignment of lexical material to a particular syntactic function does yield a fully compositional interpretation. We discuss the repercussions of our analysis for the theory of Distributed Morphology, which makes precise predictions about (non-)compositional interpretation and (re-)categorization.

Examples

- (1) a. *E alu le pasi i Apia*
GENR go DET bus DIR Apia
'The bus goes to Apia.'
- b. *le alu o le pasi i Apia*
DET go POSS DET bus DIR Apia
'the going of the bus to Apia.'
- (2) a. *E uō Tanielu ma Ionatana*
GENR friend Daniel and Jonathan
'Daniel and Jonathan are friends.'
- b. *E alofa Taniel i l=a=na uō*
GENR love Daniel DIR DET=POSS=3SG friend
'Daniel loves his friend.'
- (3) a. *lama*: 'torch' or 'fish by torch light'
b. *gaoi*: 'steal' or 'thief'
c. *solo*: 'move forward' or 'procession'
d. *tusi*: 'write' or 'a letter/book'
- (4) a. *amo* 'carry' - *āmo-ga* 'person(s) carrying loads'
b. *a'o* 'teach' - *ā'o-ga* 'school'
c. *tīpi* 'cut' - *tīpi-ga* 'surgical operation'
d. *pule* 'control' - *pulē-ga* 'unit of church administration'
- (5) *'Ua to-gā-niu ātoa le mea maupu'epu'e*
TAM plant-NMLZ-coconut whole ART place hill
'The whole hilly place was now a coconut plantation.'

References

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