The status of alternations: a lexical-constructional interface

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This paper discusses the status of alternations with argument structure constructions (ASCs). The central question is: how much information is shared by the two members of an alternation and to what extent the alternation is part of speakers' linguistic knowledge? In lexicalist approaches, the semantics of the verb are said to predict their use in alternating argument structures (Levin 1993); constructionist approaches, in contrast, often downplay the status of alternations and foreground surface generalisations (Goldberg 2002). Recent work in construction grammar (Cappelle 2006, Perek 2015) has suggested that members of an alternation are 'allostructions' that can be subsumed under a more schematic 'constructeme'.

This paper evaluates these hypotheses for the causative alternation in English, based on a large set of data drawn from COCA, comprising 29 verbs from 5 semantic domains. This yielded 11,554 extractions: 4,481 non-causative and 7,073 causative constructions.

While the meaning of ASCs is often directly related to the verbs that occur with these constructions (cf. Goldberg 1995; Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003 *inter alia*), we show that for the causative alternation one should also pay attention to the Theme, the entity undergoing the event, which occurs in subject position in the (intransitive) non-causative and in object position in the (transitive) causative construction, as shown in (1).

1. a. The *building* burned.
   b. The arsonist burned the *building.*

Regularly, however, one of the two constructions is impossible with certain verb-theme combinations, as in (2).

2. a. *His *promise* broke. / The *day* broke.
   b. b. Thomas broke his *promise*. / *The *sun* broke the day.

The Theme thus plays a crucial role in a verb's alternation potential. The role of the Theme is evaluated in two ways. First, we measure the degree to which the Themes overlap between the two constructions (Lemmens, forthc.). Secondly, we use vector-space models and distributional semantics to measure the semantic proximity of Themes across alternations (Romain 2017). Our analysis shows that alternations are verb-sense sensitive and that lower-level generalisations are crucial to our understanding of the mechanisms at play in alternations with ASCs. In other words, alternations do not hold across the different uses of a verb nor can one generalize on the basis of the surface form only without taking the Theme into account. Our analysis of the Themes reveals that it is the generalisation of the Theme's properties that is the key to understanding the (verb-sense dependent) causative alternation.

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