

Integrating event descriptions in multi-predicate constructions: frame semantics and construal in the English means construction

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Multi-predicate argument-structure constructions (e.g. caused motion, resultative) allow speakers to build descriptions of complex causal events by integrating multiple event frames: those contributed by each predicate, plus the more abstract event frame of the construction (Goldberg, 1995:5; Langacker, 1991:293-304). I extend this analysis to the highly productive English means construction, exemplified in (1), which integrates two (potentially complex) event frames (main event + means event) with the constructionally provided means frame.

- (1) a. He angered Democrats by threatening to veto his own budget.
b. Archy wrote by hurling himself at the typewriter keys one at a time.
c. His own wife survived by clinging to a couple of chairs until she was rescued.
Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-)

Although frequently used to paraphrase the semantics of other constructions (e.g. Goldberg & Jackendoff, 2001:538; Levin, 1993:98; Jackendoff, 1997:554-5), the means construction itself has received very little attention. The pattern of event integration typically exploited in these paraphrases (in which the means event specifies the underspecified causing subevent of the main event, e.g. (1a)) is however only one of the possibilities for the means construction: a corpus study of this construction reveals two other patterns of event integration.

I argue that the primary semantic contribution of the means frame is to portray the means event as a fine-grained construal (c.f. scalar adjustment in Croft & Cruse, 2004; Croft, 2012) of a component of the main event (typically, but not necessarily, involving some action by the actor of the main event). The three possible patterns of event integration are distinguished based on which component of the main event frame they target, and the pattern can be predicted based on the main event frame's causal and aspectual structure as well as the salience/cultural relevance of a larger force-dynamic structure (containing the main event frame).

The second pattern (1b), requires a durative main event (an activity or accomplishment) which is not causally complex, and the means event is a fine-grained construal of the entire main event: the relationship between the two events is similar to the elaboration coherence relation found in discourse (c.f. Hobbs, 1979). In the third pattern (1c), the main event is restricted to event frames which are not themselves causally complex, but exist within a highly salient/culturally relevant force-dynamic structure (e.g. dying, surviving, escaping). The means construction directs attention to (and the means event provides a fine-grained construal of) the event which precedes the main event in the salient force-dynamic structure: this preceding event would otherwise not have been explicitly mentioned. A detailed semantic analysis of the English means construction offers unique insight into the interaction between lexical and constructional semantics in the composition of complex event representations.

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