

On the correlation between semantics and syntax

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between semantics and syntax by looking at complement – taking verbs and complement sentences in three different languages: French, English and Modern standard Arabic (MSA).

Our aim is to describe the semantic classes of complement-taking verbs and the syntactic structures of complement sentences in order to delimit some idiosyncratic features in each language under discussion, and show to what extent the three languages are comparable. Moreover, the semantic classification of complement-taking verbs where some semantic properties of verbs in English, French and MSA are analysed, showed some rough similarities and differences in the behaviour of complement – taking verbs in the three languages.

Furthermore, we have tried to show through semantic classifications and sub-classification of verbs that the claim syntactic structures of complements are determined by semantic properties of main verb "is not axiomatic" because of the "loose" correlation between semantics and syntax. As there is no one-to-one correspondence between the syntactic structures of complements and semantic features of verbs, it is sometimes difficult to ascribe semantic regularities for verbs and syntactic patterns for complement sentences, especially at a cross-linguistic level.

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THE PROBLEM:

Syntax and semantics have always constituted the core of every linguistic research; moreover, the correlation between semantics and syntax is one of the most important areas especially when cross-linguistic descriptions are involved.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the interrelationship between semantics and syntax taking into consideration complement constructions in three different languages: French, English and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

We chose to look at one aspect of syntax that is complementation¹ in order to show whether there is a one-to-one correspondence between the

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة العلاقة بين علم المعنى و التراكيب بالنظر إلى الأفعال التي تتقبل جملاً متممة في ثلاثة لغات مختلفة: الفرنسية، الإنجليزية و العربية الفصحى. غرضنا هو وصف و تصنيف باعتبار المعنى، و الأفعال و بنية الجمل لتحديد بعض خصوصيات كل لغة و تثبيت مدى تشابه اللغات الثلاث.

¹ A syntactic aspect used in the analysis of grammatical function to refer to a major constituent or clause structure, associated with completing the action specified by the verb.

لقد تبين لنا من خلال تصنيف الأفعال باعتبار المعنى أنه يوجد تشابه واختلاف بين اللغات الثلاث. ولقد برهنا من خلال هذا التصنيف أن بنية الجمل المتممة ليست مرتبطة حتمياً بمعنى الأفعال لأنه توجد علاقة وطيدة بين علم المعنى والتراكيب. ولهذا السبب أصبح من الصعب أن ننسب معاني انتظامية للأفعال وبنية نموذجية للجمل المتممة.

semantic property of the main verb and the syntactic structure of the complement sentence.

The idea that the semantic properties of verbs determine the syntactic complement types is not new in the literature as it was supported by many linguists namely, the Kiparskys when they claimed that: "The choice of complement type is in large measure predictable from a number of basic semantic factors" (Kiparsky & Kiparsky, 1970 : 143).

The same view is shared by Noonan who stated that:

"Complementation is basically a matter of matching a particular complement type to a particular complement-taking predicate. The basis for this matching is the semantic relation between predicate and complement that is inherent in the meaning of the CTP"² (Noonan, 1985 : 90).

These strong versions assume that there is an "axiomatic" relationship between semantics and syntax, but these claims do not seem to hold at a cross-linguistic level.

One obvious question that might be asked is the following: Is it possible to talk about semantic regularities for complement-taking verbs, and syntactic patterns for complement sentences?

In order to answer the above question one should suggest a "heuristic" semantic classification of complement-taking verbs in order to develop a working hypothesis, which will enable us to proceed with our investigation. Despite the idiosyncratic features of each language, we will show whether we can make generalizations about obvious cases, if there are any.

In what follows, we are taking into account some semantic classes of verbs in French, English and MSA so that we show the predominant syntactic type for each semantic class in the three languages under discussion.

1- COGNITIVE VERBS

They express a mental activity, an attitude regarding the truth-value of a proposition. Moreover, by cognitive, we mean the non-communicative verbs.

These verbs introduce finite indicative complements in English, French and MSA, but this is not an absolute generalization because-as we will show shortly- the class of cognitive verbs is subdivided into different logical classes which introduce other complement structures such as control complements, interrogative complements, subject raising and so on.

Let us consider the following examples of cognitive verbs, which introduce finite indicative complements in English, French and MSA:

1. John knew that his brother was coming.
2. Marie savait que la réunion était reportée.
Marie- Knew that-the-meeting-was postponed.
3. Šarafa Šumaru ʔanna ʔal muŠallima saafara.

² CTP stands for complement-taking predicate.

Knew- Omar-nom that the teacher-acc travelled.

"Omar knew that the teacher travelled".

The class of cognitive verbs includes non-implicative³ verbs, which introduce "raising" type complements in English and French as illustrated in the following examples:

4. John seems to be clever.

5. Marie semble aimer la linguistique.

Mary- seems- to like- linguistics.

"Mary seems to like linguistics".

We should point out that in MSA, there is no equivalent of the above raising constructions, but the construction in example (6) is used with verbs like "seem".

6. Šumarū yadharu ʔakiyyun.

Omar-nom seems clever.

"Omar seems to be clever".

The transitive verbs of this class-non-implicative cognitive- can also take the "accusative + infinitive" construction in English as in:

7. John believes Mary to be ill.

Note that there is no corresponding construction in French and MSA, but "believe" behaves as a "control" verb in French as in (8), and takes indicative complements in MSA as in (9):

8. Marie croit être malade.

Mary believes that she is ill.

9. Šumarū danna ʔanna Šaliyyan ʔakiyyan

Omar-nom believed- that Ali-acc clever.

"Omar believed that Ali was clever".

Within the class of non-implicative cognitive verbs, a smallish class introduces interrogative complements in English, French and MSA as in the following examples:

10. John wondered whether his friend was coming.

11. Marie se demande si nous avons envoyé la lettre.

Mary wonders whether we have sent the letter.

12. Šumarū yatasa ʔalu hal ʔuxtahu raja Šat.

Omar-nom wonders whether-sister-his came back.

"Omar wonders whether his sister came back".

2- PERCEPTIVE VERBS

There are two uses of perceptive verbs. They introduce indicative complements in English, French and MSA when they function as factive⁴ verbs as in:

13. Mary heard that the meeting was cancelled.

14. Jean a entendu que la voiture a été volée.

³ They are opposed to the class of implicative verbs such as "manage" which carries an implication of some necessary and sufficient condition, which alone determines the event described in the complement took place.

⁴ Factive predicates are generally associated with the presupposition of truth of their complements when they occur as main verbs.

John heard that the car was stolen.

15. ζ umaru sami ζ a ζ anna ζ ustahu najahat.

Omar-nom heard that sister-his succeeded.

"Omar heard that his sister succeeded".

Perceptive verbs introduce the "accusative + infinitive" construction in English and French when they behave as "if-verbs"⁵ as in the examples below:

16. Mary (saw) her brother come from school.

(heard)

17. Jean (a vu) le voleur courir dans la cour.

(a entendu)

Note that in English, the same verbs introduce gerundive complements as in:

18. Mary (saw) her brother coming from school.

(heard)

In MSA, however, perceptive verbs introduce indicative complements where the complementiser is usually deleted as in:

19. ra ζ at ζ umaru yal ζ abu.

saw-she Omar-acc he-plays.

"She saw Omar play/playin".

20. Sami ζ na ζ al walada yabki.

heard-we the boy-acc he-cries.

"We heard the boy cry/crying".

3– EMOTIVE VERBS

They generally express a subjective emotional or evaluative reaction to what is contained in the complement, and they are verbs of emotion and affection which express the subjective value of a proposition, rather than knowledge about its truth value. We should point out that the class of emotive verbs is fairly heterogeneous and for this reason we shall discuss the subclasses of emotive verbs independently.

Factive emotive verbs introduce gerundive and indicative complements in English as in (21) and (22), infinitive and subjunctive complements in French, as in (23) and (24), and masdar⁶ complements in MSA, as in (25):

21. John regretted buying the house.

22. I regret that your mother is ill.

23. Jean regrette avoir arrêté ses études.

"John regrets having stopped his studies".

24. Je regrette que tu ne sois pas parmi nous.

"I regret that you are not among us".

25. ta ζ assafa ζ ala bay ζ i sayyaratihi

he-regretted prep-selling car-his.

⁵ They express a sufficient condition for the truth of the complement sentence and give rise to implicative relations.

⁶ It is the only form that represents the non-finite form in MSA. It is also the basic form of the trilateral verb in MSA. Moreover, in view of its functional similarity with infinitives and gerunds in other languages, it can be included in a comparative study of this type.

"He regretted selling his car".

Another subclass of emotive verbs are non-implicative verbs which include verbs of 'liking', 'enjoying' and so on. The verbs of this class introduce non-finite complements in English, French and MSA as shown in the following examples, but this generalization is not absolute because non-implicative verbs introduce other complement structures which we will mention as we go along:

26. "John likes fishing at night".
27. "Mary enjoyed playing cards".
28. "Peter prefers to go abroad".
29. Marie aime rester seule.
"Mary likes to stay alone".
30. Jean déteste travailler au bureau.
"John hates working in the office".
31. ʕamaru habba ʔal qiraaʔ ata bi ʔal la yli.
Omar-nom like the reading prep the night.
"Omar liked reading at night".
32. ʕaliyyun kariha kitaabata ʔal maqalata.
Ali-nom hated writing the essay-acc.
"Ali hated writing the essay".

Note that the verbs of this class also allow control complements and 'accusative + infinitive' in English as in (33), (34) and subjunctive complements in French and MSA as in (35) and (36):

33. "John likes to fish at night".
34. "I prefer Mary to stay with us".
35. Elle aimerait que tu viennes.
"She would like you to come".
36. ʕaliyyun kariha ʔan yaktuba ʔal maqalata.
Ali-nom hated that he-writes the essay-acc.
"Ali hated writing the essay".

In the preceding sections we have taken into consideration the notional classes of verbs and showed the types of complement structures they introduce in English, French and MSA. Our main concern was to show whether the semantic classes of verbs determine syntactic types of complements consistently in the three languages under discussion. However, as was shown earlier, all the notional classes are further subdivided into logical classes.

Therefore, we could not make absolute generalizations as for the predominant syntactic complement type for each semantic class. However, we may note rather strong tendencies. We should also draw a clear distinction between two important criteria: "tendencies" (i.e. partial generalizations) and the non-universality of complement types.

The notion of "tendency" is worth taking into account because although we managed to identify dominant syntactic types, nevertheless we have noticed that alongside the dominant structures we found idiosyncratic features not comparable across languages.

The second criterion is that syntactic complement types are not universal because even if we found absolute generalizations within each language we could not formulate universals of the type: "semantic type X correlates with syntactic type Y"; simply because the syntactic types Y are not universal (e.g. MSA has no infinitive, French has no gerundive complements). In other words, given that MSA has no infinitive and French has no gerundive complements it is obviously impossible to make universal generalizations about infinitives and gerunds.

Similarly, given that MSA has no "raising" construction comparable with that of English and French, we cannot make generalizations about the semantics of "raising" verbs. Nevertheless there are similarities across languages in spite of different syntactic structures (cf. e.g. 4, 5 & 6).

In conclusion, we may claim that the surface structure form of complements is not necessarily due to the quasi-accidental features of the matrix verb-as was claimed by some linguists-but to a semantic distinction of these verbs. Nor can we deny the fact that the choice of complement types is predictable from a number of semantic factors or properties that complement-taking predicates might exhibit; however, one should not make too strong a claim because of the further subclassifications of major semantic classes.

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