

On the correlation between semantics and syntax

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Résumé

Le présent article expose un aspect très connu en linguistique, qui est celui de la corrélation entre la sémantique et la syntaxe. Nous avons choisi d'étudier les phrases complétives ainsi que les verbes qui les introduisent dans trois langues différentes: l'Anglais, le Français et l'Arabe. Notre but est de prouver si à travers la signification du verbe principal nous pouvons décider sur la structure syntaxique de la phrase complétive. Vu que la morphologie ainsi que la structure des trois langues sont différentes, nous avons pu proposer des structures générales qui soient valables aux trois langues. Néanmoins, nous avons pu formuler et discerner quelques structures évidentes dans les trois langues. Nous avons aussi conclu que la corrélation entre la signification du verbe principal et la structure de la complétive n'est pas et ne peut être considérée comme un "axiome" vue que chaque langue présente des particularités et caractéristiques bien déterminées.

ملخص

من خلال هذه المقالة حاولنا أن نبحث في موضوع مهم في ثلاثة لغات مختلفة: اللغة العربية الإنكليزية والفرنسية. المقصود من ذلك هو أننا أردنا أن نبرهن أن بنية هذه الجمل لا يمكن أن تستخلص من خلال معنى الأفعال في كل الحالات كما يدعي بعض اللغويين والباحثين. نظراً لأن اللغات التي أخذناها بعين الاعتبار جد مختلفة فإننا لم نستطع أن نقترح أي بنية جمالية التي ستكون مماثلة أو متطابقة على اللغات الثلاثة المذكورة. إذن لقد إستخلصنا أن العلاقة المتبادلة بين معنى الأفعال وبنية الجمل لم تكن بديهية خاصة عندما نقارن أكثر من لغتين.

The problem

ntax 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 inter-relationship 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 complementation, in order to show whether there is a one-to-one correspondence between the 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-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)

The strong versions assume that there is an "axiomatic" relationship between semantics and syntax, but those 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 generalisations 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 generalisation 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.
Mary-knew-that-the-meeting-was postponed.
- 3- Sarafa Sumaru Sanna Sal musallima saafara
Knew - Omar-nom that-the teacher-acc-travelled
Omar knew that the teacher travelled.

The class of cognitive verbs includes non-implicative (3) 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) as used with verbs like "seem"

- 6- Sumaru Yadharu Sakiyyun
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:

- 8- Marie croit être malade
Mary believes that she is ill.
- 9- Sumaru danna sanna saliyyan sakiyyan
Omar-nom believed-that Ali-acc clever
Omar believed that Ali was clever".

Within the class of non-implicative cognitive verbs, a smalling 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- Sumaru yatasa salu hal puxtahu rajasat.
Omar wonders whether his sister came back.

1.2. Perceptive verbs

There are two uses of perceptive verbs. They introduce indicative complements in English, French and MSA when they function as factive (4) verbs as in:

- 13- Mary heard that the meeting was cancelled.
- 14- Jean a entendu que la voiture a été volée.
John heard that the car was stolen.
- 15- Sumaru Samisa Sanna Puxtahu 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" 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- rasat sumara yalsabu saw-she Omar-acc he-plays
 20- samipna-pal walada he-cries "we heard the boy/crying."

1.3. 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 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 masdar (6) complements in MSA, as in (25):

- 21- John regretted buying the house.
 22- I regret that your mother is ill.
 23- 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- Tapassafa Sala baysi sayyaratihi.
 He-regretted prep-selling car-his.
 He regretted selling his car.

Another subclass of emotive verbs are non-implicative verbs which include verbs of this class introduce non-finite complements in English, French and MSA as shown in the following examples. But this generalisation is not absolute because non-implicative verbs introduce other complement structure 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- Sumaru habla Sal qiraasata bi sal layli.
 Omar-nom like the reading pret the night.
 Omar liked reading at night".
 32- Saliyyun kariha kitaabata sal 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 adjunctive 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- Saliyyun kariha an yaktuba al 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 generalisations 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 generalisations) 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 generalisations within each language we could not formulate universals of the type: "semantic types 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 generalisations about infinitives and gerunds.

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

In conclusion, we may claim that the surface structure form of complements is not necessarily due to the quasi-accidental features of the matrix verbs - as claimed by some linguists - but a semantic distinction of these verbs. Or 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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