

Existing, Innovative, and Impossible Words

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the data surrounding what are often referred to in the literature as “denominal putting verbs”. This class of verbs includes location verbs (e.g., ‘She corralled the horses’, ‘She shelved the books’, ‘She bagged the apples’, etc.) and locatum verbs (e.g., ‘She buttered the bread’, ‘She painted the roof’, ‘She sequined the jacket’, etc.) Interestingly, speakers know immediately to which class a denominal putting verb belongs. For example, speakers know that ‘to bread’ is a locatum verb and not a location verb: no speaker mistakenly interprets ‘She breaded the butter’ as meaning that she placed the butter on the bread. Furthermore, speakers construct denominal verbs “on the fly” and readily know to which class the innovative verbs belong (e.g., ‘Are you going to mustard that sandwich for me?’, ‘She should really fanny-pack her money to keep it safe.’). Additionally, speakers know that some denominal putting verbs are impossible (e.g., *She bushed the fertilizer (meaning: She covered the bush with fertilizer), *She papered the weight (meaning: She placed the weight on the paper), *She shod herself (meaning: She put shoes on herself)). I will discuss three different accounts of the aforementioned data: (i) a primarily commonsense account [1] on which denominal verb formation is constrained by pragmatic principles governing cooperative conversation, (ii) a primarily syntactic account [2] on which denominal verb formation is constrained by independently motivated syntactic rules, and (iii) a primarily conceptual knowledge account [3] on which denominal putting verb formation is constrained by a particular element of our conceptual knowledge about the denoted objects. After arguing that none of these accounts is successful, I propose a primarily semantic account on which denominal putting verb formation is constrained by whether the source noun is semantically categorized as a container or as a covering. I argue that only a semantic account can explain the difference between existing and possible verbs as well as any cross-linguistic differences.

References

- [1] E.V. Clark and H.H. Clark. When Nouns Surface as Verbs. *Language*, 55:767–811, 1979.
- [2] Ken Hale and Jay Keyser. On Argument Structure and the Lexical Expression of Syntactic Relations. In Ken Hale and Jay Keyser, editors, *The View From Building 20*, pages 53–109. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.
- [3] Paul Kiparsky. Remarks on Denominal Verbs. In Alex Alina, J. Bresnan, and P. Sells, editors, *Argument Structure*. Stanford: CSLI, 1997.