Scalar Meaning in the Roots of Verbs and Adjectives

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In decompositional approaches to verb meaning (Dowty 1979, Rappaport Hovav and Levin 1998, Harley 2012, Beavers and Koontz-Garboden 2020) stative and change-of-state words are built from a state-denoting root plus some event template comprised of basic elements (e.g. functional heads) indicating the event or state's temporal and causal flow. The templatic operator responsible for introducing the semantic notion of change in change-of-state verbs is usually some sort of BECOME-type operator that says that at the end of the event the state denoted by the root holds, and it did not hold before. However, more recent approaches to change (Tenny 1994, Krifka 1998, Hay et al. 1999, Kennedy and Levin 2008, Rappaport Hovav 2008, Beavers 2011, 2012) have instead assumed that change is scalar in nature, where the final state of the patient is that it holds a higher degree of some property than it did before along some ordered ranking of possible degrees. Decompositionally, the root denotes a measure function that returns the degree to which an entity holds the relevant value — the same measure function that underlies corresponding scalar adjective meanings — while templatic structure introduces degree comparison that ensures the patient's final degree is higher than its initial degree. This approach provides a more unified way of subsuming a range of different types of changes of state under a single umbrella (creation/consumption, property change, motion; Beavers 2011, 2012) while also capturing the fact that different sorts of scales give rise to verbs with different aspectual properties (Kennedy and Levin 2008).

In this talk I present a novel argument (expanding on a suggestion by Beavers and Koontz-Garboden 2020) that English verbal roots denote states and not measure functions (see also Wellwood 2015). I furthermore argue that the relevant state is one that has comparison to some standard built into it already, i.e. the contribution of the root to verb and adjective meaning is comparison and not degrees. The primary role of templatic operators is instead to flesh out the details of the standard of the root-supplied comparison: verbs set the standard to a temporally prior degree while adjectives set it to a contemporaneous degree, i.e. adjectives describe comparison at a time and verbs describe comparison across a time. In addition, different templates may also derive new types of comparison that build off of what comes from the root, and also provide access to different degrees involved in the comparison for overt expression. Our argument is based on evidence from sublexical modification (e.g. by *again* and other such modifiers) as well as evidence from comparative morphology, degree modifiers, and the relationship of verbs to their corresponding adjectival forms. In addition to capturing more facts about change-of-state verbs, I also suggest that this approach better aligns scalar analyses with traditional decompositional work in verb meaning, even taking into account more recent complex typologies of possible root meanings á la Beavers and Koontz-Garboden (2020). It also provides another argument that change-of-state verbs are not built on simple or comparative adjectives, but instead verbs and their corresponding adjectives are derived equipollently from the same roots.

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