Re-appraising the role of alternations in construction grammar: the case of the conative construction

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- Overview
    - The conative construction: introduction and review
    - A new analysis
        - Based on examples from the written narratives of the BNC
    - Theoretical implications for construction grammar

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The conative construction

- The conative construction
  - One variant of the conative alternation
    - A case of preposition insertion
    - Concerns transitive verbs
    - Direct object realized as an *at*-PP, e.g.:
      > John kicked the ball *vs.* John kicked at the ball
      > Mary cut the bread *vs.* Mary cut at the bread
      > Bill wiped the counter *vs.* Bill wiped at the counter
  - Several different classes of verbs; no clear semantic alignment (cf. handout)

The conative alternation

- Towards a construction grammar account
  - Argument structure = constructions (Goldberg 1995, 2006)
    - Pairing of a syntactic pattern with an abstract schema
      - Textbook example: the ditransitive construction
        NP_X V NP_Y NP_Z ↔ 'X causes Y to have Z'
    - Verb meaning is constant but flexible (frame semantics)
    - Verb meaning in context = integration of the verb's frame semantics into the constructional schema
  - For the conative alternation:
    - Alternation = two constructions: any semantic difference is to be accounted for by different constructional schemata
    - The meaning of the transitive counterpart should play no role

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In search for the conative meaning

- What is the meaning of the conative construction?
  - Classical example of transitivity alternation but still resists a general characterization
  - Levin (1993:42): "describes an "attempted" action without specifying whether the action was actually carried out"
  - Pinker's (1989:104): "the subject is trying to affect the oblique object but may or may not be succeeding" (p. 104)
  - Goldberg (1995:63-64):
    - "the verb designates the intended result of the act denoted by the construction. The semantics of the construction can be represented roughly as 'X DIRECTS ACTION AT Y'."
    - e.g., *Ethel strikes at Fred:* "Ethel does not necessarily strike Fred, but striking him is the intended result of the directed action" (ibid.)
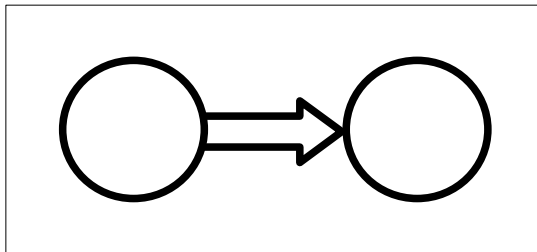
In search for the conative meaning

- Broccias (2001) enlarges the definition to two schemata:
  - the **allative** schema: translational motion towards a target, contact and affectedness are possible but not necessary ≈ Goldberg's "directed-action"

    Sally kicked at the ball

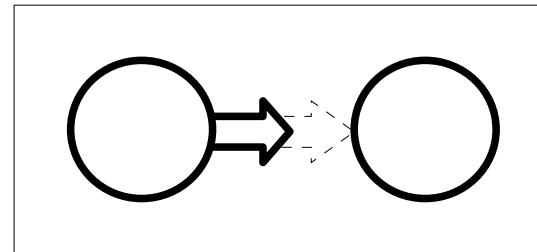 - the **ablative** schema: contact is made but does not bring the intended effect and is open to repetition

    He sipped at a tumbler of water

  - Generalizable to "no effect" (albeit context-dependent)
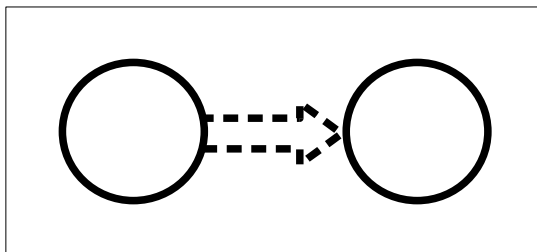
In search for the conative meaning

- State of the art: two kinds of two-participant constructions:
    - The transitive entails affectedness of the patient
    - The conative does not necessarily entail affectedness of P
        - e.g., the transitive would be contradictory in the four following cases, where affectedness is contextually prevented
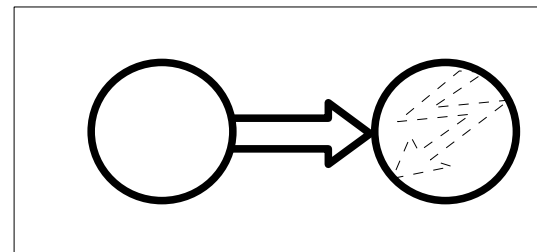
no effect (ex. 1-4)

no contact (ex. 5-8)

no energy (ex. 9-10)

no significant effect (ex. 11)

Beyond non-affectedness

- Previous accounts focus of the notion "non-affectedness"
  - However, not always the relevant difference with transitives
  - For instance: the conative must be used if no effect on the patient is **intended** by the agent,
    - <u>Either</u>: because the agent is not volitional (ex. 11-14)
      - Inanimates (natural forces, plants), abstract entities, etc.
      - They cannot be ascribed intentions or consciousness; a transitive would thus sound odd
    - <u>Or</u>: the motivation behind the act is other than the intention to bring about an effect on the patient
      - Anger, nervousness, playfulness, anxiety (ex. 15-24)
      - A transitive would entail that affectedness is **sought**
    - In both cases: affectedness (if any) is purely **contingent** and **irrelevant** (cf. ex. 19); it is not the focus of attention

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Beyond non-affectedness

- Another use of the conative: intensified contact
  - With verbs of seizing and holding: *clutch*, *catch*, *grab*, *grasp* *grip*, *hold*, …
  - May be used even when contact is made (ex. 25-26)
  - The conative gives a reading of intensified contact
    - "Affectedness" (spatial configuration) of the patient is backgrounded
    - The *at*-phrase referent seems more like a setting; the focus is more on the agent
    - However: no event-level semantic difference, objectively, it is the same event

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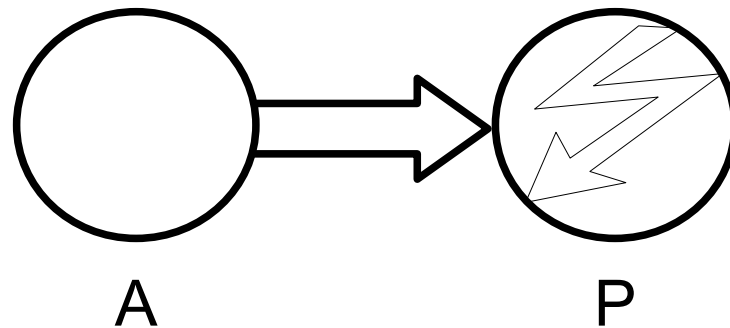textes

The conative construal

- The function of the conative
  - Not an event schema
    - Unnecessary affectedness is not a sufficient characterization
    - Apparently no event-level properties that
      - (1) hold for all conatives
      - (2) distinguish them from transitives
    - What conatives have in common is only the <u>lack</u> of some properties of the transitive
    - Events described by transitives and conatives may not <u>objectively</u> differ; it is only <u>subjectively</u> that they do

The conative construal

- The function of the conative
  - Does not denote a type of event, rather a type of construal
    - The focus shifts from causation to the agent and its activity
    - The patient loses its status as landmark (focal participant) and becomes part of the setting
  - In line with Dixon's (1991) remarks on preposition insertion
    - Marks "the deviation from an 'ideal' transitive event", "that it [the object] lacks some of the salient properties associated with the syntactic relation 'object'"
    - "to indicate that the emphasis is not on the effect of the activity on some specific object (the normal situation) but rather on the subject's engaging in the activity"

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The conative construal

- The ideal transitive event (Langacker 1991, Taylor 2003)

A   P

  - Two participants, an agent A and a patient P

  - A acts **consciously** and **volitionally**

  - A **initiates** and **controls** the event, and **intends** to bring about an **effect** on P

  - A makes **energetic physical contact** with P

  - P suffers a *perceptible* **change of state**

  - The event is **real** and **punctual**; it has a clear **endpoint**

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The conative construal

- A matter of choice?
  - The two constructions are available for conceptualizing two-participant events
  - So, what motivates the use of a conative (vs. transitive) construal?
    - The only acceptable construal for some events
      - Non-volitional agent or non-intended affectedness
      - Explicitly non-effective event
    - In competition with the transitive for others
      - It thus imposes a certain view on these events
      - In this sense it conveys meaning: intensified contact, underspecification of the effect
    - Main function = to avoid implicatures that the transitive counterpart might trigger: volition, causality, effect, ...

The conative construal

- Where do these implicatures come from?
  - Not from the transitive construction itself
    - Causal chain = just a prototype, not all of its properties necessarily hold for all instances
    - Large departures from the prototype are attested: non-volitional agents, non-causal relationships, non-affectedness can all occur in transitive sentences
  - So they come from the transitive use of the verb
    - For some verbs, the transitive use evokes a scenario which is at odds with the target conceptualization; e.g., "agression" for *kick* and *bite*, "cleaning" for *brush*, …
    - Avoided by the conative construal which focuses on the action

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Back to the theory ...

- Back to the theory; in construction grammar:
  - Clauses receive their meaning from independent surface generalizations (cf. Goldberg 2002)
  - Syntactic alternations have no theoretical status
  - Our analysis of the conative construction shows that:
    - It is a type of construal rather than a type of event
    - When and why this construal is used crucially depends on the transitive counterpart
    - Conatives sentences acquire much of their meaning from contrast with the transitive counterpart
    - This suggests that at least *some* alternations might play a greater role than what has been considered so far
    - This should be better studied and made more explicit in construction grammar

Thanks for your attention!

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