

Clausal Complementation and Mutual Selection

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It is commonly assumed that verbs that take clausal complements select the complement clause types that they can co-occur with. I am going to challenge that assumption. Some sorts of clause types (different ones in different languages) are rigid in their meanings, which is to say that the sorts of meanings that they introduce, e.g., deontic modality or conditionality, do not vary across the predicates they appear with. It could thus be said that these clausal types select the predicates that they can appear with, which reverses what is usually thought about the predicate/complement relation. The strongest position might be that every clause type is rigid, so that so-called semantic selection by a predicate is in fact just a compatibility relation, a mutual selection. A softer position is that mutual selection only holds for clause types that are demonstrably semantically rigid. The softer position suggests that the balance of asymmetric and mutual selection may play out differently in different languages. This is the position I will make a case for today, but not to the exclusion of the stronger position.

As part of that challenge, I will explore the role of predicate selection by complements in languages where the meaning of clausal complement verbs shift according to the clausal complement they co-occur with. In Lubukusu, the verb best translated as “think” and the one best translated as “believe” both can mean “hope” when they take a subjunctive complement. A rather novel sort of subordinate clause type found in Lubukusu introduces an actuality entailment, which can shift the meaning of a potentiality predicate to render it, in effect, an implicative. The internal semantic of ‘actual’ clauses also predicts what sorts of verbs can take it as a complement. In Medumba, a Grassfields Bantu language, there are very few propositional attitude verbs, so the variety of propositional attitudes that are lexicalized in English are composed in Medumba. Once again, semantically rigid complementation plays a role in constructing propositional attitudes.

This raises questions about what is semantically encoded as the lexical meaning of a predicate in those contexts where its meaning can shift according to what it is composed with. For example, when your favorite philosopher or semanticist proposes a semantics for “believe”, how Eurocentric is their point of departure?