HOMOPHONY AND SERIAL VERBS

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INTRODUCTION

Of late there has been a reawakening of theoretical
interest in polysemy, i.e. a single lexical item with
different senses. Lakoff (1987), for instance, relies
on polysemy and its linguistic representation to argue
against the classical theory of semantic category
structure. Along a somewhat different line, Traugott
(1986) investigated the implications of a polysemy
analysis for reconstructing the semantic structure of
lexical items and, in fact, of whole classes of lexical
items.

This recent emphasis provides a fresh semantic
perspective from which to view a long-standing problem
in the analysis of serial verb structures in the Kwa
languages of West Africa. Though various aspects of
these structures have proved problematic, one of the
more troublesome is the asymmetric distributional
behavior of verbal forms across different syntactic
constructions. That is, in the Kwa languages one
frequently finds that a phonological form in one
construction exhibits a range of morphosyntactic
behavior characteristic of a verb and in another
construction fails to manifest this same range. For
instance, in Ewe the form le, shown in 1a, exhibits
grammatical properties typical of verbs: it inflects
for tense/aspect, accepts the negation marker and
adopts sentence initial position in verb focus
structures. This same form, however, occurs in
sentences like 1b where it manifests none of these
verbal properties.

1.a. agbalẽa   le   kpõa   dzi
     book   be-at   table   top
     'The book was on top of the table'

  b. me kpọ lori le   mọ   dzi
     I   see lorry   street top
     'I saw the lorry on the street'

A similar phenomenon occurs in other West African
languages, Tswi among them. In this language, a form <u>wo</u>
exhibits properties typical of a verb in sentences like
2a, whereas it loses those same properties in 2b.

2.a. ọ   wọ   ọdan   mu
      he   be-at   house   inside
      'He was inside the house'

  b. ọ   yẹ   adquma   wọ   ọdan   mu
      he   do   work   house   inside
      'He worked inside the house'

Non-uniform distributional behavior such as found in
Ewe and Tswi has led investigators to postulate two
form classes or syntactic categories for the forms in
question. Ansre (1966), recognizing the form with the
fewest morphosyntactic restrictions as a verb, refers
to the form with the more restricted behavior as a
verbid (1b and 2b). Lord's (1973) analysis is similar,
though she prefers the term preposition rather than
verbid. In either terminological framework, a state of
homophony rather than polysemy is assumed, implying
thereby the existence of two lexical items. Indeed, a
traditional criterion for deciding whether the meaning
structure of a given form reflects polysemy or
homophony is form class, polysemy being restricted to
the different senses of a single syntactic category
(Lehrer 1974 and Lyons 1977).

Though the criterial role of form class in deciding
cases of polysemy or homophony has been debated in the
past, recent semantic analyses by Brugman (1983) and
Lakoff (1987) challenge its utility. Expanding on
Brugman, Lakoff analyzes the different senses of the
English form <u>over</u>, syntactically realized as a
preposition (3a), particle (3b), or adverb (3c), to be
a chain of image schemas related via a number of schema
altering processes to a central image. The senses of
<u>over</u> in 3, then, derive from this central schema by
semantic processes identified in Lakoff as
instantiation (3a), reflexive transformation (3b) and
metaphoric interpretation (3c).

3.a. The dog jumped over the fence

   b. He turned the paper over.

   c. Do it over.

MOTION IN EMAI

Though the challenge mounted by Lakoff appears
promising, it is the examination of lexical problems in
other languages which will ultimately clarify our
understanding of polysemy. A case in point is a
particular type of serial verb construction in Emai, an
Edoid language of south central Nigeria. In the Emai
domain of motion, there is a closed class of forms
which are employed in sentences conveying directional
motion, irrespective of whether the Manner or Cause of
that motion is specified. In the sentences of 4, for
instance, the directional component of the respective
motion situations is expressed by the forms <u>lagaa</u> and
<u>raa re</u>, leaving the forms <u>la</u> 'to run' and <u>sio</u> 'to
crawl' to express the Manner in which the different
events transpire.

4. a. ọli ọmọn la lagaa   uhai
      the child run move around well
       'the child ran around the well'

   b. ọli ọmọn sịọ lagaa   uhai
      the child crawl move around well
        'the child crawled around the well'

   c. ọli ọmọn la raa   uhai re
      the child run move past well
      'the child ran past the well'

   d. ọli ọmọn sịọ raa   uhai re
      the child crawl move past well
      'the child crawled past the well'

Similarly, directional forms like <u>lagaa</u> and <u>raa re</u> also
occur in sentences where the Cause of a motion event is
specified, as shown by the sentences of 5, with the
causative verbs <u>nwun</u> 'to carry' and <u>si</u> 'to pull.'

5. a. ọli ọmọn nwún ẹkpete lagaa uhai
      the child carry stool around well
      'the child carried the stool around the well'

   b. ọli ọmọn sí ẹkpete lagaa uhai
      the child pull stool around well
      'the child pulled the stool around the well'

   c. ọli ọmọn nwún ẹkpete raa uhai re
      the child carry stool past well
      'the child carried the stool past the well'

   d. ọli ọmọn sí ẹkpete raa uhai re
      the child pull stool past well
      'the child pulled the stool past the well'

What makes the directional forms <u>lagaa</u> and <u>raa</u> <u>re</u>
relevant for discussion is their asymmetric
distributional behavior vis-a-vis the Manner and Cause
constructions. To be sure, this non-uniform behavior is
not confined to <u>lagaa</u> and <u>raa</u> <u>re</u>, for it is
characteristic of forms such as <u>sho</u> <u>re</u> 'to move out', <u>o</u>
'to move into,' and <u>shan</u> 'to move via' among others. It
is the grammatical behavior of this entire set of forms
which is then under investigation.

To explore these directional forms at a more specific
level, consider the differential behavior of <u>lagaa</u> in 6
and 7. For the Manner constructions in 6, first of all,
<u>lagaa</u> assumes the position of focused constituent (6a);
follows the consecutive marker <u>o</u> (6b); and occurs as a
main verb in either clause of sentences designed to
disambiguate sentence negation (6d and 6e).

6. a. ulagaa   li ọli ọmọn sịọ lagaa   uhai
      moving around F the child crawl move around well
      what the child did at the well by crawling was
            move around it'

   b. ọli ọmọn sịọ   ọ   lagaa   uhai
      the child crawl and then move around well
      'the child crawled and then moved around the well'

   c. ọli ọmọn ọ i sịọ lagaa   uhai
      the child he not crawl move around well
      'the child did not crawl around the well'

d. ọli ọ́mọn sịọ́ bi khi ọ́ i lagaa   uhai
   the child crawl with that he not move around well
   'the child crawled but he did not move around the well'

e. ọli ọ́mọn lágaa   uhai bi khi ọ́ i   sịọ
   the child move around well with that he not crawl
   'the child move around the well but not by crawling'

In contrast, _lagaa_ in the Cause constructions of 7
fails to exhibit this same range of behavior. It fails
to occur as a focused constituent in 7a; does not allow
the consecutive construction in 7b; and does not occur
in either clause of biclausal sentences designed to
disambiguate sentence negation 7d and 7e. Across Manner
and Cause constructions, therefore, the distributional
behavior of directional forms in asymmetric.

7. *a. ulágaa li ọli ọ́mọn sí ẹkpete lágaa uhai

   *b. ọli ọ́mọn sí ẹkpete ọ́ lágaa uhai

    c. ọli ọ́mọn ọ́ i   si   ẹkpete lagaa uhai
        the child he not pull stool around well
        'the child did not pull the stool around the well'

   *d. ọli ọ́mọn sí ẹkpete bi khi ọ́ i lagaa uhai
        the child pull stool with that he not around well

   *e. ọli ẹkpete lágaa uhai bi khi ọli ọ́mọn ọ́ i   si   ọ́i
        the stool around well   the man he not pull it

ANALYSIS OF EMAI FORMS

Following the analytic strategy outlined by Ansre and
Lord, one would be inclined to ascribe the
distributional asymmetry of the Emai directional forms
to differences of form class. The form _lagaa_ in 6 might
then be analyzed as a verb, since it exhibits
morphosyntactic properties comparable to other verbs in
Emai. Applying this same strategy to _lagaa_ in 7 would
lead to assigning it the role of preposition, for like
the few other prepositions in Emai it precedes a noun
phrase and has a meaning corresponding to an English
preposition. The Lord/Ansre hypothesis would thus lead
us to postulate two distinct lexical items, in other
words homophony.

Consistent with syntactic facts though it is,
postulating homophony overlooks a significant semantic
characteristic of these forms, their similarity of
meaning. That is, across constructions the same
directional aspect of meaning is maintained by lagaa,
i.e. 'around' and by raa re, i.e. 'past.' To posit
homophony is to ignore this state of semantic
relatedness and so to minimize the role of semantics in
determining lexical structure. An alternative
interpretation would be to place this semantic
relatedness centerstage, so to speak, and to postulate
for these directional forms a case of polysemy, a
single lexical item with different senses. In fact, a
previous analysis of Emai verbs of motion in the
framework of Talmy (1985), assumes the polysemy
alternative (Schaefer 1988). As part of this analysis,
forms like lagaa and raa re are interpreted as
lexicalizing the semantic components of Motion+Path
(Path being equivalent to Direction) in Manner
constructions, but specifying only Path in Cause
constructions. Forms of the type lagaa thus manifest
two senses, one of which can be rendered as 'to move
around' and the other simply as 'around.'

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

Besides capturing the semantic relatedness of the Emai
directional forms across Manner and Cause
constructions, is there any other aspect of the
polysemy interpretation to commend it? In a recent
paper, Traugott (1986) shows how certain questions of a
historical nature are raised by a polysemy analysis.
Specifically, she suggests that there is a single
principle governing the historical order in which the
related senses in a polysemous structure emerge.
Assuming a state of homophony, on the other hand,
raises no such question, for with distinct lexical
items there is no reason to presume a question of order
other than what may characterize any two items chosen
at random from the lexicon. To account for the
historical relationship implicit in a polysemous
structure, Traugott proposes a principle of
subjectification, according to which meanings over time
tend to refer less to the objective than the subjective
situation, and less to a described situation than to
the discourse of a situation. In other words, she holds
that there is a broad principle of discourse

restructuring which underlies the historical
development leading up to a state of polysemy.

To support her case, Traugott analyzes English verbs
like observe, where both a mental sense, 'to watch
attentively,' and a speech act sense, 'to say something
is the case,' co-exist. Since the speech act sense
treats the described situation as a discourse
situation, her principle of subjectification predicts
that this sense should have emerged after the mental
verb sense. Indeed, this hypothesis is confirmed based
on datings in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Whether one accepts this dictionary evidence or not,
the hypothesis that discourse motivates polysemous
lexical structures is worth further investigation. For
Emai directional forms like lagaa, Traugott's
hypothesis suggests that we adduce evidence for the
historical order in which its senses, Motion+Path and
Path, emerged. Is the Motion+Path sense found in Manner
expressions earlier in time or is this reserved for the
simple Path sense revealed in Cause expressions? Of
greater import than the choice between possible
orderings, however, is our identification of the
particular feature of discourse which led to the change
in lexical structure.

That a principle of discourse may in fact play a role
'in explicating the historical development of Emai
directional forms is suggested by another source.
Hopper and Thompson (1984) advance the concept of
decategorialization to describe how the morphosyntactic
properties distinguishing nouns from verbs neutralize
in particular discourse contexts. Verbs, for instance,
lose their prototypical grammatical properties in
conditions where they do not assert the occurrence in
discourse of an actual event. Illustrating this
condition is the differential behavior of the form
throw in 8, which accepts a variety of tense, aspect,
modality and agreement morphemes in 8a but not in 8b.
For the latter we can say that throw has been
decategorialized.

8. a. The boy threw the log into the fire.

   b. The boy prepared to throw the log.

Emai directionals also exhibit decategorialization, since in Manner constructions they exhibit a full range of morphosyntactic properties typical of Emai verbs, whereas in Cause constructions they do not. Following the Hopper and Thompson analysis, one would expect that a change in the discourse role of the directional forms underlies their non-parallel behavior in Manner and Cause constructions. In order to explore this further, however, we require some notion of how semantic components in this domain of motion were distributed at earlier stages of Emai or of the language family to which it belongs. Fortunately, data from an earlier stage can be inferred from Tswana, another Niger-Congo language of Africa. Tswana is particularly revealing in this regard, since the Bantu subfamily of which it is a part has been postulated as undergoing the least historical change in the Niger-Congo family (Heine 1980).

MOTION IN TSWANA

Tswana reveals a crucial similarity to Emai in its lexicalization of the motion domain. Just as Emai relied on a directional verb in its Manner expressions, i.e. a main verb incorporating the components of Motion+Path, so too does Tswana. But what is potentially more relevant to the historical analysis of polysemy in Emai is that this pattern of lexicalization occurs in sentences expressing Cause as well. Previous analysis of Tswana sentences like 9 and 10 has revealed this to be the case (Schaefer 1985), but rather than recapitulate these arguments here, let us examine some crucial facts concerning the verbs in 9 and 10.

9. a. mosímané ó-pǫtóloga   petse á-táboga
      boy .   he-move around well   he-run
      'the boy is running around the well'

   b. mosímané ó-pálama   thaba á-gágaba
      boy   he-move up hill   he-crawl
      'the boy crawled up the hill'

10. a. mosímané o-pǫtóloga   petse a-goga koloi
        boy   he-move around well he-push cart
        'the boy is pushing the cart around the well'

    b. mosímané o-pálama   thaba a-belega koloi
        boy   he-move up hill he-push cart
        'the boy is pushing the cart up the hill'

First, take note of the directional verbs <u>potologa</u> and
<u>palama</u>, which incorporate the semantic components
Motion and Path. Each occurs as the sole verb of the
main clause in the Manner sentences of 9 and the Cause
sentences of 10. Support for this conclusion is based
on the attachment of the Class 1 concord prefix <u>o</u>- to
each directional verb. Secondly, notice that there is
another verb in each of these construction types. This
second verb refers to either the Manner or Cause of the
overall motion event and occurs in what Cole (1955)
would identify as a participial clause, a clause type
akin to a subordinate clause in English. Particularly
important in attributing this second verb to a
participial clause is the attachment of a Class 1
concord prefix distinct from that employed in a main
clause, the <u>a</u>- prefixed to the verbs <u>toboga</u>, <u>gagaba</u>,
<u>goga</u> and <u>belega</u>. This prefix only occurs in participial
clauses, not main clauses. It would appear, therefore,
that concepts of Manner and Cause in Proto-Niger-Congo
occurred in clause structures considered background
information, subordinate to the assertion of the main
clause.

RESTRUCTURING MOTION

Allowing the sentences from Tswana to lay the
foundation for a hypothesis about the structure of
Proto-Niger-Congo, we can view the Emai motion
sentences afresh. From this new perspective, the Emai
sentences show not only a change in the clausal
distribution of the Manner and Cause verbs but an
accompanying change in the foreground or background
status of the information conveyed by these verbs. That
is, in Proto-Niger-Congo we infer that a bi-clausal
structure was employed to express the components of a
basic motion event, each clause explicitly marked at
the surface level for concord and tense/aspect
agreement. These two clauses differed, however, on the
dimension of grounding, with the Direction verb

expressed in a foreground clause and the Manner or
Cause verb expressed in a background clause. What then
might have motivated a change in this structure,
particularly a change to a system like that in Emai
where the foreground/background distinction is no
longer supported by morphosyntactic marking?

An interesting fact to begin with is that the verbs in
the Tswana background clauses differ in transitivity,
as discussed by Hopper and Thompson (1980). These
investigators argue that transitivity is a composit of
interlocking gradients whose values co-vary with
grounding values in such a way that high transitivity
clauses correlate with foreground information and low
transitivity clauses with background information.
Notice in this regard that the clause containing the
Cause verb in Tswana involves two participants compared
to the single participant of the clause with the Manner
verb. In the Hopper and Thompson scheme, the former
would be of higher transitivity value. What would
happen, however, to the grounding status of the clauses
containing the Cause or Manner verb as the agreeement
morphology formally marking their background status
became lost, as indeed the Emai data suggests? Without
the support of the concord markers, one can only
surmise that the Cause or Manner verb would compete
with the Direction verb for foreground status. As a
resolution to this dilemma it seems natural to
hypothesize that the clause with the higher
transitivity value within the different types of motion
constructions would come to be viewed as foreground
information.

To see how this might work, let us consider the two
different types of motion construction. In
constructions of the Cause type, the Cause not
Direction verb would be foregrounded, since the clause
containing it manifests a greater number of those
features associated with high transitivity. Firstly,
the Object of the Cause verb is totally affected by the
action of its verb compared to the Object of the
Direction verb, and secondly, the Object of the Cause
verb is more highly Individuated. The latter may be
somewhat controversial, but it is important to recall
that Hopper and Thompson maintain that Objects high on
the Individuation scale are animate and human while
Objects low on the same scale are inanimate. With

respect to the latter, notice that the Object of a
Direction verb represents a location, an inanimate par
excellence. The higher transitivity value of the Cause
clause, therefore, would lead to its reinterpretation
as foreground information.

Interlocked with this realignment of grounding values
one might postulate a linear restructuring of clauses.
Bever (1970), that is, maintains that in SVO languages
the natural order of clauses differing in grounding is
foreground followed by background. Hence, the
foreground information consisting of the Cause verb
would come to precede the background information, the
Direction verb and its Object. Today, it is this linear
order of verbs which characterizes Emai Cause
constructions.

As for Manner constructions, their overall analysis
would appear to be similar. Manner verbs, though, are
not as highly correlated with transitivity as Cause
verbs. On initial inspection, in fact, they may seem to
be less strongly correlated with transitivity than
Direction verbs and so less likely to assume the role
of foreground information. True, Manner verbs have no
affected Object as do the Cause verbs, but unlike
Direction verbs they do not occur with an Object which
is of low value on the Individuated scale. In other
words, Manner verbs are neutral on this transitivity
feature whereas Direction verbs are low. The clause
containing the Manner verb, as a consequence, would be
higher in transitivity value than the Direction verb,
and more crucially, would be reassigned foreground
status relative to the latter. And in agreement with
the natural order principle, the Manner verb in the
foreground clause would come to precede the background
Direction verb, exactly the linear order prevailing in
Emai Manner constructions today.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that a historical
reinterpretation of the foreground/background status of
clauses in motion constructions underlies the current
state of polysemy affecting Emai directional forms.
This reinterpretation, it would appear, was mediated by
Hopper and Thompson's (1980) transitivity scale.

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