Rescuing Manner/Result Complementary from Certain Death

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An important question concerning lexical semantics is the constraints the grammar imposes on the possible meanings of words. One hypothesis constraining lexical semantics is manner/result complementary (1) (Rappaport-Hovav & Levin, 2010), which has recently come under empirical scrutiny (Koontz-Garboden & Beavers, 2010). I defend manner/result complementary, arguing that these observations demonstrate that the distinction between asserted and presupposed meaning is key to understanding the scope of the manner/result complementary constraint.

Focusing on the meaning of verbal roots, one broad distinction which seems to occur cross-linguistically is that verbal roots can express manner meanings and result meanings. Manner verbs express only the manner in which something happened but leave the result unspecified, while result verbs express only the result of something happening but leave the manner unspecified. Following a long line of research, Rappaport-Hovav & Levin (2010) observe that verbal roots seem to only express either manner or result meanings, but never both. They propose that this restriction is due to a grammatical constraint on possible verbal root meanings, given in (1).

(1) The manner/result complementary hypothesis: A verbal root can only encode either a manner meaning or a result meaning, but not both.

Recently, Koontz-Garboden & Beavers (2010) argued that there is empirical evidence against this hypothesis. They observe that manner of death verbs in (2) express both a manner and result meaning, a possibility at odds with (1).

(2) asphyxiate, behead, decapitate, drown, electrocute, guillotine, hang, strangle...

A point of debate, however, concerns whether these verbs entail both a manner and result meaning, and what the status of these manner and result meanings is for verbs expressing both. I first observe that only a subset of these verbs are true manner of death verbs, i.e. expressing both manner and result meanings. Much like the verb kill in (3) which express a result, manner of death verbs given in (4) do not allow an interruptive interpretation of for x time and resist the resultative to death; however, those verbs in (5) which do allow an interruptive interpretation of for x time and accept the resultative to death do not entail a result, but merely infer it.

(3) North Korea killed two civilians #for an hour/#to death.
(4) a. King Louis XVI was guillotined #for 30 seconds/#to death.
b. Cicero was decapitated #for 10 minutes/#to death.
c. Thich Quang Duc immolated himself #for an hour/#to death.
d. Terrorists beheaded Daniel Pearl #for 3 minutes/#to death.
(5) a. The state of Florida electrocuted Ted Bundy for 30 seconds/to death.
b. Joe Delaney drowned for 5 minutes/to death.
c. Richard Montague was strangled for a minute/to death.
d. Michael Hutchence asphyxiated himself for half a minute/to death.
I further argue that manner of death verbs assert their manner, but presuppose their result. As an assertion, the manner meaning of manner of death verbs can be directly questioned, given in (6). The result meaning of manner of death verbs, however, projects, as given in (8). This is different from kill in (7) which asserts its result (Kadmon, 2001).

(6) a. Was King Louis XVI guillotined? Yes, he was killed by a guillotine.
    b. Was Cicero decapitated? No, he was poisoned.
    c. Did Thich Quang Duc immolate himself? Yes, he set himself on fire.
    d. Did terrorists behead Daniel Pearl? Yes, he was beheaded.

(7) Did North Korea kill two civilians? Yes, they died.
(8) a. Was King Louis XVI guillotined? #No, he didn’t die.
    b. Was Cicero decapitated? #No, he didn’t die.
    c. Did Thich Quang Duc immolate himself? #No, he didn’t die.
    d. Did terrorists behead Daniel Pearl? #Yes, he died.

In light of their behavior, manner of death verbs give us a more nuanced view of the manner/result complementary hypothesis. While the manner/result complementary hypothesis is often taken to be a constraint over the meanings expressed by verbs, manner of death verbs reveal that manner/result complementary is a constraint on the asserted meaning of verbal roots. Although manner of death verbs express both manner and result, only the manner is asserted. The hypothesis in (9) reflects these observations.

(9) The manner/result complementary hypothesis (revised): A verbal root can only assert either a manner meaning or a result meaning, but not both.

Whether manner/result complementary also operates over presupposed meaning is an open question; however, it is clear that distinguishing between assertion and presupposition is key in understanding the constrains on word meanings.

References