Definiteness and verb meaning: Investigating the definiteness profile of English verbs

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In English verbs are taken to determine argument structure (Tesnière 1959; Fillmore 1968; Levin 1993, Levin & Rappaport 2005; Perek 2015). At the same time, English marks (in)definiteness overtly and obligatorily by determinatives like (*the*, *a*,…). Definiteness marking is seen as a discourse-pragmatic feature which codes identifiability, familiarity, specificity, etc. (Hawkins 1978; Langacker 1991; Lyons 1999; Sommerer 2018). Argument realization and definiteness marking are typically seen as separate grammatical phenomena. This paper suggests that the two phenomena are not as separate as it may be assumed (also see Dowty 1991; Filip 1999; Zimmerman 2001; Moltmann 2008). On the basis of a large corpus study of 3.4 million direct object NPs extracted from the British National Corpus (XML Edition) by means of a dependency parser (Chen & Manning 2014), we find verbs to vary widely in terms of the definiteness of their direct object. Among other things, this variation can be related to the meaning of the verb. For each verb we calculated its so-called 'Definiteness Ratio', i.e. the proportion of its definite uses. Using a Distributional Semantic Model we then show that specific verb groups tend to occur to a similar extent with (in)definite direct objects; for example, 'creation' verbs (*produce*, *develop*,…) and 'desire' verbs (*need*, *want*…) are much more likely to combine with an indefinite NP due to the fact that one produces or needs something that one does not yet possess and hence is most likely unfamiliar with. In contrast, 'knowledge' and 'movement' verbs (*explain*, *remember*, *shake*, *lift*…) are highly likely to collocate with a definite NP because one primarily explains what one already knows and what is familiar and specific. Our data show that next to intertextual discourse reasons, the semantics of a particular verb seems to have an influence on the definiteness profile of the arguments it licenses. This suggests that, from a usage-based, cognitive point of view (e.g. Goldberg 2006, 2019; Bybee 2010; Diessel 2019), verbs project not only information about the morphosyntactic encoding of their arguments, but also expectations about their discourse status.

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