

Grammar and compression: Instructions for (not) unpacking a blend

Vera Tobin
Case Western Reserve University

This paper looks at constraints on several constructions that reflect the degree to which expressed events, and their component chains of causation, are conventionally “packaged” (Goldberg 1995: 169) in conceptualization. It has frequently been observed that lexical causatives, as in (1a), are typically used only to express cases of direct causation, while expressions like (1b) can be used to express either direct or indirect causation.

- (1) a. Helen moved the book.
b. Helen made the book move.

Similarly, both (2a) and (2b) can be used to express literal change to a single room, but only (2b) can be used to express fictive change (Sweetser 1997; Tobin 2010).

- (2) a. My cubicle expands every year.
b. My cubicle gets bigger every year.

But under the right circumstances, both of these lexical constructions can license interpretations usually reserved for their periphrastic cousins, as seen in (3).

- (3) a. Poe shortened the poem for every new edition.
b. Edward cut his hair. [A stylist actually did the cutting.]

Interestingly, lexical causatives also seem to be more available for expressing cases of indirect causation when other aspects of the expression are overtly non-literal:

- (4) a. She opened doors all over town. [indirectly created opportunities for others]
b. #She closed doors all around the house. [turned on a fan and doors blew shut]

I claim that these apparent exceptions to the usual constraints are all the consequence of a critical degree of conventionalization, not of linguistic structures, but of patterns of compression across vital relations (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), reflected in and evidenced by the expressions available for referring to these relationships. Few hearers of the paraphrastic (2b) will think that the speaker’s office is “really” growing. It is less obvious that (3a) does not, in fact, refer to a poem that has “really” changed or that Edward in (3b) did not “really” cut his hair.

The phenomenon illustrated in (4) can also be explained as the product of compressions and their accessibility: these expressions work because they recruit “pre-compressed” structure that is itself highly conventionalized. I will argue that the semantics of these constructions can be most usefully analyzed in terms of whether they do or do not invoke, or permit for, a decompression of the expressed relation, and will discuss a range of additional phenomena (in particular, some related to complex viewpoint configurations) that are similarly linked to short-circuited decompressions.

References

- Fauconnier, G. and Turner, M. (2002). *The Way We Think*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sweetser, E. (1997). “Role and Individual Readings of Change Predicates.” *In Language and Conceptualization*, eds. J. Nuyts and E. Pederson. Oxford University Press.
- Tobin, V. (2010). “Grammatical and Rhetorical Consequences of Entrenchment in Conceptual Blending.” *In Meaning, Form, and Body*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.