Formalizing hierarchy-related generalizations in RRG: The brittle and the supple

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I demonstrate several instances where sentences that "should" be ungrammatical according to conventional syntax, are not. Their acceptability seems to hinge on something more than syntax alone. Problematic cases of this sort can be optimally handled in a framework such as Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Van Valin 2005), that is sensitive to known hierarchies, for instance a thematic relations hierarchy (Van Valin 2005, pp. 53-61). Predictions of a sentence's acceptability, if they can be partly informed by a hierarchy or continuum, are more realistic than those based on a brittle black-and-white "can the grammar generate this" criterion. I propose a formalization of continuum-sensitive semantic generalizations, as a part of the RRG constructional schema system.

Under many approaches, syntax-only analyses make generalizations that are unavoidably brittle – any string is either licensed by the syntax, or is not, and other considerations have no way to play a role. For such an inflexible analysis, exceptions can spell disaster. But it is these exceptions that can yield informative data, pointing us toward a more nuanced understanding that embraces not only syntax but also semantic and pragmatic insights.

A syntactic framework such as Role and Reference Grammar, by availing itself of descriptive hierarchies/continua, often of a semantic sort, is able to express generalizations that are less brittle and more supple.

For a typical area where purely syntactic generalizations fail, consider the tough construction in English as in (1):

(1) This jar is tough to open.

With the tough construction, various syntactic claims have been made that underestimate or even ignore the role of semantic/pragmatic considerations. I will present examples of several published syntactic generalizations that, understood in black-and-white terms, are simply false – they have exceptions. But all of them involve preferences based on some meaningful continuum or hierarchy. Where brittle generalizations fail, supple ones can succeed.

Here is a nonexhaustive sampling of some of these brittle claims:

(a) Tough constructions are supposed to be ungrammatical if the embedded clause has an expletive "there" subject (e.g. Bresnan 1971);

(b) Tough constructions are alleged to require intentionality or animacy on the part of the (covert) embedded subject (e.g. Lasnik & Fiengo 1974);

(c) Tough constructions are supposed to be incompatible with a nongeneric indefinite matrix subject (e.g. Postal 1971);

(d) Tough constructions are supposed to be limited to a certain group of adjectives (and some nominals and verbs) that subcategorize for it (discussed in Fleisher 2015);

(e) Tough constructions are alleged to be incompatible with embedded non-intentional *be* (discussed in Jones 1991).

In each case, the brittle generalization can be improved by aligning it with an independently

motivated semantic continuum, predicting which examples will sound better or worse, thus embracing the apparent exceptions. The exceptions that I have found to (a)-(e) above stem from and reflect speaker preferences that are describable in terms of these continua. Several continua or hierarchies are in play in (a)-(e); animacy, thematic relations, definiteness, topic vs. focus, etc., as I will show in detail.

RRG's constructional schema system gives us a way to let hierarchies contribute. In the semantics section of a constructional schema, reference can be made to relevant considerations, including hierarchies that play a role. The result is an account augmented by the ability to distinguish good-sounding from bad-sounding examples on the basis of a hierarchy – that is a supple account.

I propose that we begin work on formalizing the semantics section of a constructional schema. In so doing, we can constrain and categorize the kinds of statement permitted in that section, making new predictions about what is possible in grammar, and hinting that some of these semantically-informed constraints may be universal.

With a better mechanism for characterizing generalizations – to include supple, semantically sensitive tendencies – RRG offers a framework for grammar that corresponds more naturally and closely to actual linguistic usage facts. We can perhaps even extend this idea to new areas where relevant hierarchies have not yet been proposed. Whenever we can reconceptualize a generalization's exceptions (or other "unruly data") as exemplifying sensitivity to a continuum or hierarchy, that generalization can be drawn in more supple and more comprehensive terms.

Hierarchy-sensitive grammatical facts should be encoded in the form of preference tendencies; semantic preferences in the grammar are systematic, not a random or haphazard collection. For example, in an RRG system where, for a given construction, the PSA (privileged syntactic argument) must not be Actor (hence, ~A), a useful semantic constraint in some cases will be "and the less Actor-like, the better." Expressing a preference tendency for one end of a continuum versus the other, may turn out to be a common format for such constraints. In any case it can be spelled out so that explicit claims are being made and can be evaluated more easily crosslinguistically. A proposal envisioning hierarchies and preference statements about them to involve partially-ordered sets and set-theoretic functions, will be offered. Such a notation system enables further predictions about what sorts of semantic constraints are expected or unexpected in the world's languages. The supple triumphs over the brittle.

References

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