

At what level of schematicity should we investigate argument structure variation?

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A recurring discussion in formal-theoretical approaches to language is at which level of schematicity to describe argument structure (Müller 2006; Goldberg 2013). On the one hand, so-called ‘lexical’ approaches describe argument structure at the level of the individual verbs, viz. in the verb’s lexical entry (e.g. Sag et al. 2003; Müller 2018). On the other hand, so-called ‘phrasal’ approaches posit highly schematic argument structure constructions (e.g. Goldberg 1995; Tomasello 2003). These constructions may in principle combine freely with verbs, although they can have preferences as to with which verbs they combine in actual practice (Goldberg 2006: 22; Goldberg 2013: 439–440).

This discussion is highly relevant when conducting quantitative analyses of variation in argument structure. Consider the Dutch examples in (1)-(3), where the preposition *naar* ‘to’ is optional. Do these examples instantiate a single alternation between a schematic transitive construction and a schematic *naar*-construction? Or are we actually dealing with three different alternations, viz. one between a transitive and prepositional *zoek*-variant, another one between a transitive and prepositional *verlang*-variant, and one between a transitive and prepositional *peil*-variant?

- (1) *Voor iedereen dien je (naar) een individuele oplossing te zoeken.*
For everyone ought you (to) an individual solution to search
‘You ought to look for an individual solution for everyone’.

(Sonar-corpus, id: WS-U-T-B-0000000143.p.7.s.3)

- (2) *Dirk De Wildeverlangt (naar) wat meer creativiteit.*
Dirk De Wilde desires (to) some more creativity
‘Dirk De Wilde desires some more creativity.’

(Sonar-corpus, id: WS-U-E-A-0000202851.p.1.s.23)

- (3) *‘What’s in a name’ dachten we en peilden (naar) jullie mening.*
What’s in a name thought we and gauged (to) your opinion
‘“What’s in a name”, we thought, and gauged your opinion.’

(Sonar-corpus, id: WR-P-E-C-0000009624.p.1.s.4)

Hybrid approaches have also been proposed that allow argument structure to be described either at a lower or higher level of schematicity or that combine elements from both proposals (e.g. van Trijp 2011; Boas 2014; Diessel 2019: 115–141). Still, the question remains: how can we determine which level of schematicity is most appropriate? I argue that this essentially constitutes an empirical question, and propose a methodological procedure to deal with it. The procedure consists of three steps: (i) define a number of possible levels of schematicity, based on theoretical grounds; (ii) formulate hypotheses at several of these levels; (iii) systematically put these hypotheses to the test.

The alternation(s) in (1)-(3) are put under scrutiny to illustrate this procedure. By applying the Lexical Origin Hypothesis at various levels of schematicity (Goldberg 1999; Perek & Lemmens 2010), the following more concrete hypotheses are derived. These hypotheses will be tested on data of the Sonar-corpus of written Dutch, using distributional vectors and mixed regression modelling (Oostdijk et al. 2013).

- The *naar*-construction expresses directionality, the transitive construction does not.
- The meaning of ‘search’ has specialized to ‘seek to make or to acquire’ for the transitive variant, and to ‘look for’ for the prepositional variant.
- The meaning of ‘desire’ has specialized to ‘demand’ for the transitive variant, and to ‘long for’ for the prepositional variant.
- The meaning of ‘gauge’ has specialized to ‘directly assess’ for the transitive variant, and to ‘gauge by asking’ for the prepositional variant.

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