



The construal of salience in atemporal complement clauses in English

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Abstract

In Cognitive Grammar, expressions differ in meaning depending on not only the entities they designate but also the construals employed to structure their conceived scenes. The syntax of an expression is a reflection of its conceptual organisation, and represents the specific construal of the scene it describes. In atemporal (non-finite) complementation, causative constructions involving two participants in object position can appear in two syntactic forms: bare infinitive as in *She made them go* or *to*-infinitive as in *She forced them to go*. The construal which brings about the syntactic difference between the two complement clauses pertains to salience. When the speaker wants to give the complement clause initial salience, he opts for the bare infinitive. By contrast, when the speaker wants to give the complement clause subject initial salience, he chooses the *to*-infinitive. In each case, the meaning of the construction is determined by the particular way the speaker structures its scene, whereas its distribution is governed by the semantic compatibility between its internal parts.

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1. Introduction

The theoretical framework adopted in the present paper is Cognitive Grammar (CG) as described in Langacker (1987, 1991a,b, 1999).¹ CG rests on a number of fundamental tenets. One tenet is that the meaning of a linguistic expression does not reside in its conceptual content alone, but includes the particular way of construing that content. For one thing, expressions differ in meaning depending on which entities within the situation they designate. For another, speakers have the ability to construe the same situation in many different ways. Conceptual content is the cognitive domain with respect to which an expression is characterised. Construal is a language strategy which allows the speaker to conceptualise a situation in discourse and choose the appropriate structure to represent it in language. This means the structure used correlates with the construal chosen. The construals employed to structure conceived situations amount to different mental experiences. Consequently, the construal embodied by a linguistic expression constitutes a crucial facet of its meaning.

As its base, an expression evokes a particular conception within which it designates some participants by placing them on stage as the focus of attention. These participants are accorded a special quality, which Langacker (1999, p. 7–8) terms *salience*. Salience refers to the quality of a participant of an expression of being noticeable, obvious and conspicuous. Salience is then a mental operation which allows the speaker to give the participants of an expression some degrees of significance, notability and eminence. However, to describe these participants optimally and show that they differ in the degree of salience they receive, another mental operation is required. This mental operation is what Langacker (1991a, pp. 4–5; 1987, pp. 116–117) calls *initial salience*, referring to the most significant participant within a scene. Linguistically, the participant, standing out from the ground, is placed in a certain position in the expression relative to its importance.

In language, predications invoking the same content can be distinguished by the varying degrees of salience which they accord to their profiled entities. The attachment of varying degrees of salience to such entities results in various syntactic structures. The speaker selects a particular entity, and thus imposes a particular organisation on the scene. For example, in constructions with two entities in profile the construal of salience determines their salience in order of sequence. It specifies which entity the speaker construes as initially salient and which one as only secondarily salient. That is, an initially salient entity is structured differently from an entity that is secondarily salient. In CG, it is the norm that differences in construals spell differences in structural coding, and the latter no doubt reflect differences in meaning.

To illustrate his thesis, Langacker (1987, pp. 39–40) gives an example on the dative shift, as in *He sent a letter to Susan*, and *He sent Susan a letter*. According to theories of autonomous syntax (Radford, 1988, p. 31), the two sentences have the same source, with the second being derived from the first. Because they have the

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version of Chapter 7 of my doctoral thesis (Hamawand, 2002), which was presented at the University of Hamburg in December 2001.

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