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## Concerning the radial network view of argument structure: The case of the English caused-motion pattern

Enrico Torre

Independent Scholar, 17 Newlands Avenue, Lancaster, LA1 4HU, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

On the basis of the analysis of a sample of data drawn from the large English corpus *enTenTen13*, the present paper provides an account of the caused-motion pattern which calls for caution on the radial network view of argument structure, common among proponents of Construction Grammar. In my study, I first analyzed a sample of occurrences which are supposed to instantiate the central sense of this grammatical pattern; then, I considered a few instances of the supposed semantic extensions of the pattern. Based on my findings, I claim that the distinction between a set of different senses is less than convincing. Instead, I propose that the different realizations of the pattern are better characterized as standing in a relationship of family resemblance, sharing a common syntactic structure and only a very general meaning denoting a change of circumstances. This flexible approach allows capturing the peculiarities of the different instantiations by positing a series of low-level generalizations based on specific senses of the lexical items.

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### 1. Introduction

In the present contribution, I will address the topic of polysemy in syntax. The view of argument structures as radial categories common among proponents of Construction Grammar (CxG henceforth) has recently been criticized for drawing generalizations over meanings too hastily, with the result that a number of constraints need to be posited in order to rule out implausible senses (e.g. [Boas, 2003, 2008a](#); [Croft, 2003](#); [Perek, 2014](#); see also [Faulhaber, 2011](#); [Herbst, 2011](#)). Furthermore, this perspective has been criticized for drawing unnecessary boundaries between grammatical patterns (e.g. [Broccias, 2000, 2003](#)). In my study, I will focus on the English grammatical pattern normally referred to as the ‘caused-motion construction’, but in this paper, the label ‘construction’ will be replaced by the more theory-neutral one of ‘pattern’.<sup>1</sup> First of all, I will illustrate some occurrences of this pattern with a sample of verbs which are normally considered to instantiate its ‘central sense’ X causes Y to move  $Z_{\text{path}}$  (e.g. *She threw the paper into the bin*). Then, I will turn my attention to its supposed ‘radial extensions’. On the basis of the results of my analysis, I will suggest that the radial network view of argument structure does not seem warranted, at least as far as the caused-motion pattern is concerned. As an alternative, I will propose that the instantiations of the caused-motion pattern may be better characterized as standing in a relationship of family resemblance ([Wittgenstein, 1953](#)) with each other. Only a very general meaning common to all these instantiations seems to be detectable, and it does not seem necessarily related to motion, but rather to a change of circumstances affecting either the causer or the

E-mail address: [contact@enricotorre.com](mailto:contact@enricotorre.com).

<sup>1</sup> This is due to the fact that the notion of ‘construction’ as is normally used in mainstream CxG (e.g. [Goldberg, 2006](#)) does not seem to significantly differ from that of ‘pattern’ used by pre-Chomskyan linguists (e.g. [Jespersen, 1924](#); [Sapir, 1921](#)), as pointed out by [Itkonen \(2011\)](#).

theme participant or some other aspect of the situation. This observation seems to go in the direction of Broccias's (2003) proposal to merge the 'caused-motion' pattern with other patterns which share the same syntactic structure under the umbrella label of 'change' pattern. While a general meaning can be observed, I will propose that low-level generalizations based on specific word senses are still necessary to avoid overgeneralizations and the consequential proliferation of constraints (cf. Boas, 2003, 2005).

## 2. Argument structure and syntactic polysemy

CxG awards a role of paramount importance to argument structure (A-S from now on). A-S specifies how the arguments of a verb are realized and is considered as the part of grammar mapping syntax with semantics. According to Goldberg (e.g. 1995, 2006), the meaning of a sentence is determined by the interaction of the frame semantics of the verb and the A-S (see Fillmore, 1982). From this perspective, the English caused-motion pattern requires that the verb is combined with three arguments: a causer, a theme, and a goal. These arguments will be realized syntactically as subject, direct object, and oblique, respectively. Consider the following sentence (from Goldberg, 1995, p. 3):

- (1) Pat sneezed the napkin off the table.

The meaning of this sentence will be provided by the interaction between the semantics of the verb *sneeze* and the A-S of the caused-motion pattern. The semantics of a verb includes the delimitation of participant roles, which are instances of the more general argument roles associated with the construction. Verbs lexically determine which aspects of their frame-semantic knowledge are obligatorily profiled. Thus, the argument structure of the English caused-motion pattern can be seen as the combination of the syntactic properties shown in (2), and the basic meaning reported in (3) below:

- (2) a. structure: [NP V NP PP/AdvP]  
 b. function: Subj V Obj Obl<sub>path/loc</sub>  
 (3) CAUSE-MOVE (**causer theme** path)

Only the causer role must be fused with a participant role of the verb: the remaining two can be contributed by the syntactic pattern. Indeed, looking back at the example in (1) above, it is possible to notice that the verb *sneeze* has only one participant role. The interplay between the frame evoked by the verb and the schematic meaning of the A-S gives rise to the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

In Goldberg's (1995) view, syntactic patterns are polysemous: a pattern is typically associated with a family of closely related senses rather than a single, abstract sense. However, one of these senses is considered more 'basic', while the other ones are seen as extensions from this central sense. For instance, the English caused-motion pattern typically implies that the causer argument directly causes the theme argument to move along a path designated by the directional phrase, as in the case of the example sentence in (1). It follows that the English caused-motion pattern will provide an expression with the core meaning *X causes Y to move Z<sub>path</sub>* (i.e., something causes something else to change location).<sup>2</sup> While this can be considered the central sense of the pattern, less prototypical examples display different kinds of meaning. Goldberg (1995, p. 76) identifies at least five different senses related to this pattern, listed in (4) below:

- (4) a. SENSE1: 'X causes Y to move Z<sub>path</sub>' (central sense)  
 INSTANTIATED BY: verbs of force-exertion (e.g. *push, kick, sneeze, shove*)  
 e.g. Pat pushed the piano into the room.  
 b. SENSE2: conditions of satisfaction imply 'X causes Y to move Z<sub>path</sub>'  
 INSTANTIATED BY: verbs of saying with associated satisfaction conditions (e.g. *ask, order, send*)  
 e.g. Pat ordered him into the room  
 c. SENSE3: 'X enables Y to move Z<sub>path</sub>'  
 INSTANTIATED BY: verbs of enablement (e.g. *allow, let*)  
 e.g. Pat allowed Chris into the room  
 d. SENSE4: 'X prevents Y from moving Z<sub>path</sub>'  
 INSTANTIATED BY: verbs of blocking (e.g. *lock, keep, barricade*)  
 e.g. Pat locked him into the room  
 e. SENSE5: 'X helps Y to move Z<sub>path</sub>'  
 INSTANTIATED BY: verbs of helping (e.g. *help, assist, guide, show, walk*)  
 e.g. Pat assisted him into the room

<sup>2</sup> Goldberg (e.g. 2006, ch. 4) posits that A-Ss show a high degree of overlapping with certain general purpose verbs. For instance, the English caused-motion pattern is allegedly related to the meaning of the verb *put*.

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