

In this talk, I question lexical analyses of Implicit Objects (IO's) in English, and propose instead that IO's can be licensed by a pragmatic principle called Recoverability to a Relevant Degree of Precision (RRDP). In a broad sense, I suggest that it's our own goals, not syntactic specifications, that determine when we may leave an argument implicit.

IO's are cases when a verb that is usually transitive appears without an overt object ('I ate.'). I focus on *indefinite* IO's, which refer to an indefinite entity (cf. definite IO's such as 'I noticed').

(1) Phil ate/*devoured.

Based on contrasts like (1), researchers have argued that a verb lexically specifies whether it will allow an IO or not; more recently, Rappaport Hovav and Levin (e.g. Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2010) have proposed that in particular, *result* verbs such as *kill* do not allow IO's. But IO's are far more flexible than these lexical accounts predict. In Web examples, *devour* and its kin do take IO's; and Goldberg 2001 shows that result verbs can take IO's in a number of contexts:

- (2) a. Tigers kill at night. (Goldberg)
b. He burglarized, but she murdered. (Goldberg)

These data suggest that IO's are not lexically legislated, but rather interact with pragmatic factors. In this talk, I try to spell out these factors. Building on Goldberg's idea that objects may be implicit when they are 'low in discourse prominence,' I identify two factors that cause an object to be accorded this status. First, context may provide information that will allow the object to be recovered more or less precisely. Second, one may care more or less about how precisely one can recover the object, depending on one's goals. Synthesizing these ideas, I suggest that IO's are used when people can recover the object well enough to proceed with their goals. If speakers only need to know that an object exists, it can be implicit. And if speakers do need to know what it is but can easily recover it from the context, it can be implicit there as well, as long as it is not the topic/focus of the sentence. Formally, this idea may be stated as a condition that IO's must be RRDP:

- (3) Let V be a transitive verb and let $S1$ and $S2$ be sentences that are identical except for the argument structure of the verb.
In $S1$, give V an implicit object and interpret $[[V]] = [\exists y \lambda x. xVy]$.
In $S2$, give V an explicit object y so that $[[V]] = [\lambda y \lambda x. xVy]$.
Let $S2$ (and therefore $S1$) be true.
The implicit object of $S1$ is RRDP if interlocutors' purposes **are not thwarted** when $S1$ is uttered instead of $S2$.

This definition builds on the idea, from Graff-Fara 2000, that we use language to make goal-relevant distinctions while abstracting away from goal-irrelevant ones. For her, this notion is invoked to analyze vagueness, but it also applies here: an IO may be left somewhat underspecified if it is recoverable enough that we can proceed with our goals.

This analysis suggests that people can tinker with the valency of a transitive verb to suit their goals on a particular occasion. On this view, the lexicon is a dynamically negotiated system (Ludlow In preparation) that speakers reshape and reproduce with every utterance. At a macro level, an entire community may conventionalize an adjusted version of the lexicon, as when athletes say 'I lifted' [weights] or musicians say 'I played' [my instrument]. Here, I suggest that this process may also happen at a micro level, between two participants in a single conversation.

References

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