

Complementation patterns of English illocutionary shell nouns

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The literature on complementation has concentrated mainly on the verbal category. Not much research has been carried out on the complementation of nouns (see Vergaro & Schmid 2017).

In this paper we focus on illocutionary shell nouns, i.e. the class of abstract nouns reporting an illocutionary act and its propositional content (*his **assertion** that the town of Hebron is essentially an Arab town*), with the aim of checking for the correlation (i) between the meaning of these nouns and their preferred complementation patterns, and (ii) between their semantic similarity and their similarity in the distribution of complementation patterns.

We report the results of the investigation of a dataset of 181 illocutionary shell noun types belonging to a corpus of 335 illocutionary nouns developed by the author on the basis of speech act literature and grouped, following Searle, into the five classes of assertive (*assertion, claim, guess, etc.*), commissive (*promise, vow, offer, etc.*), directive (*request, order, edict, etc.*), expressive (*apology, complaint, boast, etc.*) and declarative (*abrogation, christening, excommunication, etc.*) shell nouns.

Two types of analysis were carried out in order to investigate the semantic and grammatical characteristics of these nouns. The semantic analysis was based on insights from speech act theory and the philosophy of language, and consisted in the development of the specifications – attributes and attribute values – that make up the conceptual structure of each lexical item (see Proost 2007). The results were tallied with a corpus-based grammatical analysis aimed at investigating the occurrence of individual tokens in grammatical constructions according to their unique specifications. Two hundred tokens of each noun type were randomly sampled from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Using these data, the 181 nouns were subjected to an analysis of the relative frequencies of their complementation patterns.

Results indicate that the match between noun and complement is fairly confirmed in the prototypical core of each class of illocutionary shell nouns, where the more prototypical meaning of each shell noun type and the prototypical meaning of each grammatical pattern show the highest degree of compatibility. It is much less confirmed in the less prototypical and more specific nouns.

The distribution of the patterns among the shell nouns is motivated in terms of profiling effects (Langacker 1991). In the conceptual dependence relation between head and complement, the complement elaborates a salient feature of the head. The occurrence of a shell noun in a specific pattern highlights specific portions of the noun's conceptual structure, i.e. specific attributes and values, leaving the rest in the background. Elaboration of specific attributes and values accounts for the major or minor compatibility between noun and construction.

References

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