The structure of the mental lexicon, a lexicalist viewpoint
Abstract

1. Introduction This study investigates the structure of the mental lexicon. It is a long-standing debate whether the mental lexicon contains roots or words. The root-based view is supported by Halle & Marantz (1993), Arad (1998), and Borer (2005), while the word-based view is represented by Horvath & Siloni (2009), Reinhart (2002), and Levin (1995). Following Horvath and Siloni (2009), I assume that the lexicon can be properly investigated with the help of idioms. Based on new data from English and Hungarian, I argue that the lexicon stores words and not minimal meaningful units (morphemes).

2. Theoretical Background The present study is based on Horvath and Siloni (2009). They proceed from two assumptions: one possible lexicalist hypothesis considers words as the basis of the lexicon, while a neoconstructionist view considers roots to be the basis. Horvath and Siloni investigate Hebrew idioms to find out which approach is the appropriate one. With the help of idioms, the structure of the lexicon can be determined by examining whether they keep their idiomaticity during subcategory alternation or not. They assume that if words are stored separately in the lexicon, it is expected during the alternation of two different verb forms that the idiomatic reading does not remain generally. On the other hand, if the lexicon stores roots, which gain their category in syntax, idiomaticity is supposed to remain during verb form alternation. The final result of their research supports the view that the lexicon is word-based.

I assume that the most appropriate verbs for this study contained by the chosen idioms take part in the so called anticausative alternation[1]. Based on Reinhart (2002), I assume that the anticausative alternation can be formalized by theta-roles. A theta-role is a formal device for representing a constituent from the argument structure of a verb. She calls the argument structure a theta-grid. Two features describe theta-roles: c, [+/-c(ause)], "which determines whether or not the argument in question is necessarily responsible for causing the denoted event", and the second is m, [+/-m(entally involved)], which "determines whether or not the mental state of the argument in question is relevant to the denoted event." The theta-roles and their features are the following: Agent: [+c+m], Theme/Patient: [-c-m], Experiencer: [-c+m], Cause: [+c], Instrument: [+c-m] (Reinhart 2002). During the process of "decausativization"(1), she derives the transitive form from the intransitive with the omission of a cause role, which is how she explains the anticausative alternation (Reinhart 2006).

3. The Method The present paper compares the English and Hungarian languages. The study is built on 100 idioms collected separately from both languages from 4 idiom dictionaries and 2 corpora. The existence of the idioms was checked with Google Search. Besides multiword idioms, I also selected from those idiomatic structures which contain a verb and an argument. The argument varies within one semantic domain (e.g.: *suffocate talent, suffocate enthusiasm*).

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[1] Anticausative alternation happens when a transitive verb with a non-agentive subject has an unaccusative (intransitive) verb pair. Anticausative verbs are a subclass of unaccusatives, which are predicates whose subject is semantically patient (typical unaccusative verbs are *dry, boil, melt, burn*). Unlike in the case of unergative verbs, whose subject can only be an agent (i.), the subject of the anticausative verb can be both an agent or a cause (ii.).

i. a. John/*the pencil writes the letter.   UNERGATIVE
  b. *The letter write.
ii. a. John/the stone/the wind broke the window.   ANTICAUSATIVE
   b. The window broke.

4. The Results I created 3 groups of idioms: transitive idioms without an intransitive counterpart (2), intransitive idioms without a transitive counterpart (3), and idioms which have both transitive and intransitive realizations (4). Having a look at these idiomatic structures with anticausatives, I came to the conclusion that in both languages there are idioms which keep the idiomatic meaning during the alternation, and also ones which are idiomatic only with one verb form. The lexicon is word-based according to my preliminary research. Furthermore, my research shows that English can be grammatically more rigid than Hungarian, as it has less constructions which can be idiomatic in both verb forms, and it casts before that multiword idioms maybe keep their idiomatic meaning less times during the alternation compared to two-word idioms/polysemies.

Examples

(1) Decausativization (Role Reduction):

    V (Cause, a) →V (a)

    open (Cause, Theme) →open (Theme)

(2) a. money burns a hole in the/one's pocket: *"I am one of those people whose **money burns a hole in the pocket** whenever anything promising arrives on the market."* (British National Corpus)

    b. hole burns in the/one's pocket   non-existing

    c. a hit hegyeket mozgat (the faith.NOM mountain-PL-ACC move-PRES.3SG): *„Mert ha **a hit hegyeket mozgat**, úgy a szeretet még ennél is többre képes: úrrá tud lenni mindenen, még a józan észen s a megfontolt mérlegelésen is."* (Hungarian National Corpus)

    d. hegyek mozognak (mountain-PL move-PRES.3PL)   non-existing

(3) a. hell freezes over: *"Their last win at Anfield was 22 years ago and with this kind of luck **hell will freeze over** before they do it again."* (British National Corpus)

    b. freeze hell over   non-existing

    c. hízik a mája (fatten-PRES.3SG the liver-POSS.3SG); 'he likes what he sees/hears':

        *„A többségnek szerencséje van, hogy nem kell bonyolult lelki izékkel vergődniük, sejtelmük sem lehet az ilyen dolgokról, viszont remekül dobálóznak a remek tanácsokkal, és közben **hízik a májuk**, hogy milyen szerencsések, hogy az átlaghoz tartoznak, nem lógnak ki."* (fatten-PRES.3SG the liver-POSS.3PL) (Hungarian National Corpus)

    d. hízlalja a máját (fatten-PRES.3SG the liver-POSS-ACC)   non-existing

(4) a. break the/one's silence: *"De Gaulle recognized that the crisis that he had been anticipating since 1946 had finally arrived. But still he did not **break his silence**."* (British National Corpus)

    b. silence breaks**:** *"You are giving your child the strongest message in the loudest way: You are there and will be there when that **silence breaks**."* (British National Corpus)

    c. kétely ébred (discredit.NOM rise-PRES.3SG): *„Ilyen körülmények között logikusan **ébred kétely** az iránt, hogy a Szlovák Köztársaság és a Magyar Köztársaság külügyminisztereinek előkészítés alatt álló találkozója elérné-e célját."* (Hungarian National Corpus)

    d. kételyt ébreszt (discredit-ACC rise-PRES.3SG)*: „Tippu palotája, afféle bronzból és fából épített nyárilak, derűs bizalommal nyitja meg magát a hűsítő légáramlatoknak, csakhogy a bizalom valódi volta iránt a brutális bástyafal enyhe **kételyt ébreszt**."* (Hungarian National Corpus)

Selected References

Horvath, Julia & **Siloni**, Tal. 2009. Hebrew Idioms: The Organization of the Lexical Component. Brill's Annual of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics 1, 283-310. • **Reinhart**, Tanya. 2002. The Theta System: An Overview. Theoretical Linguistics 28 (3), pp. 229-290. • **Reinhart**, Tanya. 2006. Causativization and decausativization. Handout distributed at Syntax, lexicon and event structure. Anita Mittwoch's workshop. Jerusalem.