Conative and Its Related Constructions: An Extended Semantic Map Approach

A large number of theoretical frameworks have been devoted to the problem of the conative construction (hereafter CC, ‘verb-at’, shot at the bear). Pinker (1989), Levin (1993) and Beavers (2006) address the CC in terms of lexical semantics; van der Leek (1996) and Dixon (2005), in terms of a compositional approach; Goldberg (1995), in terms of Construction Grammar; and Broccias (2003), in terms of Cognitive Grammar. However, it would seem that none of them provide a fully consistent explanation for i) why (1a) through (4a) are acceptable whereas (1b) through (4b) are not:

(1a) Terry patted at the cat. (1b) *Terry touched at the cat.
(2a) Mary hit at the naughty child. (2b) *Mary spanked at the naughty child.
(3a) He carved away at the roast. (3b) *He carved at the roast.
(4a) John hit out at the door. (4b) *John hit out the door.

Furthermore, these approaches lack an explication of the relationships between the CC (underspecifying a patient’s affectedness) and other constructions: away (continuous, chat away), out (uncontrolled, hit out), away at (continuous conative, carve away at) and out at (uncontrolled conative, hit out at) constructions.

This paper presents an extended semantic map model (Kim, Y. 2008) by integrating Talmy’s attentional system into the semantic map model (Croft 2001). The semantic map model shows the relationships between the various semantic functions of a multifunctional construction. However, it has some theoretical limitations. First, it lacks criteria with which to specify the arrangement of the geometry of semantic functions and the distance between them. Second, a conceptual space makes little reference to cognitive operations like construal, indicating that this model leaves out the role of the conceptualizer.

I argue that there is a relation between the windowing of attention on event schemas (the X-axis of the semantic map) and the focus of attention on participants (Y-axis). Participants who control an event are more likely to have the speaker’s focus of attention in Activity-windowing event schemas so that these controllers are prototypically construed as Agents. On the other hand, participants who undergo change are more likely to have the focus of attention in Change or State-windowing event schemas so that these undergoers are prototypically construed as Themes.

The CC is an [Activity- (Cause)]-windowing construction; 1) it implies, but does not entail the Change of a Theme, 2) it is likely to occur with imperfective aspect, non-past tense, or non-specific Objects, 3) it does not have a stative passive, and 4) it is unlikely to occur with the Resultative construction. The away and out constructions, encoding a continuous and uncontrolled event respectively, are more Activity-windowing than the CC because unlike the CC, they can form a construction without a Theme (He chattered away. He hit out wildly.). It can explain why the [Activity-Cause]-windowing hit is less likely to occur with the more [Activity]-windowing out construction as in (4b) whereas it can occur with the CC as in (2a).

The [Activity- (Cause)]-windowing CC can occur also with the more [Activity]-windowing away and out constructions. The away construction shifts the windowing of attention from Change in carve to Activity in carve away, and the out construction shifts the windowing of attention from [Active-Cause] in hit to Activity in hit out so that they can easily occur with the [Activity- (Cause)]-windowing CC as in (3a) and (4a) respectively.

The CC is less likely to occur with touch and spank verb types because touch verb types lack intention to affect a Theme, and spank verb types are less [Activity]-windowing since they prototypically entail affectedness of a Theme. On the other hand, the CC is more likely to occur with pat and hit verb types, both of which window Activity rather than Change.