The frame elements of NOVELTY in chess: A cross-linguistic exploration

The advances in cognitive linguistics, among them frame semantics (Fillmore, 1982) and construction grammar (Goldberg, 1995, 2006) provide an excitingly new way to better understand language. Studies that apply a frame semantic analysis to language phenomena have been motivated by several factors, such as ethnobiological classification (Martsa, 2000); shift in word meaning (Payne, Ole-Kotikash & Ole-Lekutit, 2001); metaphorical and metonymical uses of body part words (Petrucc, 1995), or the causative construction (Gilquin, 2003). Few of these studies investigate frames cross-linguistically (Marsta, 2000). Moreover, cross-linguistic frame analysts have rarely investigated naturally occurring data.

The present study has been called into being by the quest to find out about the ‘new move’ frame in relation to chess in two languages. As part of a bigger research, it was found that American and Hungarian college students view the possibility of novelty as an important element of games. Moreover, the two populations’ conception of chess seems to be different, even though it is a game of medium typicality for both populations. As chess is a game in which new moves and new ideas are of utmost importance, chess articles from several sources of naturally occurring data (daily papers, chess magazines, sport and chess websites) in both languages have been searched for expressions that comment on new moves. It was found that beyond reporting the fact, the most important frame elements are actor, source of information, evaluation, effect, and preconditions. Based on the data, both the importance of and the specific ways in which these elements are expressed appear to be different for the two populations.

Standard forms to express the fact include new move (új lépés) and novelty (újítás) in both languages. At the same time, Hungarian tends to express that it is the new idea (Kramnik új terve- Kramnik’s new plan) that counts more than just the move to a bigger extent. In the American data, the actor, that is, the person who made the move, is stated in only about 40% of the expressions, and is invariably the player’s name (Anand used a novelty). In Hungarian, on the other hand, actor is stated about 70% of the time, and sometimes it is only the player’s title that is given (A bolgár exvilágbajnok-the Bulgarian ex-world-champion). Moreover, evaluation, which can be split into unequivocally positive expressions (a brilliant novelty) and those that convey doubt of different degrees (It looks a little bit strange; A novelty of dubious worth) seems to be a more foregrounded frame element for Americans than for Hungarians. Conversely, the effect of the novelty, most often that of surprise, is expressed more often by the Hungarian writers (Anand újabb meglepetése újítás- Anand’s another surprise is a novelty).

To conclude, this cross-linguistic investigation of naturally occurring language use has revealed that the same discourse context, namely, the reporting of new moves in chess articles, motivated the usage of overlapping frame elements in American English and Hungarian. At the same time, the weighing of those elements as expressed in linguistic constructions shows remarkable differences. In an attempt to explain these findings, the presenter will speculate about their possible connections to her findings on the psychological prototype concept of chess as a game in the two cultures, as well as to those of her other linguistic explorations of chess articles.