Pieces of meaning in unexpected places: Wug-ir and wug-er nonce verbs receive a different default semantics in French

Itamar Kastner  Fabienne Martin
itamar@itamarkast.net  fabienne.martin@hu-berlin.de

CLAIM
French speakers prefer -ir for COS and -er for activity in a wug task.

INTRODUCTION
➢ To what extent does lexical semantics influence the syntax? (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995; Alexiadou et al. 2014)
➢ Is there a formal typology of lexical semantic features? (Levinson 2014; Beavers and Koontz-Garboden Under review)
➢ Where can meaning come from, other than features on syntactic heads and the root? ⇒ The two main conjugation classes in French (e.g. Schwarze 2009).
1. -er verbs, e.g. aime-er ‘love’ (~6000 in Le Petit Robert).
2. -ir verbs, e.g. maigr-ir ‘become thin(ner)’ (300–400)
⇒ Speakers have morphological knowledge of both in wug tasks. (El Fene 1994; Boyé 2000).

CONJUGATION CLASSES: SEMANTICS
➢ Most -ir verbs are deadjectival/denominational:
  – maigr-ir ‘become thin(ner)’ < maigre ‘thin’.
  – in fewer cases denominial (at-terr-ir ‘land’ < terre ‘earth’).
➢ Most word-derived -ir verbs have change of state (COS) semantics, but few (if any) are activities (e.g. bonner ‘tell good stories!’).
➢ The other -ir (root-derived) are less frequent.
  – Most are COS.
  – Some activities, e.g. bondir ‘bounce’.
⇒ -ir verbs are more likely to be COS than activity verbs.
➢ The minority activity -ir verbs are root-derived.
  agir ‘act’, bâtir ‘build’, barrir ‘trumpet’ …
⇒ No deterministic rule associating -ir with a COS meaning.
⇒ Do speakers associate COS with word-derived verbs of this class?

CONJUGATION CLASSES: SYNTAX
Activity ≈ unergative  COS ≈ unaccusative/transitive

Conjugation classes are agnostic with regard to syntax:
Class 1 -er word-derived root-derived
Transitive amocher ‘damage’ aimer ‘love’
Unergative polissonner ‘act in a silly way’ nager ‘swim’
Unaccusative rapetisser ‘get smaller’ tomber ‘fall’
Class 2 -ir word-derived root-derived
Transitive agrandir ‘make bigger’ convertir ‘convert’
Unergative bonnir ‘tell good stories’ agir ‘act’
Unaccusative amochir ‘get damaged’ sortir ‘get out’
(But -ir verbs do differ when embedded under faire and when prefixed)

METHODS
➢ Native speakers of French, recruited from personal networks.
➢ N = 28 (Exp 1, prefixed), N = 16 (Exp2, unprefixed).
Main predictors:
➢ Condition (COS/Activity) and Prefix (yes/no).
➢ Contextual cues for Condition:
  (1) If you need a material that quickly becomes louloue, I recommend Plastazote. It is a malleable foam that a-loff/\-a/loff-ir under the effect of heat (with a heat gun). It can be easily cut when cold, and it remains malleable for a few minutes once heated.
  (2) Even though Gustave and Martin work a lot, they are very marouches. They love to hang around all day in pyjamas, eat Italian ice-cream and play video games. In short, they en-marouch-ent/en-marouch-iss-ent very willingly.
➢ Nonce words were created using Waggy (Keuleers and Brysbaert 2010).
➢ Choice between -ir and -er form on a 7-point Likert scale.
➢ Order of presentation and order of items were randomized.
➢ 2 practice items; 8 items per condition; 8 control fillers.
➢ Presented visually via PC/IBex.
➢ Results z-transformed and fed to mixed effects models.
➢ Prediction 1 borne out, but no effect of Prefix.

RESULTS
Scores on the Likert scale were Z-transformed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive scores for COS (-ir)</th>
<th>Negative scores for Act (-er)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COS 0.19±0.89</td>
<td>Act -0.25±0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

➢ Prediction 1 borne out, but no effect of Prefix.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK
COS (-ir) / Activity (-er) predicted participants’ choice, as hypothesized.
➢ No effect of Prefix: Larger sample needed?
➢ Confound of infinitives: leave out the Inf task.
➢ Compare with distribution in the lexicon.
➢ Formal analysis.
➢ Are -ir verbs more “naturally intransitive” than -er verbs?
  – Create doubles for existing stems
  – Rate anticausative uses of prefixed nonce verbs and passive/anticausative readings under faire.
➢ How productive is the -ir class?
  – Lexicographic study.
  – Give an intransitive -ir/-er wug, ask for a meaning.
  – Give a transitive -er wug, ask for an intransitive form.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Supported by DFG AL 554/8-1 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Preis 2014 to Artemis Alexiadou.

The Current Study
Research questions
1. Do conjugation classes carry meaning?
2. Does this meaning translate to syntactic effects?
⇒ Is there an element (conjugation class) which has syntactic effects without using a standard syntactic feature?

Hypotheses and predictions
1. The morpheme -ir is associated with a default CoS meaning (in word-derived verbs).
⇒ Participants prefer -ir COS wugs and -er activity wugs.
2. Prefix-ir verbs more easily keep an anticausative use.
⇒ Findings should be stronger for prefixed verbs than for unprefixed ones (in a intransitive frame).

Selected References