

A Note on Roots and Redundancy

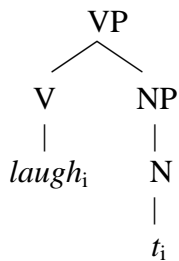
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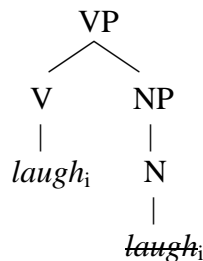
The past several years have seen the development of a substantial literature on “denominal” verbs. One prominent but still controversial approach, pioneered by Hale and Keyser (1993), proposes that unergative denominal verbs (e.g. *laugh*, *dance*, *spit*, etc.) are underlyingly transitive, being derived through head-movement incorporation à la Baker (1988):

(1) Hale and Keyser’s Derivation of English Unergative Denominal Verbs

a. Movement with trace



b. Movement as “copy”



One long-standing observation about such constructions is that when they contain *cognate objects* they are generally pragmatically infelicitous when the cognate object noun root appears in the direct object NP without some kind of further specification (cf. 2b,c vs. 3):

- (2)a. Hortense is laughing/dancing.
b. ?*Hortense is laughing a laugh/dancing a dance.
c. ?*Hortense is laughing the laugh/dancing the dance.

- (3) a. He laughed a false laugh that held genuine bitterness. (Michael Chabon, *Gentlemen of the Road*, p. 187).
b. Hortense is dancing a happy dance.

A further observation, which has not yet been pointed out so far as I know, is that there is no such proscription against a “cognate subject”:

- (4)a. The cook is cooking (dinner/the dinner).
b. The snitch snitched.

This asymmetry must be the result of a constraint on verb-object *root identity* rather than some other kind of constraint or filter on syntactic outputs, such as a plausible constraint or filter ruling out “cognate objects” based on some kind of syntactically-relevant “Obligatory Contour

Principle” (or some such) between a verb and its object. Merely homophonous objects are perfectly acceptable in the object position of a given verb root:

- (5)a. I saw *Saw* (the movie).
 - b. I saw *Saw II* too. (the sequel)
 - c. I saw *Saw III* three times. (the sequel’s sequel)
- (6) I heard a herd (of wildebeests).

These facts parallel other observations that show that verbs compose with syntactic objects in a way that is different from the way that they compose with syntactic subjects (e.g. agents), as Marantz (1997) has discussed with respect to the interpretation of idioms.

This asymmetry in interpretation is naturally captured in Hale and Keyser’s syntactically-oriented account of the derivation of unergative denominal verbs, which by independent constraints on head movement allows syntactic objects but not syntactic subjects to incorporate. Under Chomsky (1995)’s copy theory of movement, where the “trace” is actually a copy of the moved item (cf. 1b), spelling out both copies of a moved root would be pragmatically redundant, by Grice’s Maxim of Quantity, unless that root is made to be more specific through some kind of external modification or by the late insertion of a different (i.e. hyponymous object) root into the lower copy (or “trace”) position (e.g. *danced a jig*, etc.) (Haugen 2009).

The lack of such a redundancy in the “cognate subject” construction seems to support Hale and Keyser’s syntactically-oriented view, which entails a derivational connection between unergative denominal verbs and their cognate objects, and thus poses an intriguing challenge for non-syntax-oriented alternative theories.

References

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- Hale, Kenneth L. and Samuel J. Keyser. 1993. On argument structure and the lexical expression of syntactic relations. In K. L. Hale and S. J. Keyser (eds.), *The View from Building 20: Essays in Linguistics in Honor of Sylvain Bromberger*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 53-109.
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