

Giving the slate a cleaning: A lexical semantic exploration

In Beth Levin and Malka Rappaport Hovav’s *Wiping the slate clean: A lexical semantic exploration*, two interdependent questions are addressed:

First, how much does the meaning of a verb determine its syntactic properties; and, second, a question which will be the focus of this paper, to the extent that syntactic properties are predictable, what components of verb meaning figure in the relevant generalizations?

Levin and Rappaport Hovav first examines an extreme general “natural class” of verb that can be said to be done to books: *abridge, autograph, print, read, review*, etc. mentioning that there is nothing linguistically remarkable about this set of verbs or the fact that that can be done to books. While these verbs may not seem particularly significant, Levin and Rappaport Hovav interrogate a particular set of verbs that form a natural class involving removal of substances and physical objects. The *locatum* is removed from a *location*. Consider:

1.
 - a. Doug cleared dishes from the table
 - b. Kay wiped the fingerprints from the counter

On the surface, both *clear* and *wipe* seem to behave in identical manners, with the locatum (dishes, fingerprints) being removed from the location (table, counter); these verbs are well-behaved in a “NP V NP FROM NP” syntactic frame. Both verbs also allow for the absence of a locatum, following a “NP V NP” syntactic frame:

2.
 - a. Doug cleared the table
 - b. Kay wiped the counter

But as these verbs seem to relate to the idea of removal, the behavior of *remove*, then, is unexpected:

3.
 - a. Doug cleared dishes from the table
 - b. Doug cleared the table
 - c. Kay wiped the fingerprints from the counter
 - d. Kay wiped the counter
 - e. Monica removed groceries from the bag
 - f. *Monica removed the bag

Where (3f) cannot mean that Monica removed undetermined contents from the bag, unlike (3b) and (3d).

Both *clear* and *wipe* themselves also diverge when placed in another environment:

4.
 - a. Doug cleared the table of dishes
 - b. *Kay wiped the counter of fingerprints

Because of this alternation, Levin and Rappaport Hovav place *clear*, *wipe*, and *remove* into distinct categories with distinct behaviors. These verbs, while all generally dealing with removal, show syntactic alternations. They are thus placed in the following classes:

5. Clear-type verbs: clear, clean, empty
6. Wipe-type verbs: buff, brush, erase, file, mop, pluck, rake, sponge, vacuum...
7. Remove-type verbs: dislodge, draw, evict, uproot, withdraw...

Levin and Rappaport Hovav note that clear-type verbs are stative but provide no information about the arrival to a state—a road can be cleared in several ways just as a table can be cleaned in several ways. The clear-type verbs are zero-derived from adjectives, unlike wipe-type verbs. The authors also note that wipe-type verbs *do* explicitly state the method of removal. (Compare *wiping* a board to *washing* a board to *erasing* a board).

Levin and Rappaport Hovav also mention two distinct subclasses within wipe-type verbs that denote either manner or instrument:

8.
 - a. buff, erase, pluck, prune, rinse, rub, scour, scrape, scratch, scrub, shave, skim, trim, wipe
 - b. brush, file, mop, rake, shear, shovel, sponge, vacuum

It is here where the authors briefly mention, in footnote 7, the light verb construction using wipe-type verbs:

9.
 - a. Give the table a wipe
 - b. *Give the table a buff
 - c. *Give the table an erase

Levin and Rappaport Hovav note that ungrammaticality occurs with verbs involving “several iterated and small movements.”

Notice, however, that the following constructions are also, at best, only marginally grammatical:

10.
 - a. *Give the floor a vacuum
 - b. *Give the dishes a sponge
 - c. *Give the edge a file

Where *vacuum*, *sponge*, and *file* cannot be read or coerced to be read as zero-derived nominals. Compare:

11.
 - a. Give the table a wipe
 - b. *Give the floor a vacuum
 - c. Give the floor a vacuuming
 - d. Give the table a wiping

While generally behaving in a uniform fashion (contrastive against clear- and remove-type verbs), the wipe-type verbs have additional distinctions when placed in in this light verb construction. While Levin and Rappaport Hovav notice that small-iterative verbs cannot exist in this construction, it may also be that *all instrument wipe-type verbs* (such as those in (8b)) display this alternation of ungrammaticality.

Note that the verbs in (8b) are derived from real-world instruments; only a vacuum could be said to vacuum, and only a mop could be said to mop. This is unlike verbs in (8a), where several instruments can be used to prune or trim (further, there are probably several tools you could call “pruners” or “trimmers”). It is likely this property of instrumental-type verbs that disallow a zero-derived nominal reading, thus rendering (10) ungrammatical.

Give generally takes an object, direct object, and indirect object:

12.
 - a. Shelly gives Joseph a pizza
 - b. Shelly gives a pizza to Joseph

Notice a relevant version in the imperative:

13.
 - a. Give Joseph a pizza
 - b. Give Joseph a vacuum

Where *vacuum* and *pizza* are objects given to Joseph.

What could be rendering (10) ungrammatical is the inability or inconvenience in divorcing meanings in sentences like (9a) from meanings in sentences like (13b). As *give* is so often used in constructions denoting exchanges, sentences in (10) must be repaired to represent the actual exchange of the instrument itself; a reading like (9a) is not available unless the instrument-type verb is placed in as a gerund, as seen in (11c) (which is also grammatical with manner-type verbs like (8a)).

An additional test can be thus made to check for instrumentality within wipe-type verbs. Within this group, the manner type verbs largely behave well with the light verb construction (save for the few that denote a small repeated action), and the instrument type verbs largely do not behave well within the same construction as the nominal reading is unavailable lest it be confused with action of *the object itself being given*.

This construction is not available (or only marginally grammatical) for clear- or remove-type verbs:

14.
 - a. *Give the table an empty
 - b. Give the trash can an emptying
 - c. *Give the table a remove
 - d. *Give the table a removing

Note that (14d) is only grammatical if the *location* (the table) is being removed and not some *locatum*.

One notable exception in the remove-type class is *pry*. *Pry* already behaves strangely within this class:

15.
 - a. *I dislodged at the stone in my tooth
 - b. I dislodged the stone in my tooth
 - c. *He extracts at the leech from his arm
 - d. He extracts the leech at his arm

But:

- e. He pried at the money-safe but was unsuccessful in opening it.
 - f. He pries the money-safe
 - g. He pries open the money-safe

Recall that remove-type verbs do not occur grammatically in the conative construction. Now notice *pry* also occurring grammatically in the light construction above:

16.
 - a. Give his suitcase a pry
 - b. Give the safe a pry

- c. Give the suitcase a prying
- d. Give the safe a prying

While (16c) and (16d) sound more grammatical, (16a) and (16b) are also valid.

Pry remains a rather strange type of remove-type verb considering it both well-behaved in the conative construction and has some currency in the light verb construction detailed above. Compare:

- 17.
 - a. I wipe at the surface but the spots just won't go away
 - b. I pry at the dial but it just won't budge

Pry, then, perhaps occupies a realm in-between these two classes of verbs, or has multiple unique lexical entries with their own special properties that may misbehave in the framework provided by Rappaport and Hovav.

It is worth noting the *pry* also most often occurs with *open*:

- 18.
 - a. I pry the box open
 - b. *I wipe the table of fingerprints
 - c. I wipe the table clean of fingerprints
 - d. Give the table a wipe
 - e. *Give the money-safe a pry open

Where sentences in (18) reveal that collocative elements have complicating effects on the capabilities of these verbs. It could be that each collocation is internally “repaired” within some of the above sentences and simply phonologically omitted, thus resulting in grammaticality. However, it is difficult to tell.