

Predicting Argument Realization from Preposition Semantics

I examine the role of adpositions in predicting the occurrence and shape of "argument/oblique alternations" across languages. In argument/oblique alternations a semantic argument of a verb can be realized either as a direct argument (e.g. subject, object) or via an adposition, as in the dative and *clear* alternations:

- (1) a. sent Mary a book
b. sent a book to Mary
- (2) a. clear the dishes from the table
b. clear the table of dishes

I first argue that adpositional realization arises from a semantic compatibility between the adposition and the verb. For example, the "goal" semantics of *to* in (1b) (and other uses) is a more general form of the "possessor" semantics assigned to indirect objects by ditransitive verbs in (1a). This is not true of other English prepositions, predicting that ditransitives only alternate with *to*. Similarly, *of* generally marks separation semantics (*ate of the cake, little became of it*), predicting its occurrence with *clear* verbs. This semantic compatibility requirement also predicts a correlation between which alternations and which adpositions a given language has. I demonstrate this to be the case by showing that the lack of dative alternations in Finnish and French is correlated with the lack of dative and allative adpositions respectively, and the lack of *clear* alternations in Japanese corresponds to the lack of separation adpositions. Thus by placing adposition semantics at the heart of oblique realization we can derive facts about the shape and occurrence of various argument realization phenomena from independent facts about the lexical inventories of different languages.