

Pruning the verb class tree. Issues of granularity in classifying verbs of communication

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In this paper we will present an alternative classification of verbs of communication, as they are discussed in Levin (1993), Baker, C. & J. Ruppenhofer (2002) and Barðdal (2003), a.o.. More specifically, we will use recent research results (Verroens *et al.* 2008) on the subcategory of Verbs of Instrument of Communication (i.e. *(tele)phone, wire, fax*, etc.) to tackle the problem of granularity in verb typologies in general and the impact and implications it has for the classification of verbs of communication in particular. In an attempt to group those verbs that show similarities both with respect to types of constructions as well as their attested frequency, a different system of clustering will be presented on the basis of the structure of the matrix event (following Pustejovsky 1988, 1998) and the position that is assumed by the verbs in this constellation.

In the first part of the paper we zoom in on the micro-level and discuss the Verbs of Instrument of Communication (VICs) as a subcategory of the more general class of Verbs of Communication in both French and English. The findings of Verroens *et al.* (2008) are relevant with respect to the issue of granularity in at least two ways. First, despite their being derived from the instrument that is used to communicate and despite the attested similarities, corpus data shows that these verbs actually differ significantly in terms of structural possibilities and the frequency with which these have been attested. Based on the realised arguments and the kinds of themes, for instance, it can be concluded that *fax, telegraph, wire, mail* behave relatively similarly and that *skype, blackberry, cell* and *telephone* show overlap in structural preferences as well. In terms of classification the structural differences between these two groups are actually more striking and relevant than their being derived from an instrument.

Secondly, the study reveals that some 'new' Verbs of Instrument of Communication (e.g. *skype, blackberry, text*, etc.), which can be added to Levin's (1993) list, allow for structural possibilities that do not occur in any of the other VICs, but which can be attested in other verbs of communication, not belonging to this category. For instance, while *phone with* and *fax with* have not been attested in the English data, *skype with* seems to be perfectly acceptable, as shown in (1), a structure which is also possible for *chitchat* verbs and *talk* verbs.

- (1) I **Skyped** with James last night as he was wrestling the Bluetooth demons into submission and he seems delighted with his choice of the HP TC1100 so far.
...[source]

In French, too, there is one particularly interesting structural feature. While we observed that non-prepositional realisations of recipients are not possible with most other VICs, we do find occurrences of this kind with *mailer, texter* and *skyper*, as shown in (2), where we get *le* instead of *lui*, a feature which these verbs share with the verb *appeler* or *contacter*.

- (2) Alors la Canaille et moi on est devenus potes et je le **textais** de temps en temps pour savoir s'il sortait avec nous car il était quand même de bonne compagnie.
[WebCorp]
'So la Canaille and me became friends and I texted him from time to time to see if he would go out with us because he actually was good company.'

In short, these results show that both the internal variation as well as the recently attested structural overlap with other verbs of communication calls for a reconsideration of the VICs as a separate subcategory and by implication of the Verbs of Communication as a whole.

In the second part of the paper, we will attempt to provide such an alternative classification by extending the analysis to a macro-level and to other verbs of communication in search for further parallels and differences in frequency and structural possibilities. We believe that the attested constructional behaviour will be similar for those verbs which focus on the same element in the communicative event, be it either on the establishment of contact, the actual transfer of the message, the social activity in itself or the successful delivery. In doing so, we adopt Pustejovsky's (1988) methodology of *event headedness*, in which some event arguments are foregrounded or backgrounded, depending on the head marker (i.e. the lexical item) that is used. More specifically, it will be shown that some verbs are essentially relevant in establishing contact, while for other the actual transfer of the message or the social activity in itself is crucial. Taking the concrete case of the VICs, for instance, it will be shown that a verb like *phone* is especially significant in establishing contact, as the contactee is realised much more frequently than the actual object (i.e. the message). In fact, in a significant number of instances, we can actually witness a division of the communicative event in which the successive events of establishing contact and the actual delivery of the message are represented, as shown in (3) to (5):

- (3) But that night one of my other inspectors **phoned** and told me that Carella was in hospital after being struck by a car in the Portuense district.[BNC HTT 3021]
- (4) You would have thought Magnus's mother would have been nice to me but I bet Father had already **telephoned** and told her lies about me, because she made me wait in the hall until Nanny came to collect me in a taxicab.[BNC A0D 1898]
- (5) 'She's the neighbour who **phoned** to tell us about Aunt Bertha,' Lucy whispered to Silas.[BNC HHB 3716]

Conversely, a verb like *fax* rarely occurs with a recipient only and most frequently occurs with both recipient and object or object only (i.e. the message), which further illustrates the importance of the message. In addition, instances where the establishment of contact and the transfer of the message have been split up are very rare. A verb like *skype* in its turn, hardly ever occurs with both object and recipient, nor does it occur with an object only. In addition, it does not show a split between contact and message and it most frequently occurs with a recipient only. Here, the structural preferences show that the emphasis is on the social activity itself.

We will show that this methodology can also be extended to other verbs of communication (e.g. *say*, *talk*, *inform*, etc.) and that a clear link can be established between preferred structures and the focus of the communicative event. In this way, it is possible for members of the subcategory of VICs to be merged with other members of new and less diversified subcategories of communicative verbs, based on the communicative event scheme and the aspects that are foregrounded.

References

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