‘Give’ and semantic Maps
Jeremy Collins,
Radboud University

Previous studies on the verb ‘give’ have focused on grammaticalization pathways and figurative uses (e.g. Newman 1996, von Waldenfels 2012 among others). These semantic extensions are often divided into categories such as ‘literal give’ (transfer of objects), ‘emergence’, ‘permission’ and so on (Newman 1996). This study focuses instead on the lexical semantic core of the literal ‘give’, using English and Mandarin data, and giving a semantic map analysis (Croft 2007, Cysouw 2010). Even in what is traditionally thought of as literal ‘give’ the nature of the arguments can vary and have semantic consequences. The usages discussed here include:

i) inalienably possessed ‘give’, such as I give you my arm;
ii) alienable ‘give’: I give you ten pounds, I give him a book;
iii) partitive ‘give’: where a part is given, e.g I give him a spoonful, I give him a taste;
iv) not yet possessed: where the direct object needs to be acquired first, e.g. give a laptop to every child
v) holding: holding something but not possessing it, such as I give him his jacket;
vi) allowing: something which I do not own but can prevent you from having, such as I give you time/space/freedom;
vii) transitive: in which there is no indirect object, such as give money, give blood and verging towards the ‘create’ sense of give light, give fruit or give a yell (as discussed in Newman 1996).

These types are sufficiently distinct to pass tests for polysemy such as zeugma, for example (i) and (ii) yielding *I give you my arm and ten pounds. However, they also arguably fall along a continuum: they fail the zeugma test if done across more than one sentence (c.f. Cruse 1986; e.g. I give you my arm and a shoulder to cry on, I give you a shoulder to cry on and a place to stay, I give you a place to stay and ten pounds to spend are all acceptable). These uses are therefore along a semantic continuum of variables such as alienability (which yield zeugma if they are sufficiently far apart).

These types can be partitioned differently in different languages. Mandarin expresses type (i) differently from type (ii), preferring Wo ba wo de shou gei ni I (object marker) my arm give you rather than ?Wo gei ni wo de shou I give you my arm (which suggests cutting off one's arm and giving it). Type (iv) also tends to be expressed with ‘Buy a laptop for every child’ Gei meige haizi mai diannao for every child buy computer, as omitting the verb ‘buy’ would imply that the computers are already acquired. Type (vii) is found in Mandarin (gei qian ‘give money’), and can be extended to acceptable but rarer uses such as gei yige weixiao ‘give a smile' and gei yige biaoyan ‘give a performance’ (although not to *gei yige tanqi ‘give a sigh’ and *gei yige paiyai ‘give a party’), with a gradience of acceptability again suggesting that these uses lie on a semantic continuum. The semantic map model outlined here facilitates the study of these continuum phenomena, and of the variation in the lexical semantic core of ‘give’ in different languages.

References