Holistic giving: Towards a unified account of the behavior of GIVE predicates

John Newman,
University of Alberta

GIVE predicates (and the multitude of GIVE-based predicates derived from ‘give’ stems) display a dazzling range of uses, as documented by Newman (1996, 1998) and many others. Even when the focus of interest is specifically the use of GIVE to refer to the transfer of physical objects from one person to another (what we may call a ‘literal’ sense), there is a considerable complexity in the syntactic–semantic frames, or construction types, that are associated with this use cross-linguistically. The extension of GIVE predicates to non-literal uses is, however, equally interesting, at least to linguists of a cognitive linguistic persuasion. ‘Non-literal’ is used here to refer to the multifarious types of grammaticalizations which are now well documented for GIVE predicates (e.g. GIVE > causative), as well as a variety of figurative uses (e.g. ‘to give fruit’ -> ‘to bear fruit’, ‘to give oneself to a cause’).

In this talk, I argue for an holistic account of GIVE phenomena which aims to motivate simultaneously many facets of literal and non-literal uses of GIVE predicates. I hold the view that some key experiential realities associated with the giving of physical objects from one person to another motivate various linguistic properties associated with GIVE predicates cross-linguistically. These key experiential properties follow, broadly, the framework proposed by Newman (1996, 2005) who distinguishes relevant dimensions or “lenses” through which the act of giving can be viewed: (a generalized notion of) CONTROL, FORCE DYNAMICS, a SPATIO-TEMPORAL perspective, and SOCIAL-INTERACTIONAL realities. So, for example, the typical social-interactional reality of giving-acts is that some benefit accrues to the recipient (an observation that is admittedly a subjective assessment). This typical condition, in turn, motivates the case marking of recipients in (literal) GIVE constructions as benefactives in some languages, as well as the grammaticalized (non-literal) extension of GIVE to become the benefactive marker itself in some languages.

I acknowledge the value of studying, say, “argument realization” as a discrete phenomenon as it applies to GIVE (and other transfer verbs such as PUT, TAKE, and GET). However, I advocate the study of the full spectrum of linguistic phenomena associated with such verbs in order to appreciate the commonalities in the motivations for the seemingly disparate phenomena. In the case of GIVE, this would include the study of the etymology of GIVE verbs, the syntax-semantic interface of GIVE constructions, grammaticalizations of GIVE, and conceptual mappings evident in figurative uses of GIVE. While GIVE phenomena across many languages have now been described in the literature, a fully integrated account of the full spectrum of such phenomena in any one language has yet to be achieved.

References