Remarks on Semantic Redundancy in English

Tatsuo OTSUKA

1. Introduction

Jackendoff (1990:164-5) claims that one of the denominal verbs in English, butter, is represented at the level of Lexical Conceptual Structure (LCS) as in the following:

(1) butter
   [uN]
   [NPj
    [CAUSE([ ]i), INCH[BE ([BUTTER], [Ond [ ]])])]

This lexical entry is intended to account for the sentences like (2).

(2) We buttered the bread.

In (2), the Theme BUTTER in (1) is completely incorporated into the reading of the verb. He goes on to state that although (3), in which something akin to the Theme appears, is acceptable, (4) sounds oddly redundant unless the object of with is used contrastively.

(3) We buttered the bread with cheap margarine/with soft, creamy unsalted butter.

(4) We buttered the bread with butter.

Aside from the technical details of the With-Theme Adjunct Rule, in which the with-phrases in (3) and (4) are fused with the incorporated theme BUTTER, what we can intuitively claim based on (4) is (5).

(5) The lexically incorporated component of LCS cannot be syntactically realized as it is.

(4) is not well-formed because BUTTER is realized as butter with no further information added. I assume that (5) serves to avoid semantic redundancy in English (or in language). The purpose of this paper is to collect various kinds of sentences relevant to (5) and to discuss whether it can always be maintained.

2. Further Data and Analysis

Jackendoff (1970:170) shows another type of denominal verbs, bottle, pocket, and package.

(6) a. Fred bottled the wine.
    b. Herb deftly pocketed the money.
    c. We finally packaged the potato chips.

In (6), the corresponding root noun employed as Goal as in “put wine into bottles” is incorporated into the verb. Attaching only the root noun as Goal leads to unacceptability.

(7) a. Fred bottled the wine in tall green bottles/*in bottles.
    b. Herb deftly pocketed the money in his left pocket/*in his pocket.
    c. We finally packaged the potato chips in air-cushioned packages/*in packages.

As in the second with phrase in (3), the modifiers, tall green, left, and air-cushioned added to the nouns save the respective sentences from resulting in total redundancy which will otherwise arise. A similar pair can be observed in (8) (from Levin (1993:163)).

(8) a. Linda taped the box with two-sided tape.
    b. ?Linda taped the box with tape.

The sentences in (7) and (8) show that (5) can be maintained for these classes of denominal verbs.
The following type of sentences can also be accounted for by (5):

(9) a. Harry destroyed/demolished/wrecked the car (*into bits). (Jackendoff 1990: 117)
b. *The builders destroyed the warehouse flat. (Levin 1993: 239)
c. *The builders destroyed the warehouse to smotherens. (Levin 1993: 239)

Jackendoff (1990: 117) states concerning (9a) that these verbs “totally incorporate the Goal-expression” like into bits. Levin (1993: 239) states concerning (9b,c) that destroy verbs “relate to the total destruction of entities” and describe the fact that something “is totally destroyed.” Kageyama (1996: 222) comments on (9a) and states that the representation of into bits is avoided since these verbs imply that something is broken into bits. If “come into bits,” “be flat,” “and “be blown to smotherens” are the implications the verbs in (9) have, i.e., they are incorporated into them, these resultative expressions function only to add semantic redundancy, being excluded by (5). In fact, these researchers presumably assume something like (5).

The next data concerns the resultative construction containing the phrase to death. According to the LDCE, the verb drown means “to (cause to) die by being under water and unable to breathe.” With this in mind, observe the following (from Levin (1993: 224,232)):

(10) a. *The sailor drowned to death.
b. ?? The swimmer was drowned to death.

Since the meaning of drown contains a component of DIE, as we can safely assume given the definition above, the phrase to death in (10) is considered to be semantically redundant. In contrast to drown, the verbs, knife, poison, shoot, stab, bite, flog, thrash, and choke do not necessarily imply the death of Patient. Therefore adding the phrase to death to these words does not lead to semantic redundancy, as exemplified below.

((11a,b,c) are from KDEC, (11d,g) from LDCE, and (11f) from Levin (1993: 152).)

(11) a. He was knifed to death.
b. His dog has been poisoned to death.
c. He has been shot to death.
d. Caesar was stabbed to death.
e. The dog bit the hare to death.
f. They flogged/thrashed him to death.
g. He almost choked to death on a fish bone.

(5) does not rule these sentences out as ill-formed.

It will be appropriate to take notice of the fact that acceptability judgment on the sentences containing a denominal verb such as (7b), Herb deftly pocketed the money in his left pocket, seems to vary according to individuals. As we have observed, Jackendoff regards it as acceptable. However, according to Levin (1993: 121), the acceptability level of much the same sentence, (12b), is ??.

(12) a. *Lydia pocketed the change in her pocket.
b. ?? Lydia pocketed the change in her left front jacket pocket.

This acceptability difference indicates that just adding informative material to the incorporated noun does not necessarily produce an acceptable sentence for every native speaker. But it is important to note that the acceptability difference between (12a) and (12b) at least shows that a modifier that contributes additional information makes the sentence better.

(12b) does not constitute a counterexample to (5). Although it cannot be ruled out by (5), it simply shows that further constraints unknown up to now as far as I know will be necessary in order to account for its variability in acceptability.
3. Counterexamples

The verb *kill* is probably one of the widely discussed words since the rise of Generative Semantics, and it is well-known that McCawley (1968) proposes that it can be decomposed into CAUSE-BECOME-NOT-ALIVE. Whether one accepts his analysis or not, no one will deny that "x killed y" implies that "y is dead." In other words, DEAD is incorporated in the verb *kill*. With this in mind, observe the following:

(13) a. *Brutus murdered Julius Caesar dead.*
    b. Brutus killed Julius Caesar dead.5

Giving the sentences in (13) as examples, Levin (1993 : 231) states that *murder* verbs except *kill* cannot be found in the resultative construction. The verb *murder* in (13a) implies that *Julius Caesar* is dead. Therefore, the presence of *dead* makes the sentence semantically redundant. The ill-formedness of (13a) falls in line with the prediction of (5). The verb *kill* also implies that *Julius Caesar* is dead as we have just noted. Therefore (13b) should be ill-formed like (13a). But it is well-formed; it presents a counterexample to (5).

Another type of counterexamples is presented by the verbs *smother, strangle, and suffocate*. According to the LDCE, these verbs mean respectively:

(14) a. to kill from lack of air
    b. to kill by pressing on the throat with the hands, a rope, etc, to stop breathing
    c. to (cause to) die because of lack of air

Since these verbs are considered to contain a semantic component of KILL or DIE, the following sentences with *to death* should be ill-formed. But they are well-formed, constituting counterexamples to (5).

(15) a. He was smothered to death. (KDEC)
    b. The Boston Strangler strangled his victims to death. (Levin 1993 : 232)
    c. He suffocated to death. (Levin 1993 : 224)

Notice that the verbs in (15) do not require a resultative expression, which makes it impossible to argue that the resultative to *death* is structurally required, although semantically redundant. This is shown in the following sentences cited from CCED.

(16) a. A father was secretly filmed as he tried to smother his six-week-old son in hospital.
    b. He tried to strangle a border policeman and steal his gun.
    c. They were suffocated as they slept.

Finally observe the following sentence with the verb *smash*.

(17) I dropped the plate on the floor and it smashed/it smashed to smithereens. (LDCE)

The LDCE states that the verb *smash* means "to (cause to) break into pieces violently and noisily." The resultative expression "into pieces" is contained in the definition itself, which implies that in the case of (17) the plate is broken into pieces. Then, the problem is why it is possible for it to contain *to smithereens* optionally, in contrast to (9a, c). (17) presents one more counterexample to (5).

3. Concluding Remarks

When we have exceptions to the putative generalization, we have at least two ways to handle them. One is simply to say that there are some exceptions to every rule. The other is to try to find out a mechanism/mechanisms which make(s) exceptions possible. Needless to say, the latter is a truly interesting approach to any theory construction. While I assume that (5) is probably one of the universal characteristics of language, it is entirely unclear at present whether the exceptions to (5) we have observed are rule-governed or not. It remains for further research to clarify the nature of semantic redundancy in syntactic representations.

—101—
Notes

*The following abbreviations are used in this paper:

1. Evan Norris (personal communication) states that there is a semantic anomaly in (9b, c), given that builders do not usually destroy buildings, but that the replacement of the builders with the bombs does not improve (9b, c).

2. The following example (i) represents a non-literal use of kill...dead.

(i) That comment killed the conversation dead. (KDEC)

References