θ-Features and Projection

Many approaches to verb phrase projection have taken the view that deeper insight into structure can be derived by analysis of verbal predicates into elementary semantic components. Neo-Generative Semantics approaches like Pesetsky (1995), Harley (2002), Harley and Folli (2007) employ **predicate decomposition** of a sort familiar from the work of McCawley and Lakoff in the early 70's: predicates like *give* are analyzed in terms of primitives like CAUSE and HAVE, etc. Thus (1a) gets a representation roughly as in (1b):

(1)   a.   John gave Mary a cookie.
      b.   [John CAUSE [Mary HAVE a cookie]]

Ramchand (2008) extends this line of thinking, adding aspectual notions INITIATION, PROCESS and RESULT, etc. to the list of verbal ingredients. These approaches share the intuition that verb phrase structure is fundamentally a representation of lexical meaning, with the atoms of composition being "deep morphemes" - minimal units of verbal meaning.

Neo-Davidsonian approaches (Castañeda 1967; Parsons 1990; Schein 1992; 2010; Pietroski 2000, 2005) offer a sharply different approach. In place of predicate decomposition these analyses urge **argument separation**, in which the verb is analyzed as a unary event predicate to which its arguments are related by means of binary thematic relations (2b):

(2)   a.   John gave Mary a cookie.
      b.   ∃e[give(e) & Agent(John,e) & Goal(Mary,e) & Theme(e,cookie)]

Here the meaning of *give* remains intact and undissected. (2b) may be thought of as a fundamentally "nominalizing" approach to verbs, not only in terms of the natural paraphrase of *give(e)* ("e is a giving") but in a subtler sense as well. Syntactic decomposition has not been pursued with common nouns. The fact that dogs are domestic canines, for example, is widely viewed as an encyclopedic fact not a linguistic one, and hence not one to be captured syntactically by decomposing *dog* into deep nominal morphemes CANINE and DOMESTIC. Just so the fact that givings are caused possessions may be understood as an encyclopedic fact in this framework, and hence not one to be captured syntactically by decomposing *give* into CAUSE and HAVE.

In these lectures I develop an approach to syntactic projection based on the Neo-Davidsonian analysis. I argue that the latter can be made the basis of an interesting and revealing implementation of Hornstein's (1999) proposal that theta-roles are syntactic features, showing the same range of possibilities as other features with respect to being valued/unvalued, interpretable/uninterpretable. This account yields a radical view of selection in which the latter is seen to be entirely syntactic (non-semantic), but which nonetheless allows us to reconstruct modern views of phrase structure involving "shelled projections". I illustrate these proposals concretely in two domains: vP/VP, concentrating on ditransitives and applicatives, and dP/DP, concentrating on prepositional genitives and pronominal possessives. These pairs are argued to be related by movement - specifically by a generalized version of "Dative Shift". The resulting picture, although departing sharply from current decompositional views, is nonetheless consonant with Chomsky's (1955/75) observations in the Preface to LSLT: "…semantic notions, if taken, seriously, appear to assist in no way in the solution to the problems that we will be investigating. We will see, however, that syntactic study has considerable import for semantics. This is not surprising. Any reasonable study of the way language is actually put to work will have to be based on a clear understanding of the nature of the syntactic devices which are available for the organization and expression of content. (p.57)"