

Variable argument realization in Ob-Ugric languages: a formal semantic approach

It is widely acknowledged that the Ob-Ugric languages Khanty and Mansi exhibit variable argument realization in ditransitive¹ constructions. Nikolaeva et al. (1993), Skribnik (2001) and Virtanen (2012) discuss two possible patterns with respect to the thematic roles, syntactic functions as well as the case marking of the relevant constituents in active constructions.²

	argument 1	argument 2	argument 3	
(a)	agent subject (NOM)	recipient indirect object (DAT ~ LAT)	theme direct object (NOM/ACC)	verb
(b)	agent subject (NOM)	recipient direct object (NOM/ACC)	theme adverbial (LAT ~ LOC ~ INSTR)	verb

It has been proposed in the literature (Däbritz 2021: 193–196) to identify the theme’s discourse function (narrow, i. e. minimal focus) as the factor that triggers the application of pattern (b) in Khanty. The assumption can be made for the Mansi data, too, cf. examples (1a) and (1b).

- (1)a. *Am tawe-n* [FOC *mōjt mōjt-ey-um*].
 I s/he-DAT tale tell-PRS-1SG
 ‘I tell him a tale.’ (responding to ‘What do you do for him?’)
- (1)b. *Am tawe* [FOC *mōjt-əl*] *mōjt-i-l-um*.
 I s/he.ACC tale-INSTR tell-PRS-OBJ.SG-1SG
 ‘I tell him a TALE.’ (responding to ‘What do you tell him?’)
 (Skribnik 2001: 228; indication of focus domain added)

Based on common assumptions concerning the hierarchy of thematic roles (Grimshaw 1990, Dowty 1991), example (1a) shows the unmarked pattern with the theme argument more deeply embedded than the recipient/goal argument. In example (1b), however, the recipient argument is more deeply embedded than the theme argument, and consequently marked with accusative case. The theme argument, in turn, is marked with the oblique instrumental case.³

Issue How can the variability of argument realization be explained without taking recourse to the mere stipulation of more than one configuration? In other words, is it possible to derive one variant from the other in a principled way and, hence, obey economy requirements?

Proposal Variable argument realization as observed in Khanty and Mansi is due to a formal change of the meaning representation, which is a part of the lexical entry of the verb. We claim that the change is brought about by a semantic template⁴ operating on the basic meaning representation, namely:

$$(2) \quad \lambda P \lambda y' \lambda z' \lambda x' \lambda s [P z' y' x' s']$$

Our assumptions rest on the theory of the interplay of lexicon, syntax, and semantics as developed by Higginbotham (1985) and Bierwisch (1986, 2007). Thematic roles are assumed to be associated with lambda abstractors that bind argument variables. Operations that affect the abstractors correlate with the discharge of theta roles. Thus, the lambda prefix of a meaning

¹ “Ditransitive” is taken as a cover term for verbal predicates with three syntactic arguments.
² Passive constructions can basically be analyzed likewise, but are not treated here for reasons of space.
³ Note that the surface shows the results of information structuring, which overwrites base configurations.
⁴ For a general characterization of templates see, e. g., Zimmermann (1992: 275, fn 4).

representation both encodes the argument structure and determines the order of the thematic roles that are assigned. The application of a template as, e.g., the one given in (2) needs to be restricted so as to avoid over-generation. Cross-linguistically, various domains serve as sources for restricting factors – morphosyntax, semantics, and information structure. The restriction can be formally encoded as an address tied to the lambda abstractor in question as proposed by Bierwisch (1990). Thus, the mechanism assumed yields a well-formed linguistic expression only if the licensing condition holds.

In the Ob-Ugric languages, it is a specific information structure – minimal focus on the theme argument – that licenses the application of the template in (2). Leaving technical details aside, the effect is that the recipient argument gets demoted, while the theme argument is promoted in the hierarchy. These changes determine the specific morphosyntactic realization of the arguments involved. It can be argued that the account of the Ob-Ugric facts is not an *ad hoc* solution, since similar processes apply, under specific conditions respectively, in languages as, e.g., Bulgarian (see Junghanns & Lenertová 2008), English, or Czech. Thus, the assumption of semantic templates appears to cover a broad range of data and helps to explain variants of argument realization in natural languages.

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