Classifiers and Semantic Underspecification

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Abstract

Classifiers are called 'measure words' in Chinese in that they usually co-occur with numeral quantifiers. Classifiers in this language fall into two major types: nominal measure words (1 and 2) and verbal measure words (3 and 4)

1. liang – zhi laohu (=two tigers)   2. san – tou niu (=three oxes);
   two−CL   tiger   three−CL   ox

3. Zhangsan lai – guo san – hui (=Zhangsan has come three times.)
   zhangsan   come−EXP   three−time

4. Zhangsan da – le san – quan (=Zhangsan punched (someone) three times.)
   Zhangsan   hit−PFT three−fist

These measure words are real classifiers in that they provide classificatory information about entities or events. It has been long claimed in the literature that classifiers are modifiers. However, 'modifier' is too general a concept: adjectives also function as modifiers. Obviously, classifier modification and adjective modification are not the same. In this work, I take an unconventional approach to the semantic and syntactic characterization of classifiers of both types.

Adopting the concept of underspecification in Dynamic Syntax (Kempson et al 2001; Cann et al 2005), I assume that classifiers of both types project metavariables, which are placeholders requiring some contentful formulae for the construction of semantic representations. The metavariables projected by classifiers are feature-bound and the features impose constraints on the choice of potential substituends. The general notion of classifier modification is significantly narrowed down as specific dynamic-syntactic operations. Classifiers participate in intermediate operations toward building semantic representations but they do not directly contribute any formulae to semantic representations. Under this assumption, verbal and nominal classifiers are given a unified theoretical account.

References

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