



LEXICAL ECONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Saidov Khayrullo Shavkatovich

PhD, senior teacher of Bukhara states university

Babaeva Dilnoza Akmalovna

student of 11-ITNA 22

Abstract: *Language economy is a universal category inherent in all languages of the world, characterized by the desire to save energy, avoid excessive expenditure of physiological and psychological effort when using speech and manifests itself at all levels of the language system. The principle of economy is expressed in the creation and perception of language elements with minimal effort and can be considered one of the reasons for language changes.*

Key words: *language economy.*

Lexical Economy states that lexical entries should be minimally, i.e. verbs should only provide one case frame. Thus, the case frame of a verb must be compatible to the thematic requirements of all readings of this verb. Researchers paid little attention to the fact that polysemy is characteristic for psych-verbs. Psych verbs have (or have had) other, more specific readings, as well, and occasional psychical readings are possible for most verbs. According to the proto-role approach of Dowty (1991) and its modifications by Primus (1999b, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), case selection is determined by the grade of agentivity or patientivity of arguments. Concrete readings have stronger agents and patients and make therefore stronger restrictions to case selection, and the psychical reading of a verb is always compatible with this reading. Thus, the case selection of psych-verbs is not affected by its psychical reading.

The Principle of Lexical Economy and its Corollaries. Recurring to the findings of Primus (2002a, 2002c) case selection is due to the Thematic Involvement Scale; e.g., in German the more agentive properties an argument accumulates the more likely it is coded by NOM, and the greater the number of accumulated patient-properties the more likely it is coded by ACC. Psych-verbs belong to those verbs whose arguments do not accumulate a high number of proto-properties or whose arguments accumulate agentive properties as well as patientive properties. The case selection of those classes of verbs is therefore less predictable.

In order to be operative on psych-verbs, the procedure described in section 2 must be completed by a supplementary assumption, which is the core of our approach: Case selection of psych-verbs does not depend on their psychical reading at all. This is due to the Principle of Lexical Economy (67) and its corollaries:

Corollary 1 to the Principle of Lexical Economy Each verbal lexeme has only one case frame. This case frame holds for each reading of the lexeme and must therefore be compatible to all of its readings. In reverse it follows that a verb that is part of two different constructions is lexically represented by two distinct lexemes. It is important to point out



that the principle can be violated by individual lexemes, but then the principle predicts that either after some time of coexistence one of the case frames will disappear or that the two constructions will become semantically differentiated until finally two distinct lexemes emerge from the readings.

illustrates such a rather marginal exception. The different constructions with *hungern* in (69.a) and (69.b) are usually traced back to the same lexeme while (69.c) is considered to belong to a different lexeme.

- (69) a. *mich hungert*
 1s:ACC be.hungry:3s:PRS
 'I am hungry.'
 b. *ich hungere*
 1s:NOM starve:1s: PRS
 'I am starving.' / 'I am fasting.'
 c. *ich habe Hunger*
 1s:NOM have:1s: PRS hunger:ACC
 'I am hungry.'

The Exp/ACC-construction in (69.a) can be supplemented by an expletive (*es hungert mich*). However, both constructions are rather old-fashioned and out of use, whereas both (69.b) and (69.c) are common expressions. (69.a) to (69.c) differ in meaning. Only (69.b) may be used as controlling verb ('I am fasting', 'I am dieting'). The construction in (69.c) focuses on an uncontrollable sensation of the experiencer, namely hunger. (69.a) *mich hungert* has no controlling experiencer either, but in NHG it focuses on a lasting situation, i.e. it bears a durative component, as the DWb (IV/II co. 1947) states: "doch wird in der neuern sprache diesz persönliche hungern [b.], gegenüber der unpersönlichen fügung [a.], immer mehr durativ verwendet". That is, a semantic differentiation of a. and b. took place in which a. became a durative meaning 'to lack food', whereas b. means either 'to dispense (willingly or unwillingly) with food' or 'to feel hunger'. The latter exactly corresponds to the meaning of the constructional variant c., which is nowadays much more frequently used to denote the experience than a. By contrast, the meaning 'to lack food' is more frequently expressed by b. than a. (e.g. *Die Kinder in Afghanistan hungern*. 'The children of Afghanistan are starving.'). so that a. might get completely replaced by b. and c. one day.¹⁷ With respect to our purpose it is important, that, while b. and c. belong to different lexemes, one might find it plausible to trace a. and b. back to the same lexeme *hungern*. This then would imply that one single lexeme might have different case frames, depending on differing meanings. The need to distinguish different meanings by different constructions is due to Functional Expressivity.

As stated in Corollary the case frame of a verb must be compatible with all readings of the lexeme, meaning that the reading which puts the strongest restrictions on case selection is decisive for the selection:

Corollary 2 to the Principle of Lexical Economy For each verbal lexeme exists one reading which is decisive for the selection of its case frame. It is the reading putting the strongest restrictions on the selection of the case frame. This reading is called the "strongest



reading” of a verb. Any case frame that is compatible with the strongest reading of a verb is compatible with any other reading, too.

The corollary in (70) also states, that there are never two different strongest readings of one and the same lexeme thereby imposing incompatible restrictions on the case frame. Such readings would force the expression to occur in two different case frames, with such cases then usually being considered as belonging to two distinct lexemes – not only because their formal representation differs, but also because their semantic content diverges considerably.

Improving Lexical Economy. Typically the same full form of a word corresponds to several distinct agreement tuples. The preceding formal presentation simply assumed that there would be a distinct lexical entry for each one of these tuples. In practice, this would not be very realistic. Therefore, we are going to define licensed lexical entries in terms of more economical *lexicon entries*. Thus, instead of a feature *agr* mapping to a single agreement tuple, a lexicon entry has a feature *agrs* mapping to a set of agreement tuples. Although this is much less useful, we shall do the same for category information and replace feature *cat* mapping to a single category by a feature *cats* mapping to a set of categories. Optional complements are another source of considerable redundancy in the lexicon. Therefore, instead of modeling the valency by a single feature *comps* mapping to a set of complement roles, we shall have 2 features: *comps_req* mapping to a set of required complement roles, and *comps_opt* mapping to a set of optional complement roles.

We now define the lexicon as a finite set of *lexicon entries*, where a lexicon entry is an AVM of the form:

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{word} \quad : \quad W \\ \text{cats} \quad : \quad C \\ \text{agrs} \quad : \quad A \\ \text{comps_req} \quad : \quad R \\ \text{comps_opt} \quad : \quad O \end{array} \right]$$

and the *lexical entries* licensed by the lexicon entry above are all AVMs of the form:

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{word} \quad : \quad W \\ \text{cat} \quad : \quad c \\ \text{agr} \quad : \quad a \\ \text{comps} \quad : \quad S \end{array} \right]$$

where

$$c \in C$$

$$a \in A$$

$$R \subseteq S \subseteq R \cup O$$

This simple formulation demonstrates how constraints can be used to produce compact representations of certain forms of lexical ambiguity. Note that lexicon entries as presented here do not support covariation of features: in such a case, you still need to expand into multiple lexicon entries. Covariation could easily be added and supported using the selection constraint, but I have never found the need for it: the most common application for covariation is agreement, and we have already elegantly taken care of it by means of a product of finite domains.



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