

Categorial ambitransitives

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Ambitransitive verbs optionally take a direct object, so they represent verbs that can be used both transitively and intransitively. There are two types of ambitransitives: agentive and patientive. For agentive ambitransitives, the single argument of the intransitive S corresponds to the agent of the transitive A ; while for patientive ambitransitives, the single argument of the intransitive S corresponds to the patient of the transitive P .

For an agentive ambitransitive example, by the sentences ‘I have read a lot,’ and ‘I have read a lot of books,’ we see that ‘read’ is an agentive ambitransitive verb. For another, ‘John shaves every day,’ and ‘John shaves himself every day,’ we see that ‘shave’ is also an agentive ambitransitive verb. Even though a direct object is not present in the surface forms of the former sentences, it can be present in the semantic representation [1]. This implies that, for ambitransitives, syntactic and semantic valence may differ; specifically, the syntactic valence may be less than the semantic valence but not vice versa. The semantic representation cannot be fixed for all agentive ambitransitives, as some (e.g. ‘read’) may have an optional argument like ‘something’ in the intransitive case, while others (e.g. ‘shave’) may have a reflexive agent. Still, while ‘something’ may be a plausible optional argument in the sentence ‘John is reading,’ it seems not in the sentence ‘John has read a lot.’ So, regarding categorial grammar, a category like the following may not be appropriate for ‘read’:

1. **read** :: $S \setminus NP : \lambda y. read' something' y$ for the intransitive case.

If we restrict the categories to use specific tenses and aspects, we may be able to capture the various optional arguments.

For a patientive ambitransitive example, by the sentences ‘John tripped Mary,’ and ‘Mary tripped and fell,’ we see that ‘trip’ is a patientive ambitransitive verb. We also see that ‘trip’ is also an unaccusative verb, meaning its subject is not an agent in the intransitive case. As there is no optional argument for ‘trip,’ the regular intransitive category may be appropriate for it:

2. **trip** :: $S \setminus NP : \lambda y. trip' y$ for the intransitive case.

References

- [1] CJL Blom. Optional argument in abstract categorial grammar. Master’s thesis, 2012.