Book Reviews

English Verb Classes and Alternations: A Preliminary Investigation

Beth Levin
(Northwestern University)

Chicago: The University of Chicago
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The essence of this book is a cross-classification of over 3,000 verbs, grouped according to their "diathesis alternations" in the first part and into classes of verbs with similar meanings in the second. The main body of the work (252 of the 276 pages, not including bibliography and index) is therefore something like a dictionary, and accordingly difficult to review exhaustively.

Some clarification of the book's contents may be in order. After an introduction, which sets out the theoretical perspective of the book, and which we shall discuss below, the first part deals with various essentially syntactic alternations that verbs are subject to. Beginning with transitivity alternations, such as the well-known middle, causative-inchoative, and some lesser-known such as "characteristic property of instrument alternation," we move on to alternations involving arguments within the VP, such as dative shift, double object constructions, and *spray paint* constructions. Next come cases of "oblique" subjects (instruments, locations, etc), reflexives, passives, subject inversions, cognate objects, and so on. In each case, the construction is explained, bibliographic references are provided, often in abundance (this is one of the book's major strengths), followed by examples and—importantly—counterexamples, and, often, a commentary. A brief example (p. 80) will give a flavor of this first part:

> **Instrument Subject Alternation**
>
> **References:** [17 references]
>
> (275) a. David broke the window with a hammer.
>
> b. The hammer broke the window. (intermediary instrument)
>
> (276) a. Doug ate the ice cream with a spoon.
>
> b. * The spoon ate the ice cream. (enabling/facilitating
>
> instrument)
>
> (277) a. The crane loaded the truck. (intermediary instrument)
>
> b. * The pitchfork loaded the truck. (facilitating instrument)
>
> **Comments:** [11 lines of comment on the types of instrument that can occur as subject, and a reference to another similar construction]

The second part of the book takes essentially the same data and provides a cross-classification in which the verbs are grouped according to their meaning. Often, these groups (which are usually further subdivided) are characterized by an obvious epithet, such as "verbs of change of possession," but sometimes Levin finds it more convenient simply to name the class after one of its members—e.g., "*poke* verbs." Forty-eight such classes are identified, typically with about five subclasses. The guiding principle is semantics first, syntax second; so, for example, a class of near-synonyms may be divided according to whether they allow a certain diathesis alternation.

The obvious question to ask about a collection like this is what its purpose is. Unfortunately, the introduction is not very forthcoming on this topic. The book is a product of the well-known Lexicon Project of the MIT Center for Cognitive Science, so perhaps its purpose is the same as that project's. Levin mentions (p. 14) questions such as lexical representation of verb meaning and mapping rules that determine syntactic properties, but this book "is intended to lay the groundwork that will facilitate the *future* investigation of these questions, even though it does not offer explicit answers" (*idem*, emphasis added). So it is intended as a resource, and certainly it would sit comfortably alongside much-used general grammars of English, such as Quirk et al. (1985), which it nicely complements by going into much more detail while covering a much narrower area. But Levin warns that it is "a preliminary large-scale investigation" (p. 17), and "is by no means a definitive and exhaustive classification of the verb inventory of English" (p. 18). In particular, certain verbs and verb classes have been deliberately excluded, notably verbs taking sentential complements.

What sort of resource is it then? The comparison with Quirk et al. is appropriate, because it will appeal primarily to (pure) linguists, and to learners of English, as long as they are linguistically sophisticated. A striking feature of the book, as mentioned above, is its wealth of references: the bibliography spans 35 pages and must contain well over 700 references. This will be the first stop for any Ph.D. student contemplating research in any area relating to the syntax and semantics of verbs, and as such it is appealing that the description of the data is quite neutral with regard to current theories of phrase structure.

In fact, the theoretical underpinnings of the work are quite interesting, starting from the Bloomfeldian view that "the ideal lexical entry for a word should minimize the information provided ... by factoring predictable information out of lexical entries, leaving only idiosyncratic information" (p. 11). Her view is that the predictable information might come from meaning, and while it is admitted that this view is not uncontroversial, part of the aim of the work is to "pursue the hypothesis ... seriously to see just how far it can be taken" (p. 13). Rejecting a representation in the form of semantic roles as too simplistic, Levin hints that lexical semantic representations might "take the form of predicate decompositions" (p. 16). Thankfully, no ghosts that might be conjured up by such terminology appear in the work under review, and the identification of a verb subclass simply by one of its typical members seems to be a happy expedient.

One final question is: what attractions does the book have for readers of *this* journal? As a resource that might be used in a computational implementation, the book is sadly limited. For computational linguists, the book would be ten times more interesting if there were an accompanying diskette (or a file that one could *ftp*). It would surely be easy enough to produce a verb index that identified the classes and subclasses that each verb had been assigned to, and an indication of their syntactic behavior in terms of the diathesis alternations described in Part 1 (the current index lists section references for both parts). One can envisage some kind of transparent formalism that was more or less theory-neutral within the framework of mainstream

phrase structure grammar, using a small set of feature names, or even the section numbers of the book itself (though +*holistic/partitive* would be less opaque than +*2.3.1* for verbs that allow the *spray paint* alternation). Let us hope that someone finds time to address this problem.

A nonlinguist friend of mine was flicking through the book at my home a few weeks ago and, chancing on one of the entries, asked me in wry disbelief whether "*gobble* verbs" was a technical term in linguistics. If Levin's book becomes as widely used as it perhaps deserves to be, then maybe it will become one.

Reference

Quirk, Randolph; Greenbaum, Sidney; Leech, Geoffrey; and Svartvik, Jan (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.

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