Deconstructing Register: Null Objects in English Recipes Revisited

When a construction is restricted to specific registers, is that information to be represented in the grammar or in some separate component of knowledge about language?

On the basis of an analysis of null objects in English cookbook recipes (e.g, *Put [ϕ] in oven and bake [ϕ] for 45 minutes.*), Culy (1996) argues for a component of linguistic knowledge which describes rules for use in specific situations. He shows that all existing possible analyses that attempt to represent the restriction to the recipe register of this construction as part of the grammar are inadequate. He suggests an alternative analysis, based on moving the register-restriction to another component of linguistic knowledge: the "user's manual". Under his analysis, English freely allows transitive verbs to appear without their objects. In this case, the semantic position associated with the object is left unbound. The user's manual contains the rules for interpreting such unbound positions, and those rules are sensitive to context. If the rules provide no interpretation of an unbound position in the current context, the sentence is unacceptable. While accepting the notion of the user's manual for other purposes, I argue that the register-restriction of null object pronouns is, in fact, a matter of grammar.

The first line of argument has to do with the nature of register and social contexts. Culy's conception of the user's manual takes registers and the social contexts to which they are tied to have an independent existence, such that they may be referred to by the rules of the user's manual. As much recent anthropological work has shown (see e.g., Kondo 1990), the social contexts in which communication is situated are constructed by the participants and thus reference to them as reified entities is problematic.

The alternative to reified register is that individual linguistic variants carry social information, and speakers deploy these variants in the combinations they choose to various social ends. The register spoken in a given encounter is thus emergent. Its formal properties consist of the variants that the speakers choose, and its social significance is a function of the social values of those variants. Certain patterns of linguistic variants recur because it is useful to recreate contexts that are recognizable as the same to others and language is one tool for doing this.

The second line of argument is that there is at least one analysis of null objects that takes their register restriction to be a matter of grammar and yet answers all of the Culy's criticisms. This analysis, building on recent developments in the constraint-based approaches of HPSG and Construction Grammar, posits a construction that allows the verb *serve*, for example, to appear where a verb+object would, as in *serve warm*:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \textit{null\_object\_construction} & \\ \textsc{synsem} \mid \textsc{local} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{category} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{head} & \boxed{1} \\ \textsc{val} \mid \textsc{comps} & \boxed{2} \end{bmatrix} \\ \textsc{context} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{social} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{situation} & \textit{`instructions'} \\ \textsc{self} & \textit{`authority'} \\ \textsc{described} & \textit{`care required'} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \\ \textsc{head-dtr} \mid \textsc{local} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{category} & \begin{bmatrix} \textsc{head} & \boxed{1}\ \textit{verb} \\ \textsc{val} \mid \textsc{comps} & \left\langle \textit{pro\_synsem} \right\rangle \oplus \boxed{2} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix} \end{bmatrix}$$

Consider first the syntactic features of this construction, represented in the substructures labeled CATEGORY for the mother (SYNSEM) and the daughter (HEAD-DTR). In HPSG, valency requirements of a head are represented as lists of arguments (e.g., COMPS for complements), some or all of which may correspond to nodes in phrases headed by that head. Following Ginzburg and Sag (to appear), one other way to satisfy a valency requirement is for it to appear as a *pro_synsem* on the valence list. The *pro_synsem* has pronominal syntax and semantics, but is only a synsem (as opposed to a sign) and therefore has no phonology. Further, since it is only present on valence lists, it is not an empty category. The construction that licenses null objects discharges the object requirement of its daughter by unifying it with a *pro_synsem* and assigning to the mother a reduced list of complement (COMPS) requirements.

This syntactic treatment answers all of the criticisms Culy has of the analyses he examines: First, since the *pro_synsem* shares many properties with overt synsems of pronouns, it is possible to represent their shared discourse characteristics. Second, since the *pro_synsem* is a syntactic entity, it is possible to represent its binding properties. Third, the analysis does not require duplicating lexical entries for verbs, as a similar lexicalist analysis without constructions would need to do.

Finally, this analysis allows for a representation of the restricted distribution of null objects without appealing to reified registers. In addition to phonological, syntactic and semantic information, HPSG allows signs to have pragmatic or context-based properties. These are represented as a set of constraints bundled together under the CONTEXT feature and include things like the presupposition of uniqueness that is associated with the use of definite descriptions.

In this paper, I propose to add to the CONTEXT information a set of constraints bearing information about the social context of use of the construction. There are three aspects to this social information: the situation at hand, the identity of the speaker, and the situation described. In the case of recipes, the situation is one of giving detailed instructions, the speaker is a person with the authority to give the instructions, and the situation described is the making of something that requires care.

Following the work on accommodation in pragmatics (e.g., Lewis 1979), the CONTEXT constraints are seen not as *restrictions* on what the context must be, but as the *contributions* that the use of the construction makes to the context. Applying this same notion to register, any use of this linguistic construction marks an attempt to construct the social context, the speaker's identity, and the situation described as specified in its CONTEXT constraints.

References:

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