Frame metonymy and null instantiation of core frame elements: Insights from Embodied Construction Grammar

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Starting with Fillmore (1986) and Lambrecht and Lemoine (2005), among others, we know that null frame elements, such as the competition role in the English sentence (1) *I won ØCompetition!* are subject to semantic, grammatical and information-structuring constraints. In this case, the competition role is understood as Definite Null Instantiated (DNI), i.e., as obligatorily retrievable from context. In contrast, for a verb such as *eat*, one can get an indefinite NI (INI), e.g., (2) *Who was eating Ø in here*?. That is, one need not know the thing eaten, whose referent is unspecified. This renewed focus on the role of conceptual frames in NI was put forth in Ruppenhofer (2004) and Ruppenhofer and Michaelis (2009), and we build on those insights.

Specifically, we analyse a subset of NI contexts, arguing that a more fine-grained internal architecture of frame elements is key to understanding DNI. To provide this internal frame element complexity, we look to Embodied Construction Grammar (ECG) (Bergen and Cheng 2005, Dodge 2010), in which frames are structured in complex multi-dimensional inheritance lattices, where roles are bound across frames, and they are typed as entities or complex processes.

We argue that, when DNI occurs such as in the *win* example above, this is due to the complex internal structure of the Winning_competition frame, which has as one of its core roles a competition role. The latter role differs from the thing_eaten role of the Ingestion frame for (2) the competition role has internal frame structure in and of itself and is of type complex process, while the thing_eaten role is of type entity, and has no internal frame structure of its own. Being a complex process, the competition role is itself composed of a set of roles and inferences. An asymmetry in NI-licensing occurs when the same verb takes an argument instantiating a core role of type complex process (the a sentences) vs. a core role of type entity (the b sentences): (3) a. He won the race! He won!  
   b. He won a spot on the game show! *He won!  
(4) a. I forgot to buy him a present. I forgot.  
   b. I forgot the keys. *I forgot.  
(5) a. He closed the shop early. He closed early.  
   b. He closed the door. *He closed.  
(6) a. They accepted my offer. They accepted.  
   b. They accepted my gift. *They accepted.

Above, the verbal complements in all cases instantiate a core frame element, and (a) and (b) sentences share the same semantic frame. However, the (a) sentences above all have in common that they allow NI (namely DNI) while all the (b) sentences do not. We argue that this is because the (b) sentences instantiate a core role that metonymically evokes the core element of type complex process from the (a) sentences. The complex process core roles are, respectively: Competition (the race), Content_of_forgetting (to buy him something), Locale_hours (the shop’s business operations), Acceptance_event (offering acts/goods). The entity roles that are metonymically linked to the latter content roles do so as follows, in order (3b-6b): PRIZE FOR COMPETITION, THING_FORGOTTEN FOR FORGETTING_EVENT, PORTAL FOR VENUE, GOODS FOR EVENT OF OFFERING GOODS. Thus, core roles that are of type complex process are omissible, while those that metonymically evoke the complex process are not. Further, because the (a) sentences allow
omission of a role that is in fact of type complex process, when instantiated, that role may surface as a clausal complement, such as (4a), but not always (3a, 5a, 6a). Using the ECG distinction of frame role types, and a metonymy relation between them accounts for most of the parade examples of puzzling exceptions to NI.

References


