

## The conceptual inactiveness of implicit arguments: Evidence from particle verbs and object categorization

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The linguistic system generalizes over rich conceptual structures and, at the same time, has to guarantee that the correct inferences can be drawn as to what the message is intended to convey. The question needs to be answered whether entities not realized in grammar, i.e. implicit arguments, are a necessary part of the interpretation of the expression. That this is the case is a wide spread assumption in the linguistic as well as the psycholinguistic literature (cf. e.g. Maurer et al. (1995); Williams (1987); Roeper (1987)), who argue that implicit arguments are somehow covertly present as unlinked thematic roles in the lexical representation.

Here, in contrast, it will be shown that these analyses overgeneralize at least with regard to one type of implicit argument, i.e. unrealized prepositional objects as they occur with particle verbs as in 'stick s.th. *on*'. These do not project a reference object as their prepositional pendants do ('stick s.th. *on s.th.*'). Departing from theoretical evidence it will be shown that in null contexts with German particle complexes no reference object is conceptualized on the basis of two reaction time studies with an object categorization task: It is only full prepositions that prime a potential reference object which is revealed by the reaction to situationally congruous target line drawings presented right after both prepositions and particles.

The findings lead to the conclusion that an adequate truth-conditional description of implicit arguments should discard them as being conceptually inactive and referentially empty. It is only under specific contextual conditions that a construal of the corresponding argument is coerced. Only then the semantic representation needs to be adjusted, which can be characterized as an instance of lexical re-analysis. In the corresponding semantic analysis the difference between speaker and hearer knowledge has to be considered in so far as the specificity (cf. von Heusinger (2001)) of the unrealized entity may be accessible to the speaker only, which, however, is information-structurally irrelevant.

In this context, two additional, procedural aspects will be dealt with. First, the type of priming triggered by inherent sortal information (as by *stick the label on the \_\_\_*) needs to be discussed. It will be shown that a semantic fit between the sortal restrictions activated by the preposition and a depicted object results in inhibitory effects. This finding qualifies the traditional assumption that a semantic fit results in a facilitation (cf. e.g. Kutas & Hillyard (1984)) and can be explained as the result of a competition between two object representations for conceptual activation. Second, there is evidence that certain grammatical information (such as gender) about an object expression does not enter the conceptual processing of a corresponding target object drawing, which is revealed by the fact that modifying grammatical information in the linguistic prime material proves to be irrelevant for the procedural effort the categorization task requires.

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