

### Possession of a Controlled Substantive: Light *have* and Verbs of Possession

English *have* shares a semantic ‘possession’ component with verbs such as *get*, *give*, and transitive *want* (*want a car*). Sublexical scoping, where *John wants the car for an hour* is ambiguous between readings where John’s wanting or his desired having lasts an hour, have led to two classes of analyses these verbs: (i) clauses with these verbs underlyingly contain the verb *have* (McCawley 1974) or an abstract syntactic formative HAVE (Harley 2004) (e.g. *give* is effectively the spell-out of *cause to have*); or (ii) these verbs introduce a semantic substructure meaning ‘have’ (lexical decomposition; e.g. Dowty 1979). Based on a broader view of the evidence we propose instead that the possession component of meaning in such clauses is introduced not by the verb, but rather by its possessee NP complement. We defend a unified account of *have* as a light verb.

Up to four distinct uses of *have* have been identified (Tham 2005). (1a) and (1b) are Tham’s two subtypes of ‘existential’ (or possessive) *have*, which takes an indefinite object:

- (1) a. Light Verb+Relational NP: John has a sister.  
 b. Alienable Possessional: John has a car.  
 c. Discourse-Determined (“Focus”) *have*:  
 Q: What will Eliza be polishing? A: She has the mirrors.  
 d. Control *have* (with definite object):  
 Q: Where are the mirrors? A: Eliza has them.

Verbs like *want*, *give*, and *get* allow the same range of meanings (e.g. *John wanted/got a sister*, *John wants/got a car*, *John wants/gets the windows*, etc.). This sort of parallel has been taken as evidence that these verbs are spell-outs of *desire to have*, *cause to have*, and *come to have* respectively (McCawley 1974; Richards 2001; Harley 2004). The parallel polysemy of each verb follows from the fact that *have* itself is polysemous.

Interestingly, genitive possessors in English share all the same meanings (see Barker 1995: Chapter 2 for related discussion):

- (2) a. Relational NP: John’s sister.  
 b. Alienable Possessional: John’s car.  
 c. “Focus” Possession  
 Q: Who is polishing these mirrors? A: These are Eliza’s mirrors.  
 d. Control Possession:  
 Q: Who’s got the car now? A: It’s John’s car today.

Genitives even allow the same temporal modification of the possession state: cp. *His companion during the war (has turned against him)*. We therefore propose that the possessor/possessed NPs (the only commonality to all of the data above) are the locus of the shared semantics of all of these constructions. We propose that all possessed nouns are dyadic and in the unmarked possessive use, all bear a logical predicate *poss\_rel* (possession relation), subsuming alienable and inalienable possession (where the difference between them is determined by the possessed noun as in Barker 1995). This relation is borne lexically by the argument of relational nouns:

- (3) *sister*:  $\lambda x \lambda y [\text{sister}(x,y) \wedge \text{poss\_rel}(x,y)]$

A non-relational noun can be pumped to a relational one via an optional possessor-adding rule, independently motivated by the fact that any noun can take a possessor argument:

- (4) a.  $\lambda x [N(x)] \Rightarrow \lambda y \lambda x [N(x) \wedge \text{poss\_rel}(x,y)]$   
 b. *book*:  $\lambda x [\text{book}(x)]$  (e.g. *the book*, *a book*)  
 c. *book*:  $\lambda y \lambda x [\text{book}(x) \wedge \text{poss\_rel}(x,y)]$  (e.g. *John’s book*)

We account for the focus and control readings (1c,d) by means of a *systematic polysemy* rule (Apresjan 1974; Copestake and Briscoe 1995) that maps *poss\_rel* to the appropriate contextually-determined relation (not detailed here for lack of space but discussed in the full talk). Existing accounts of the definiteness effect in (1a) (and (1b), according to Tham) (Partee 1999, Tham 2005) can be incorporated into the semantics of *poss\_rel*.

Assuming the locus of possessional semantics is therefore in a predicative NP complement, we propose that all verbs of possession function as quasi-light verbs in that they promote an unsaturated possessor argument from a relational NP to subject/object position. Thus *have* has the logical form in (5a), where R, of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ , is a relational predicate like (4c) under quantification, e.g.  $\lambda y \exists x [\text{book}(x) \wedge \text{poss\_rel}(x, y)]$  for “a book” (compare Partee 1999). Evidence for treating all uses of *have* as light verbs comes from the fact that lexical relational and non-relational possessed NPs can be non-zeugmatically coordinated (e.g. *John has a big house and a generous sister who pays all the bills*), and similarly for *get*, *want* and *give* (cf. *I wanted/got a big house and a devoted husband; I gave Jane a big house and a wonderful life*). Following our gloss of *have*, we provide the following interpretations of *want*, *get*, and *give* as quasi-light verbs:

- (5) a. *have*:  $\lambda R \lambda y [R(y)]$   
 b. *want*:  $\lambda R \lambda y [ \text{want}(y, R(y)) ]$   
 c. *get*:  $\lambda R \lambda y [ \text{become}(y, R(y)) ]$   
 d. *give*:  $\lambda z \lambda R \lambda y [ \text{cause}(y, R(z)) ]$

This explains why apparent idioms pattern across these verbs (e.g. *I have/got/gave John the creeps*). Likewise, the polysemy of constructions with these verbs follows simply from the polysemy of their complement NPs. Finally, on our analysis, the sublexical scoping of adverbials arises from the accessibility of the *poss\_rel* relation to adverbial modification in addition to other relations evoked by the proposition. Thus, in (6a), *again* may modify the *wanting* state (6b) or the *poss\_rel* relation (6c):

- (6) a. Susan wants blond hair again  
 b. *again*(*want*(Susan,  $\exists x(\text{blond\_hair}(x) \wedge \text{poss\_rel}(x, \text{Susan}))$ )))  
 c. *want*(Susan, *again*( $\exists x(\text{blond\_hair}(x) \wedge \text{pos\_rel}(x, \text{Susan}))$ )))

For perspicuity this abstract uses standard lambda notation, but we present an account of these scope facts in terms of an underspecified semantics (cf. Copestake et al. 2005), which provides a straightforward way to reduce sublexical scope to syntactic scope (Egg 1999). The rule in (4a) adds a *poss\_rel* Elementary Predication to the bag that also includes quantifiers and other scopal elements, and quantifier scope constraints ensure correct scope of the *want*, *become*, etc predicates over *pred\_rel* in the same manner that quantifier raising, etc., is analyzed.

Summarizing, *want*, *give*, and *get*, as well as traditionally ‘heavy’ uses of *have*, are all assimilated to light verbs. Whether in genitives, *have*, or other verbs of possession, the possession relation arises from a possessor argument on lexical or derived possessed nouns, an analysis that moves the account of polysemy from particular lexical entries, as in previous work, to the semantic relation of possession more generally.

### Selected references

- Egg, Marcus 1999. Deriving and resolving ambiguities in *wieder*-sentences. In *Proceedings of the Twelfth Amsterdam Colloquium*.  
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 Tham, Shiao-Wei 2005. *Representing possessive predication: Semantic dimensions and pragmatic bases*. Stanford University PhD dissertation.