The Elasticity of Verb Meaning Revisited
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As Fillmore and others have observed, verbs with similar meanings often show characteristic argument realization patterns, that is, shared patterns of morphosyntactic distribution. This observation has suggested that these patterns follow from facets of meaning common to their members (Fillmore 1971, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, Pinker 1989). A significant challenge to proposals that verb meaning determines verb behavior has come from a growing collection of phenomena falling under the umbrella of 'elasticity of verb meaning' (RH&L 1998), including what have been called 'variable behavior verbs' (L&RH 1995). Such phenomena suggest that every verb is found in such a variety of syntactic contexts that verbs themselves — or more accurately, their 'roots' — can simply be inserted into any syntactic context. On this approach, unacceptable root-context combinations are ruled out due to a semantic incompatibility between the two (Borer 2003, Goldberg 1995, Hoekstra 1992). Such incompatibilities are often explained by appeal to real world knowledge, but details remain to be fleshed out.

I revisit this challenge in the context of recent work on the semantic underpinnings of argument realization. I acknowledge that the empirical landscape is more complex than studies of argument realization in the '90s assume, but I argue that there are still significant asymmetries in the distribution of verbs across syntactic contexts. I take these asymmetries as a reason to reassess the contribution of the verb root to argument realization and to probe what facets of world knowledge matter.

I focus first on the well-known, systematic asymmetries that involve what have been called manner vs. result verbs, exemplified by *hit* and *break*, respectively (Rappaport Hovav & Levin 2010). Then, I turn to less well-known, but equally systematic asymmetries between two types of manner verbs represented by the verbs *hit* and *wipe*. The *break/hit* asymmetries have been previously used to support the proposal that roots come with a grammatically relevant ontological type. I further argue that some manner roots select for an 'argument' (cf. the 'constant participants' of Levin 1999), and that *hit* and *wipe* impose different demands on such an argument. Informally, *wipe* requires it to be an 'area' or 'region', while it is construed as a 'point' for *hit*.

Drawing on work in progress, I propose that the distribution of roots and, hence, verbs, across syntactic contexts is determined by a cluster of interacting factors, including the ontological type of the root. The diversity of syntactic contexts that many verbs are found in can largely be attributed to the expression of three major types of events of scalar change (Hay, Kennedy & Levin 1999). Further, as suggested in RH&L (2010), the argument that a scalar change is predicated of must be realized as an object. As RH&L discuss, this requirement is the source of distributional differences between *break* vs. *hit/wipe*. I argue that further distributional differences reflect the nature of the scalar change involved, especially among the *hit/wipe* verbs. Finally, the differential syntactic behavior of *wipe* and *hit* can be traced to the distinct types of 'argument' their roots require, which in turn results in *wipe*, but not *hit*, having an object which is a potential incremental theme.