'Let in Translation':
A typological study of the concept of LETTING
in a parallel corpus of film subtitles

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Outline

1. Constructional typology: Methodological challenges
2. The constructional field of LETTING
3. Data
4. Quantitative analyses
   - conceptual space
   - language space
5. Conclusions
Constructional Typology

- a theoretical and methodological 'update' of lexical typology (see Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2008 about the latter)
- lexical fields as classical examples: kinship terms (Hjelmslev 1957), colour terms (Berlin & Kay 1969), verbs of cooking (Lehrer 1974), aquamotion verbs (Majsak & Rakhilina 2007)
- Constructional Typology: how languages cut the conceptual space with their inventories of constructions – form-meaning pairings at any level of abstraction, including words
Tertia comparationis in semantic typology

- atomistic, or decompositional approaches: comparing elementary semantic components of functionally similar expressions in different languages (e.g. structuralist binary features; Wierzbicka & Goddard's semantic primes)

- holistic approaches: basic frames, or patterns of experience, as input for lexical-typological questionnaires/experiments (e.g. Majid, Boster & Bowerman 2008 – videos with cutting and breaking events). Compare form-meaning mappings in different languages.
Challenges

- the holistic approach looks more attractive (cf. Majsak & Rakhilina 2007)
- however, their inventories of 'frames' are pre-defined and subjective
- we could use non-elicited language data (corpora), as the source of 'frames'
- still, how to compare such contexts from a corpus cross-linguistically?
A proposal

- 'a metric on meaning' (Cysouw 2010):

  'The similarity between two meanings can be empirically investigated by looking at their encoding in many different languages. The more similar these encodings, in language after language, the more similar the contexts. So, to investigate the similarity between two contextualized meanings, only judgments about the similarity between expressions within the structure of individual languages are needed.'

- theoretical support: iconicity of form-meaning mapping in usage-based semantic theory

- practical 'carrot': abundance of parallel corpora, which seem to be ideal for this approach
An example

Exemplar 1

EN  ...I must be the one to kill Harry Potter.
FR  je dois être celui qui tuera Harry Potter.
NL  ik moet degene zijn die Harry Potter doodt.

Exemplar 2

EN  Ron, kill it!
FR  Ron, tue-le!
NL  Ron, dood het.
An example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EN</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exemplar 1</td>
<td><strong>kill</strong></td>
<td><strong>tuer</strong></td>
<td><strong>doden</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplar 2</td>
<td><strong>kill</strong></td>
<td><strong>tuer</strong></td>
<td><strong>doden</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An example

Exemplar 3

EN  the second brother killed himself so as to join her
FR  le deuxième frère se tua pour la rejoindre.
NL  … beroofde de tweede broer zich van het leven om bij haar te zijn.
## An example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplar 1</th>
<th>EN</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kill</td>
<td>tuer</td>
<td>doden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplar 2</th>
<th>EN</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kill</td>
<td>tuer</td>
<td>doden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplar 3</th>
<th>EN</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>NL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kill (oneself)</td>
<td>(se) tuer</td>
<td>(zich) van het leven beroven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An example

• if we judged from these 3 examples about the conceptualization of KILLING in these three languages,

a) situations 1 and 2 would be more similar than 1 – 3 or 2 – 3, and therefore closer in the conceptual space

b) EN and FR would be more similar than EN – NL or FR – NL, and therefore closer in the language space
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LET as a Force-Dynamic category

• Causation: the initiator overrides another object's tendency towards rest or motion.

  e.g. *The strong wind made the ball roll.*

• Unlike in causation *per se*, in letting the initiator doesn't cause another entity to change its natural tendency. In other words, the initiator refrains to exercise its force-dynamic potential (Talmy 1988).
LET as a Force-Dynamic category

• two main types:
  - cessation of impingement (onset letting)
    The plug's coming loose let the water flow from the tank.
  - non-occurrence of impingement (extended letting)
    The fan's being broken let the smoke hang still in the chamber.
Wierzbicka 2002 on English *let*

- more specific semantic functions, for instance:
  - *let* of permission (*Please let me go*)
  - *let* of non-prevention (*She let him die*)
  - *let* of tolerance (*Let him do what he wants*)
  - *let* of shared information (*let me know*)
  - *let* of cooperative dialogue and interaction (*Let me conclude by saying...*)

- some functions are less typical of the corresponding verbs in other languages (Russian or German), e.g. the cooperative *let*
Research questions

- conceptual space:
  - how do languages cut the common conceptual space, which serves as a tertium comparationis (cf. typological semantic maps by Haspelmath 1997; van der Auwera & Plungian 1998; Croft & Poole 2008)?

- language space:
  - which European languages are more similar to one another in their expression of LETTING?
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Movies
Languages of subtitles

- Spanish
- English
- Dutch
- German
- Swedish
- Russian
- Polish
- French
- Slovene
- Bulgarian
- Portuguese
- Italian
- Spanish
Data sources

- http://www.subscene.com
- http://www.opensubtitles.org
subscene.com
Example

<i>Sooner or later though, you always have to wake up.</i>

<i>In cryo you don't dream at all.</i>

<i>Doesn't feel like 6 years.</i>

<i>More like after tequila and ass kicking.</i>

Avatar.2009.720p.TS.XviD-ViSiON

SubRip format (.srt)
Constructional field of LET

- onomasiological approach (meaning - form)
- all verbs and verb expressions related to LETTING in WordNet and FrameNet
  - WordNet: synset of let
  - FrameNet: frames Make_Possible_to_Do, Grant_Permission, Permitting, Releasing
    e.g. Permitting LUs: accept.v, allow.v, entitle.v, permit.v, permit.n, sanction.v
- also permissive can and may (cf. Talmy 2000)
English constructions

Total: 123
• equivalent contexts were found manually with the help of timing information (no perfect alignment)
• the constructions in the translations were analyzed
• a data matrix with 123 exemplars as rows and 12 languages as columns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EN</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>SV</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>PT</th>
<th>BG</th>
<th>PL</th>
<th>RU</th>
<th>SL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>let</td>
<td>lassen</td>
<td>laten</td>
<td>låta</td>
<td>dejar</td>
<td>laisser</td>
<td>lasciare</td>
<td>deixar</td>
<td>puskam</td>
<td>pozwalać</td>
<td>pozwolić</td>
<td>dovoliti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allow</td>
<td>zulassen</td>
<td>laten</td>
<td>tillåta</td>
<td>permitar</td>
<td>permettre</td>
<td>permettere</td>
<td>deixar</td>
<td>pozvoljavam</td>
<td>dopuścić</td>
<td>dopustiti</td>
<td>dovoliti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
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Distances between the exemplars

- A Python script that computes Gower's similarity metric between pairs of exemplars
- for a pair of exemplars \( i \) and \( j \) and \( k \) languages,
  \[
  s_{ij} = \sum_{ijk} w_{ijk} \cdot s_{ijk} / \sum_{ijk} w_{ijk}
  \]
  where \( w \) is 1 or 0 depending on whether the comparison is valid (0 if the translation is missing);
  \( s_{ijk} \) can be 0 (different constructions), 1 (identical constructions) or 0.5 (partly identical).
- distances: \( d_{ij} = 1 - s_{ij} \)
An example

take two first exemplars (rows)
- 3 full overlaps (NL, PT, SL)
- 2 partial overlaps (DE, SV)

\[ d = 1 - \left(3 + 2 \cdot 0.5\right)/12 \approx 0.67 \]
Multidimensional Scaling

- the matrix of distances serves as input for MDS
- MDS is a dimensionality reduction technique that represents distances between objects in a low-dimensional space
- smacof library in R (de Leeuw & Mair 2009)
Choosing the number of dimensions

scree plot of n-dimensional MDS solutions
Zoom-in on \textit{let}
Polysemy of *let*

Why not let them just kill my ass?

(Avatar)
Polysemy of *let*

*Let him go.*

*(Braveheart)*
Polysemy of *let*

Well, let me tell you something, man. (Am. History X)
Swedish
French
Bulgarian
Russian
Slovene
Interim conclusions (1)

- the most coherently expressed sense is letting as non-interference (the prototype?)

- some senses, e.g. cooperative letting, are rarely expressed crossed-linguistically as force-dynamic expressions
Interim conclusions (2)

- the languages cut the space in different ways
- the space fragmentation increases from West to East
- the semantic area of analytic causative expressions (two verbs for cause and effect) also decreases from West to East

  cf. Bally – Wierzbicka's 'analytic' – phenomenological continuum

  EN > FR > DE > RU

- these West-East differences seem to override the genealogical relationships
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Language Space: Procedure

Step 1. For each pair of languages $i$ and $j$:

   for each pair of exemplars:
   
   • If both languages have the same expressions in both exemplars, similarity score $s_{ij} += 1$.
   
   • If both languages have different expressions, $s_{ij} += 1$.
   
   • If one language has identical expressions, and the other one different ones, $s_{ij} += 0$.

Step 2. Transform the similarities into distances.

Step 3. MDS
Interpretation

- the genealogical groupings are observed with a few exceptions:
  - Italian is close to German, as well as the Southern Slavic Slovene and Bulgarian
  - Swedish is close to the Slavic languages and, surprisingly, Spanish
- West-East correspondences within each group
A 'lite' version

- Is the force-dynamic meaning expressed at all or not? (if 'NotLet', $s_{ij} += 1$)
- A 3D MDS solution
3D MDS
Interim conclusions

- the coarser granularity leads to more stable genealogical patterns
- the finer granularity leads to less genealogically transparent results, but reflects the West-East continuum of analyticity to a larger extent
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Final conclusions

• There is evidence of an 'analyticity' (focus on cause and effect) continuum in the ways the languages cut the conceptual space. There is a decrease of 'analyticity' from West to East.

• The level of granularity of analysis can yield different results. Taking into account the more global strategies leads to a clustering of languages that reflects the genealogical classification to a larger extent.
Perspectives

- More data, also translated into English
- Other registers
- Automatic word alignment (e.g. Tiedemann 2011)
- Dialectometric dimension