

What verbs mean, and a realist's view of why

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Abstract :

What sort of thing does a verb mean ? In this talk I offer an answer that combines elements of both the lexical and constructional views : a lexicalist approach in which distinct components of a verb's meaning are localized on specific syntactic addresses of its arguments. This approach leads us to the view that argument alternations result from the way these components shift meaning over time, leading to polysemy. (This contrasts with the usual view of alternations in which arguments are rearranged, either in the lexicon or in syntax.) I will suggest that explanations for the prevailing patterns of such polysemy be sought, not in putative cognitive universals or conceptual structures, but rather in systematic correlations between properties of the real-world contexts in which verb meanings are acquired.