Abstract

In his 1991/1996 GLOW paper, Stowell observes that in newspaper headlines an overt article on the subject blocks omission of the article on the direct object, but not vice versa (see “man bites a dog” vs. “a man bites dog”). Let’s call this “Stowell’s Law”.

In this paper, I present a binding-theoretic treatment of Stowell’s Law, which is essentially a corollary of the analysis I propose for copula omission. -- The paper is accordingly split in two parts. Part one deals with the omission of copulae in German newspaper headlines, part two with article omission. In part one, I argue that the German data suggests that the relevant non-sentential headlines are copula constructions headed by a null copula NC.

This, however, does not yet answer the question, why it is exactly in newspaper contexts that the NC (and article omission) is licensed. Building on ideas developed in Huang (1984) and Stowell (1991/1996), I propose that it is the specific fact that headlines systematically report *about* important latest events, i.e., that headlines presuppose the existence of a topical event “e-topic” they comment on.

In the spirit of Huang (1984), I furthermore take it that languages (and registers within one and the same language) may, in principle, exploit two different strategies: (i) discourse orientation (as in e.g. Russian or Hebrew), or (ii) grammar orientation (as in e.g. English or German). Discourse orientation, it is argued, can be modeled as binding the event variable “e” introduced by the predicate and linking it to the topic event “e-topic”, thus establishing the link to the context and licensing the strategy of discourse orientation.

Grammar orientation, on the other hand, involves existential quantification of the predicate’s event variable (and thus blocks the identification of “e” with the topic event “e-topic”). The crucial claim then is, that in English and German newspapers a discourse oriented strategy is exploited, even though the normal register is grammar oriented.

To conclude the paper, it is shown that, given these assumptions, Stowell’s Law simply follows as a corollary from the different properties of binding and quantification involved in the two strategies.
