Conceptual Effects of Verb-Adverb Modification in the Domain of Force

This dissertation contributes to the study of semantic well-formedness in verb-adverb modification. Two main findings are presented. Firstly, when agent-oriented adverbs such as playfully are used to modify verbs that express a force exertion such as hit, a defeasible inference is triggered: the force magnitude is understood to be low. The adverb, despite not being a force modifier, nonetheless has an effect on the force magnitude expressed in the verb. This inference is an instance of stereotypical enrichment and is argued to be compositional in nature, as it cannot be traced to either the verb or the adverb in isolation. Secondly, adverbs such as lightly, which modify the force magnitude expressed by a verb, cannot felicitously be combined with verbs in a resultative construction, i.e., verbs that appear with a resultative particle or prepositional phrase such as the German einschlagen (lit. 'to hit in', 'to break'). The specification of a force result thus blocks modification of the force magnitude.

An Event Semantic analysis is proposed that models these findings based on underlying force vectors, which represent the force generated by the agent. Adverbs, verbs and prepositions are analysed as having specific requirements on force vectors, which also accounts for observations such as the selectivity requirements of verbs for certain prepositions or the unacceptability of specific verb-adverb combinations. The underlying force vectors and other relevant meaning components are then represented in a Frame Semantic model which transparently spells out the conceptual underpinnings of semantic well-formedness in verb-adverb modification.