
Semantic arguments for many-to-one mappings from syntactic primitives to exponents

Nina Haslinger

Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS), Berlin
haslinger@leibniz-zas.de

Often a given meaning is realized by an internally complex form in some languages and by a non-segmentable form in others. Given the principle of “syntax all the way down”, there are then two analytical options: either we take the exponents at face value and conclude that the structures underlying this meaning are not uniform (the ‘one-to-one’ view), or we assume a uniform syntax, but permit a many-to-one mapping from syntactic primitives to exponents (the ‘many-to-one’ view). Arguments for the many-to-one view often come from morphosyntactic typology, e.g. containment patterns or *ABA constraints.

This talk aims to draw attention to a different kind of argument, based on semantic theories of strengthening and competition which distinguish between structural subtypes of alternatives. For instance, recent work following Katzir (2007) has claimed that strengthening is sensitive to a distinction between alternatives derived by *deletion* of structure and those obtained by *replacement* of syntactic terminals. If correct, this provides a new way of motivating ‘many-to-one’ analyses: Only the ‘many-to-one’ view predicts segmentable and non-segmentable forms for a given meaning to have the same alternative structures.

I will present two case studies of this reasoning, both involving quantifiers. First, plural universal quantifiers often transparently contain definite plurals (Matthewson 2001), but this is not the case e.g. in German. I argue that an otherwise promising generalization about competition between semantically precise and imprecise alternatives can be upheld only on a ‘many-to-one’ approach to this variation. The second case study (based on joint work with Viola Schmitt) concerns distributive quantifiers such as English *every/each*. In some languages, these items transparently contain the numeral ‘one’ (Gil 1995) or an indefiniteness marker. If we take a ‘many-to-one’ approach here as well (Haslinger et al. 2025), English *every* QPs end up having deletion alternatives with indefinites. I argue that this prediction is welcome, as it helps us address the puzzle of why *every* intervenes in NPI-licensing while universal modals do not.

References: • Gil, D. (1995). Universal Quantifiers and Distributivity. In E. Bach et al. (eds.), *Quantification in Natural Languages*, 321–362. Dordrecht: Kluwer. • Haslinger, N., Hien, A. N., Rosina, E. E., Schmitt V. & V. Wurm (2025). A unified semantics for distributive and non-distributive universal quantifiers. *NLLT* 43, 3147–3214. • Katzir, R. (2007). Structurally-defined alternatives. *L&P* 30, 669–690. • Matthewson, L. (2001). Quantification and the nature of crosslinguistic variation. *NALS* 9, 145–189.