How "semantic" are semantic maps?
A pilot study of passive and impersonal constructions in European languages

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1. Introduction and aims. Semantic maps are often defined as *multi-level* representations of linguistic meaning/function in which each point represents a *semantic structure* associated with one or more grammatical entities (or grams), and the connections between points represent relations between the functions/meanings of grams. How these "semantic structures" should look like is largely an individual choice of the creator of the map, and often it is not easy to tell if we are dealing with different usages or with different meanings/senses of grams. As a result, *function*, *meaning*, *sense*, and *usage* are used by practitioners of semantic maps as if they were interchangeable, and the claim underlying this method, be it explicitly stated or not, is that different contextual meanings (=usages/functions) of a given grammatical entity directly reflect its conventional meanings (=senses/meanings), both being part of the semantic characterization of that entity (for an exemplar discussion, see Haspelmath 2003: 212-213). Moreover, although in principle the semantic-map approach to cross-linguistic diversity is able to transcend the boundary between sentences and discourse (see, e.g., Croft [2001: 93, adapted]: "conceptual spaces also represent conventional *pragmatic* or *discourse-functional* or *informational-structural* or even *stylistic* and *social* dimensions of the use of a grammatical form or construction"), semantic maps have rarely been used in the realm of discourse in a systematic way. This paper is an attempt at making the semantic structures that form semantic maps more suitable to deal with phenomena traditionally falling within the realm of discourse (such as, e.g., voice phenomena, anaphoric relations, topic/focus constructions, etc.). The purpose of this paper is thus twofold. First and foremost, I will use discourse micro-structures as a diagnostics for building a semantic map of *agent defocusing* (Myhill 1997, Sansò 2006), a general function that is manifested in a variety of ways in the languages of the world, and that appears to be preferentially associated with passive and impersonal constructions across languages. The second aim is more general: I will illustrate how *discourse-functional* or *informational-structural* dimensions of the use of a grammatical form may be captured by making use of semantic maps. Passive and impersonal constructions, being highly sensitive to discourse conditions, are an ideal domain for this purpose.

2. Corpus and data. The corpus used in this pilot study consists of Umberto Eco's novel *Il nome della rosa* along with its translations in 9 European languages (Spanish, Romanian, French, German, Dutch, Danish, Modern Greek, Polish, Czech). The construction types analyzed in this study include: (i) so-called *periphrastic passives*, in which the verb phrase consists of an auxiliary plus the past participle of the verb; (ii) *inflectional passive/medial paradigms*; (iii) passive and impersonal constructions in which a reflexive marker is used (labelled as *middle constructions*, following Abraham 1995, Steinbach 2002, among others); (iv) so-called *impersonal passives*, i.e. constructions in which the predicate is associated with passive morphology, but either there is no patient (i.e. the corresponding active clause is intransitive), or the patient is marked in the same way in which it is marked in the active sentence; (v) so-called *man-constructions*, i.e. constructions having some general noun ("man", "people") as subject; (vi) constructions involving the impersonal or vague use of a personal pronoun, or the corresponding inflected form of the verb (so-called "vague *you*" and "vague *they*" constructions).

3. Results. Even in a typologically and genetically homogeneous language sample, structurally similar constructions show considerable differences in use (see, e.g., Figures 2-4): these differences are not chaotic, but systematic to a certain extent, and can be captured through a careful inspection of texts, which alone can shed light on semantic nuances that would otherwise be downplayed or ignored. These differences can be formalized by means of a conceptual space whose nodes are not atomic meanings/functions, but **clusters of discourse properties of the event and its main participants** (A[gent] and P[atient]; see Figure 1): the discourse status of A and P, and their degree of individuation (in the sense of Hopper and Thompson 1980) are in a direct, positive relationship with the overall degree of elaboration of the event, i.e. the degree at which an event is conceptually distinguished into separate participants and sub-events. To be more precise, I will argue for the existence of an array of *situation types* which have agent defocusing as their basic component but show some crucial differences that can result in their being coded in different ways both within a single language and across languages. *Situation types* are defined, following Kemmer (1993: 7), as "sets of situational or semantic/pragmatic contexts that are systematically associated with a particular form of expression". 'Semantic/pragmatic contexts' are not simply 'real world contexts' existing independently of the language-user, but include 'real world' information filtered through the conceptual apparatus of the speaker. Every language has a large inventory of lexico-grammatical devices that allow a given real-world situation to be portrayed in different ways, *under any conceivable set of discourse conditions*. The constructions examined in this paper are precisely among those lexico-grammatical devices that allow different conceptualizations of the same states of affairs: they *share the basic component of agent defocusing*, but encode different situation types, and their semantic contribution to the discourse in which they are embodied crucially depends on the way they conceptualize the event denoted by the verb.

Situation type	Features of A, P, and the event
Patient-oriented process	A is less discourse-central than P; P is highly topical; medium/high degree of elaboration of the event: the state of affairs is represented from the point of view of the patient.
Bare happening	A is de-emphasized, but corresponds to some specific individual in the world; P is not particularly topical; the event is a past, realis one, but is conceptualized as a naked fact, in summary fashion
Agentless generic event	A is generically identifiable as a subgroup of humanity (e.g., people in a given location) or represents virtually all humanity; P is not particularly topical; the event is a generic (or irrealis) one, which either did not occur, or which is presented as occurring in a non-real (contingent) world

Figure 1. *A conceptual space of agent defocusing.*

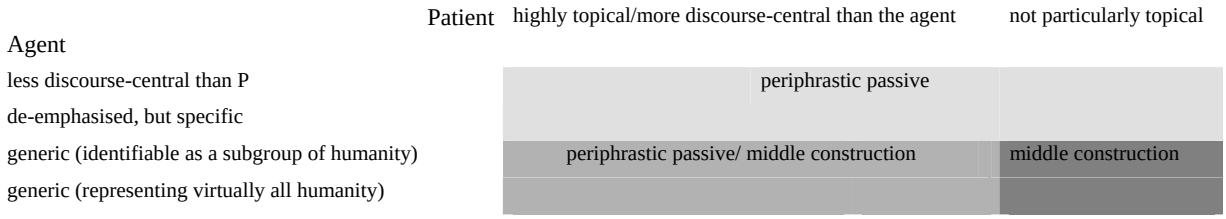

Figure 2. *A semantic map for passive and impersonal constructions in Italian*

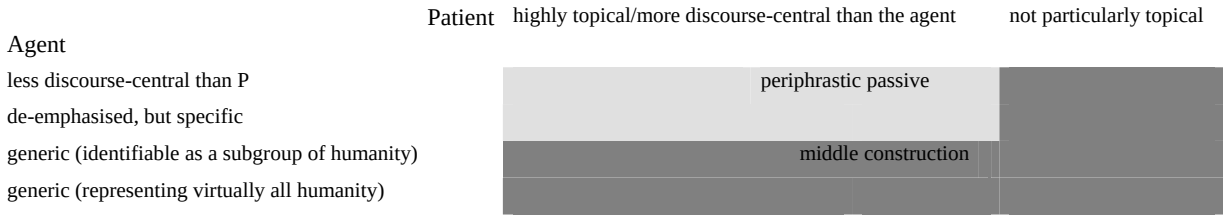

Figure 3. *A semantic map for passive and impersonal constructions in Spanish*

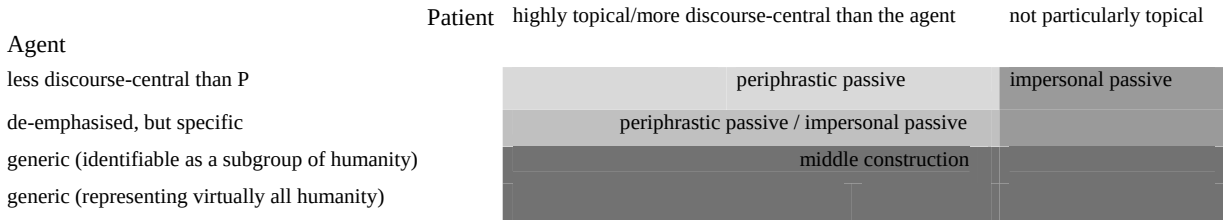

Figure 4. *A semantic map for passive and impersonal constructions in Polish*

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