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Distributional analysis of copredication:
Towards distinguishing systematic polysemy from coercion

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Abstract

English In this paper we argue that the account of the notion of complex type based on copredication tests is problematic, because copredication is possible, albeit less frequent, also with expressions which exhibit polysemy due to coercion. We show through a distributional and lexico-syntactic pattern-based corpus analysis that the variability of copredication contexts is the key to distinguish complex types nouns from nouns subject to coercion.

Italiano In questo contributo sosteniamo che il test di copredicazione utilizzato in letteratura per motivare l’esistenza di tipi complessi è problematico, in quanto la copredicazione è possibile, seppur con minor frequenza, anche con espressioni che esibiscono un comportamento polisemico a seguito di coercion. Attraverso una analisi distribuzionale che utilizza pattern lessico-sintattici mostriamo come la variabilità dei contesti di copredicazione è la chiave per distinguere nomi associati a tipi complessi da nomi soggetti a coercion.

1 Introduction

Copredication can be defined as a “grammatical construction in which two predicates jointly apply to the same argument” (Asher 2011, 11). We focus here on copredications in which the two predicates select for incompatible types. An example is (1):

(1) Lunch was delicious but took forever.

where one predicate (‘take forever’) selects for the event sense of the argument lunch while the other (‘delicious’) selects for the food sense.

Polysemous expressions entering such copredication contexts are generally assumed to have a complex type (Pustejovsky 1995), that is, to lexically refer to entities “made up” of two (or more) components of a single type; it is thus assumed for example that lunch is of the complex type event • food. Copredication as a defining criterion for linguistic expressions referring to complex types is, however, problematic, because copredication is possible, albeit less frequent, also with expressions which exhibit polysemy because of coercion, as in the case of the noun sandwich in such contexts as (2):

(2) Sam grabbed and finished the sandwich in one minute.

where the predicate grab selects for the simple type the noun sandwich is associated with (food), whereas finish coerces it to an event. The claim that the event sense exhibited by sandwich is coerced is supported by the low variability of event contexts in which sandwich appears (as opposed to lunch); see for example “during lunch” (780 hits for the Italian equivalent in our reference corpus, cf. section 3) vs. “*during the sandwich” (0 hits).

Our goal is therefore twofold: evaluate whether at the empirical level it is possible to distinguish, among nouns appearing in copredication contexts, between complex types and simple (or complex) types subject to coercion effects; and propose a method to extract complex type nouns from corpora, combining distributional and lexico-syntactic pattern-based analyses. Our working hypothesis is that lexicalized complex types appear in copredication patterns more systematically, and so that high variability of pair of predicates in copredication contexts is evidence of complex type nouns, while low variability points to simple (or complex) type nouns subject to coercion effects.

In the sections that follow, we will first raise the questions what counts as a copredication and what complex types have received different terminologies in the literature, particularly nouns with facets (Cruse 1995) and dual aspect nouns (Asher 2011).
copredication really tell us about the underlying semantics of the nouns that support it. Then, we will introduce the experiments we conducted so far to verify our hypothesis. Finally, we will draw some conclusions and point at the experiments we have planned as future work.

2 Copredication

2.1 What counts as a copredication?

In the literature, what exactly counts as a copredication is not clear. Typically, copredication has been restricted to classic coordinative constructions as in (3), where the adjective *voluminoso* ‘bulky’ selects for the physical sense of book, while *impegnativo* ‘demanding’ selects for the informational one.

(3) *È un libro voluminoso e impegnativo.*

‘It is a bulky and demanding book’.

Research has shown, however, that copredication patterns based on coordination do not frequently mix different aspects but tend to predicate on a single aspect, as in (4), where both adjectives select for the same *event* aspect of *costruzione* ‘construction’ (Jezek and Melloni 2011):

(4) *La costruzione fu lenta e paziente.*

‘The construction was slow and patient’.

Moreover, it has been claimed that constructions different from coordinative (or disjunctive) ones can be copredicative; for example, copredications with anaphoric pronouns (5)a, and structures where one of the predicates is located in a subordinative clause, as in (5)b and (5)c.

(5) a. *He paid the bill and threw it away.*

(Asher 2011, 63).

b. *La construction, qui a commencé hier, sera très jolie.* (Jacquey 2001, 155).

‘The building, which started yesterday, will be very nice’.

c. *Una volta completata, la traduzione si può caricare in una sezione apposita del sito.* (Jezek and Melloni 2011, 27).

‘Once completed, the translation may be uploaded in a special section of the site’.

These copredication patterns may be disputable from both a structural and semantic point of view because they involve pronouns and coreference, and one could argue that pronominalization leaves room for phenomena such as bridging and associative anaphora.

In our work we focus on what we argue is a less disputable copredication pattern, namely [V [Det N Adj]]. This pattern is instantiated in contexts such as the following, where for example the predicate *bruciavano* selects for the physical aspect of *book*, whereas *controversi* selects for the informational one:

(6) *... bruciavano i libri controversi.*

‘... they burned the controversial books’.

2.2 What does copredication really tell us?

As referenced above, it has also been noted that copredication may actually involve coercion (Asher and Pustejovsky 2006; corpus evidence in Pustejovsky and Jezek 2008). Consider:

(7) *Aprire il vino rosso con 30 minuti di anticipo.*

‘Open the red wine 30 minutes in advance’.

In (7), *vino* ‘wine’ appears to denote both *drink* and *container* in the same context, due to the two predicates *rosso* ‘red’ and *aprire* ‘open’. Despite the apparent polysemy, the noun *vino* is generally assumed to be lexically associated with a simple type (*drink*), and to license a sense extension to *container* in specific contexts only, as a coercion effect induced by the semantic requirements of the selecting predicate.

We claim that a single occurrence of a relevant copredication context is not enough to identify a complex type, and we conjecture that a *variety* of copredication contexts appearing with enough regularity might constitute evidence. Indeed, one can observe that *vino* ‘wine’ displays a limited variability, since it cannot be coerced into a *container* type by any predicate that would felicitously apply to *bottiglia* ‘bottle’, as shown by (8):

(8) *Ho rotto il vino rosso.*

‘I broke the red wine’.

3 The experiment

We conducted a corpus-based study to assess the possibility to empirically distinguish between complex types and simple (or complex) types subject to coercion effects through the analysis of copredication contexts. The concrete goal of the experiment was, for a given complex type, to extract a list of candidate nouns that do appear in some copredication context, and compute the variability of copredication contexts to order these nouns. The hypothesis is that nouns shall be ordered from most likely being of the complex type at stake to most likely being of some other type but subject to coercion. We exploited the SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) tagged Italian corpus It-
3.1 Predicate extraction

The copredication contexts of interest are those based on a transitive verb and an adjective that each select for a different type. The first step was therefore to pick four lists of predicates: transitive verbs selecting for information_object (Info) or physical_object (Phys) as object complements and adjectives that modify nouns of either type.

The starting point was a list of 10 seed nouns\(^2\) considered as good examples of the complex type. We extracted from the corpus predicates applying to these seed nouns, that are frequent and shared enough: on the most frequent 200 verbs (V) and adjectives (A) in the collocational profiles (WordSketches) of each of these seed nouns, we performed 2-by-2 intersections and then union, which yielded 427 V and 388 A. We manually doubly classified them into Phys and Info, avoiding predicates (too) polysemic, generic, or subject to metaphorical uses. We thus gathered 65 VPhys, 53 VInfo, 18 APhys and 127 AInfo.

3.2 Candidate extraction

Using a manually selected subset of 6-14 frequent predicates of each category, a series of concordance built on the copredication pattern with all context pairs (VPhys, AInfo) and (VInfo, APhys) produced nouns occurring in these contexts. We then manually annotated 600+ randomly taken hits, checking for actual copredication with both aspects, thus extracting 97 different nouns. The 5 seed nouns not present among these 97 were added, obtaining 102 nouns, as candidates for the complex type Info • Phys. For the rest of the experiment, since the relevant copredications are rather sparse, we focussed on the 54 nouns with frequency above 200,000, and selected 28 (52\%) ones, aiming at covering most of the various types appearing among these and including 7 seed nouns (marked * in the table).

3.3 Computing the copredication context variability

For all 28 nouns we extracted all occurrences of the [V [Det N Adj]] pattern, N fixed. The hits of each lexi-co-syntactic pattern are grouped by pairs (V, A) that we here call “copredication contexts” for this noun. We then extract the relevant contexts (VPhys, AInfo) and (VInfo, APhys) combining selected predicates in our four lists. The ratio of relevant contexts among all contexts is an indicator of the variability of Info • Phys copredication contexts for each noun, and this variability a sign of the conventionalisation of the lemma ability to jointly denote both Phys and Info referents.

The results, ordered from more variable to less variable, appear on Table 1, where Hits is the total number of hits of the lexi-co-syntactic pattern, Cop. hits are those hits with a relevant (VPhys, AInfo) or (VInfo, APhys) context, Contexts is the total number of (V, A) contexts, and Cop. cont. are the relevant ones. Ratios are in %.

Note that the hit ratio would yield a different order than the context ratio, since a single relevant context may have a large incidence. Indeed, with context ratio, the 7 seed nouns are ranked among the 10 first, while with the hit ratio, they would appear among the 14 first, and include at the very top informazione and indicazione, two nouns unlikely prototypes for the Info • Phys complex type.

4 Discussion

The copredication contexts extracted are sparse, and the ratio figures ordering the nouns are low (all below 3\%). This might be due to the phenomenon of copredication across types being sparse, but obviously also because the 4 lists of predicates are by no means exhaustive. On the basis of a manual annotation of 200 (0.8\%) hits on libro, the recall is estimated at 6\%. A very high recall could not be reached without including polysemic or very generic predicates, thus lowering precision. Precision has been estimated for libro: 118 (86\%) extracted copredication hits are indeed relevant cases. However, in the lower rows, precision drops: 9 (60\%) for volume and even 0 for fenomeno, which means that if we had other means to screen the results, the ratio range would widen between top and bottom rows.

The method allows to distinguish four groups of lemmas (statistically significant partition, but finer-grained partitions could be drawn). At the


TenTen10 (2,5 Gigawords) and its tools. The complex type chosen for this first experiment was information_object • physical_object of which ‘book’ is taken to be the prototype in the literature, and as detailed above, the copredication patterns used are of the form [V [Det N Adj]].
Table 1: Relevant copredication variability for 28 candidate Info ● Phys nouns with high frequency

We can therefore conclude that an experimental method to separate nouns of complex types from nouns subject to coercion appears possible. The proposed method constitutes the first attempt at semi-automatically extracting from corpus complex type nouns, something remaining elusive up to now. In addition, we learned that letter should be preferred over book as prototype of the complex type Info ● Phys. In fact, this complex type is not the most straightforward since the dependence between the components of a dot object is not one-to-one. The case of Event ● Food with lunch as prototype, in which there is such a tight symmetric dependence and no competition with separate simple senses, might prove easier to deal with. This will be tackled in a next experiment.

The predicate selection is a critical phase in the method proposed. It is difficult if not impossible to avoid polysemy and metaphorical uses, especially since the relevant copredications are sparse and we cannot rely only on highly specialized uncommon predicates. In future work, we plan to experiment with fully automatic selection, exploiting distributional semantics methods. Dimension reduction through non-negative matrix factorization yields a possible interpretation of the dimensions in terms of “topics”, which is confirmed by experiments (Van de Cruys et al. 2011). Building on this, we shall check whether “topics” for predicates correspond to selectional restrictions suitable to build our copredication patterns.
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