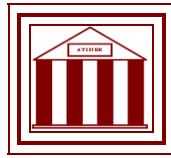


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**A Lexical Constructional Account of Position  
Verbs in English**

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## **A Lexical Constructional Account of Position Verbs in English**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to illustrate the explanatory potential of the Lexical Constructional Model (LCM), as outlined in Ruiz de Mendoza (2013), Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2007, 2008) and Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza (2006, 2009a/b, 2011) and Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Van Valin 2005) for the study of the semantic and syntactic description of predicates. The LCM combines the assumptions from functional and constructional models of linguistic description and aims to explore the relationship between lexical and syntactic meaning. In this sense, it provides a basis for the characterization of the logical structure of verbs, their semantic content (lexical templates) and the cognitive and pragmatic constraints which might block or, on the contrary, license the merging of lexical templates and other higher-level constructions. By following the methodological assumptions of the LCM and RRG, we aim to provide the semantic representation of a group of verbal predicates belonging to the domain of verbs of position in English. In doing so, we will first analyse the different syntagmatic behaviour of the predicates under concern by providing the structural patterns and constructions in which they participate (Levin 1993). Then, we will formulate their lexical and constructional templates at the core grammar level of description and explore the internal constraints which regulate the process of lexical-constructional subsumption and which motivate their different syntactic behaviour. With this study, we intend to show that the LCM and RRG methodologies are adequate in order to capture the logical structures and constructional templates of predicates and that their analytical tools are valuable and effective when describing and constructing the meaning of predicates.

**Keywords:** Meaning representation, lexical and constructional templates, Lexical Constructional Model, Role and Reference Grammar.

## Introduction

The study of the natural relationship between lexicon and grammar has been the target of the theoretical models of the linguistic description, each exploring this subordinate relationship in different terms according to whether it is accounted for from a functional perspective, where a set of linking rules describe how the morphosyntactic structure of predicates derives from their lexical structure (Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), Van Valin and Lapolla 1997; Van Valin 2005), or from the viewpoint of cognitive and constructional theories, where this relationship is explained as a continuum from lexicon to grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2002, 2006; Langacker 2005).

The Lexical Constructional Model (henceforth LCM), propounded by Ruiz de Mendoza (2013), Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal (2007, 2008) and Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza (2006, 2009a/b, 2011), is a model of semantic interpretation which incorporates assumptions from these two complementary theories but goes one step further in providing its own methodological principles which try to overcome weaknesses that can be found, for example, in functional theories where the role of constructions in predicting morphosyntactic structure is not taken into account, or in constructional models, where the constraints that restrict the unification process of constructions and lexical entries are not studied.

In this paper, I aim to illustrate the potential of the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the LCM and RRG in order to construct the meaning of predicates and account for their different syntactic behaviour. In particular, I intend to provide the semantic representation of four verbal predicates belonging to the domain of verbs of *position* in English (*join* and *attach vs cover* and *spread*) at the level of the core grammar and account for the reasons why verbs that can be classified as belonging to the same lexical subdomain show different syntactic behaviours.

As far as the descriptive objectives of this paper are concerned, I pursue to build up the semantic description of the transitive uses of the verbs *cover* and *spread*, and *join* and *attach* as position verbs (putting something on the surface of something else) using as a main source the work of Faber and Mairal (1999) as well as to describe the structural patterns and constructions in which they participate (Levin 1993) by formulating their lexical and constructional templates, which will reveal the constraints that regulate the merging of low-level lexical templates into higher-level constructional templates. Regarding the explanatory objectives of this research, I aim to illustrate how the LCM and RRG present a methodology that is adequate in order to describe and construct meaning and which will let us capture their logical structures (LS) and constructional templates (CT) at the core grammar level of description.

For the purposes of this work, I will only focus on the transitive uses of these verbs as shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4, which illustrate their different syntactic behaviour. The examples that I have analyzed are naturally-occurring example sentences withdrawn from the *British National Corpus (BNC)* and in a less significant number from the *Corpus of American Contemporary English*

(COCA) and the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) and will be clearly identified whenever mentioned.

**Semantic Description and Structural Patterns of the Position Verbs *Join Vs Attach* and *Cover Vs Spread***

Faber and Mairal’s paradigmatic organization of the lexicon presents the lexical architecture of the lexical domain “Position”, which includes the four predicates under concern, and which shows that each pair of these predicates is ascribed to two different verbal subdomains, as can be observed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Paradigmatic Organization of the Lexical Domain ‘Position’ (Faber and Mairal 1999: 284)*

<b>LEXICAL DOMAIN: POSITION</b>	
1.	To be in a particular state/condition/position, without moving, changing (STAY, LIE)
1.1.	to cause somebody or something to stay in a particular state/condition/position (KEEP, MAINTAIN)
1.1.1.	to cause somebody or something to BE in a particular place/position (PUT, PLACE)
<b>1.1.1.1.</b>	<b>to put things together (JOIN, ATTACH)</b>
1.1.1.2.	to put many things together (POOL)
1.1.1.3.	to put something around something else (WRAP)
<b>1.1.1.4</b>	<b>to put something on (the surface of) something else (COVER, SPREAD)</b>
	1.1.1.4.1 To cover something with something to protect it/make it more attractive (PAINT/COAT)
	1.1.1.4.2 To cover somebody/something so that it cannot be seen (ENSHROUD/CLOAK)

Levin’s classification of English verbs (1993) organizes verbs according to their similar semantic components but also their similar syntactic behaviour. Taking into account their semantic components, *cover* and *spread* are claimed to belong to the general class of “verbs of putting”, and within this class, *spread* is included in the subclass of “spray/load verbs” (Levin 1993: 118-119), which in the case of *spread*, corresponds to verbs related to covering substances, whereas *cover* is placed in the subclass of “fill verbs” (Levin 1993:120), which describes verbs which show the resulting state of an area as a result of putting something on it. As for *join* and *attach*, they are said to belong to the verb class of “combining and attaching”, where they are at the same time subclassified according to whether their meaning involves a *result* component, as in the case of *join*, which is classified as a “mix verb”, or, on the contrary, shows a *means* component, which corresponds to “shake verbs”, where *attach* belongs (Levin 1993:159, 161).

Regarding Levin’s taxonomy of English verbs in terms of their similar syntactic behaviour, the two pairs of verbs under scrutiny are said to participate in the following alternations which result in different grammatical

constructions. Table 2 shows that *spread* can participate in the “spray/load alternation”, whereas *cover* cannot, and Table 3 illustrates how *cover* is associated to the “*locatum-subject* construction”, where the *locatum* argument is the entity whose location is changed, whereas *spread* cannot participate in this construction.

**Table 2.** The “*spray/load alternation*”: *Cover and Spread*

<b>Locative construction: NP1 + V + NP2 + PP (NP3)</b>	
1. *... the other elephants from the herd <b>covered</b> branches and leaves on the corpse ...	2. He (NP1) cut another slice of bread and <b>spread</b> the butter (NP2) on it (NP3) from edge to edge very carefully. (BNC-G3P W_misc)
<b>With-construction: NP1 + V + NP3 + PP (NP2)</b>	
3. ... the other elephants from the herd (NP1) <b>covered</b> the corpse (NP3) with branches and leaves (NP2) ... (BNC-G2V- W_pop_lore)	4. (NP1) <b>Spread</b> the cake (NP3) with cream (NP2). (BNC-ABB W_instructional)

**Table 3.** The “*locatum-subject*” Construction: *Cover and Spread*

<b>With-construction: NP1 + V + NP2 + PP(NP3)</b>	
5. <b>Cover</b> old glass in doors and low windows with safety film. (BNC CH1 newsp_tabloid)	6. <i>Spread the cake with cream.</i> (BNC ABB W_instrumental)
<b>Locatum-subject construction: NP3 + V + NP2</b>	
7. Portraits of ancestors <b>covered</b> the walls. (BNC-FPF W_fict_prose)	8. *Cream spread the cake.

The analysis of the transitive uses of the pair *join* and *attach* will be restricted to the basic structural pattern of both verbs, which shows the prepositional variant NP1 + VB + NP2 + PP (TO/WITH) NP3, and to the “*together-reciprocal* construction” in which these two predicates can participate.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Due to the length restrictions of this paper, we have not been able to analyse those examples in which the prepositional variant of the predicate *join* alternates with the “simple reciprocal construction” (NP1 VERB [NP2 AND NP3]): *This new plan also envisaged (...) joining the church and the halls* (BNC-B13\_W\_non\_ac\_humanities\_arts). In this simple reciprocal variant, at the macrorole assignment phase both arguments (*z* and *y*) are selected as undergoers, due to the fact that they fulfill the semantic constraint that they must be of comparable status (both being themes or goals), and as a result there is no need for prepositional marking.

**Table 4.** *Prepositional Variant and Together-reciprocal Constructions: Join and Attach*

<b>Prepositional variant construction: NP1 + JOIN/ATTACH+ NP2 + PP (TO/WITH) NP3</b>	
9. What you do is <b>join</b> the bell to the two middle, or deck, feathers with a strip of leather, threaded with a bell. (BNC_CHE W_biography)	10. Now you <b>attach</b> your lead dog to a tree, ... (BNC_A67 W_misc)
<b>Together-reciprocal construction: NP1 VERB [NP2 AND NP3] TOGETHER</b>	
11. The combine tool is used to <b>join together</b> the blade and the handle to make a single filled object. (BNC- HAC W_pop_lore)	12. We <b>attach these three together</b> , on the “ridge and furrow” system (COHA-1865-NF_ Woodward's Graperies)

Once the semantic and syntactic information of these verbal predicates has been presented, we need to account for a way to explain and describe their different syntactic behaviour making use of the analytical and descriptive tools of both the LCM and RRG.

### **Constructing the Meaning of Verbal Predicates: Lexical and Constructional Templates**

In order to provide a basis which will serve to characterize the logical structure of verbs under concern and to present their lexical and constructional templates, I have mainly followed the methodological assumptions of the LCM but have also resorted to some analytical tools from RRG such as the description of verbal predicates in terms of *Aktionsart* distinctions, and the assignment of macroroles and thematic relations when accounting for the interface mechanisms which link the semantics and syntax.

The methodology followed in order to build up the lexical and constructional templates of the predicates under concern can be broken down into the following steps:

- a. Ascertain the verb class to which the predicates can be ascribed and present their logical structure (LS).
- b. Determine the thematic relations and the assignment of macroroles.
- c. Identify the argument-structure constructions into which these verb classes can be subsumed by providing their lexical and constructional templates and analyze if there are restrictions that can condition the lexical-constructional linking process.

*Verb Class Ascription and Presentation of their Logical Structures (LS)*

In order to construct the semantic representation of these predicates at the core grammar level of description, we need first to ascribe these predicates to a verb class in terms of *Aktionsart* descriptions, taking into account the theory of verb classes proposed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997:90ff.) and Van Valin (2005:31ff.), which present basic types of predicates from which others are derived. The predicates that we are analyzing can be ascribed to the verb class of *causative accomplishment* verbs, which can be decomposed into the following semantic parameters: [+ causative], [- static], [- dynamic], [+ telic], [+ duration], [- punctual], and which can be paraphrased as ‘x CAUSES y and z to become **be-LOC**’.

The lexical templates in the LCM include two modules: a semantic module which includes lexical functions, and an *Aktionsart* module, which is based on the Logical Structures of RRG. For the purposes of this research, I will only develop the second module. In the *Aktionsart* module we find constants, which are represented in boldface, followed by a prime which belongs to the metalanguage used in the decomposition, and variables, which are presented in normal typeface and are filled in by lexical items from the language being analyzed (x, y, ...). Since the four verbal predicates under scrutiny are ascribed to the same class, we can use the same complex logical structure (LS) to represent the argument and semantic structure of these predicates, in which we distinguish an activity predicate that indicates the causing action (**do**’) and an accomplishment predicate which can be said to “involve both a process that takes place over time [that is why they have duration and are not punctual], and an inherent endpoint of the process leading to the resulting state of affairs [that is why they are telic]” (Van Vallin and LaPolla 1997: 43). Both predicates being joined by the operator connective CAUSE that represents the resulting state of affairs (Van Valin 2005:42):

13.        [**do**’ (x, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **be-LOC**’ (y, z)]

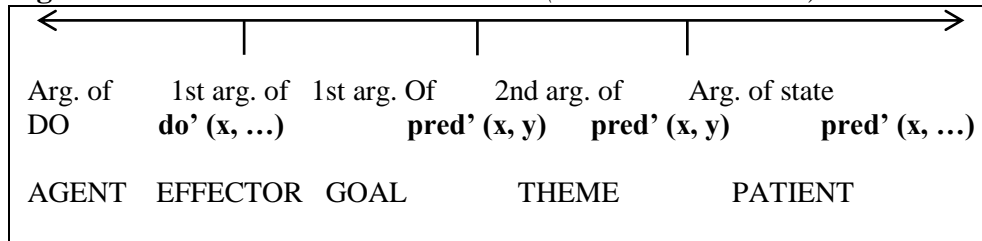
The BECOME operator codes change over some temporal span (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997:104-105) and the locative predicate (**be-LOC**’) can be marked by various prepositions depending on the verbal predicate being analyzed.

*Determining Thematic Relations and Macroroles Assignment*

The second step in building up the lexical and constructional templates of verbal predicates is to assign both thematic relations and macroroles, analytical tools that have been borrowed by the LCM from RRG in order to account for the way in which the linking between syntax and semantics takes place. Thematic relations are linked to the five possible argument positions in logical structure (Figure 1):



**Figure 1. Thematic Relations Continuum (Van Valin 2005: 58)**

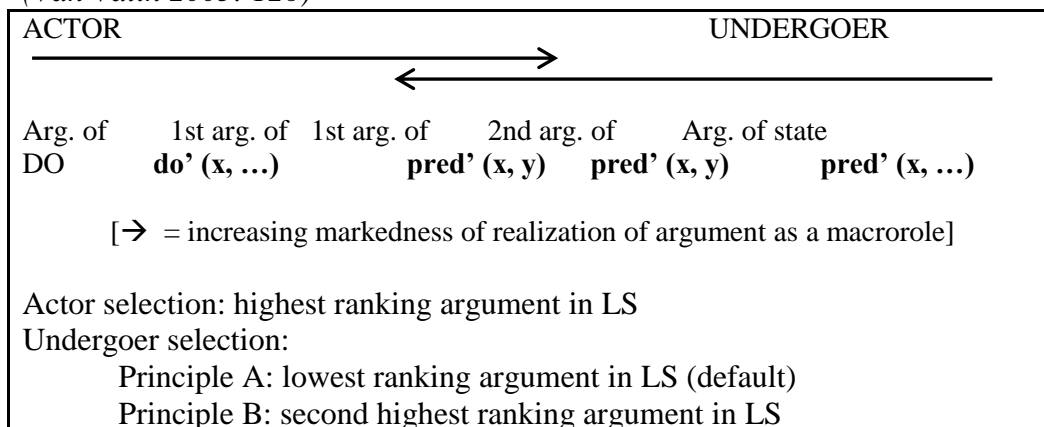


In the case of the verbal predicates concerning us, the thematic relations ascribed to the different arguments in the logical structure are the *effector*, which is related to the first argument of an activity (x) and is the entity that does the action; the *theme*, which is related to the second argument of a two-place state predicate of location (z) and refers to the participant that is placed, moved, etc.; and *goal*, which is related to the first argument of the location predicate (y). The following LS could be read as follows: the first argument of an activity (**do'** (x...)), the *effector*, does something that causes the *theme* (z) to become “be on y” in the case of cover and spread, or “be next-to y” in the case of *join* and *attach*.

14. [**do'** (x<sub>EFFECTOR</sub>, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **be-LOC'** (y<sub>GOAL</sub>, z<sub>THEME</sub>)]

At this stage, we should also assign the macroroles (MR), Actor and Undergoer, which are generalizations of the different semantic roles that can be assigned to predicates, where Actor is the more agent-like argument, and Undergoer is the most patient-like argument. Macrorole assignment fulfills the role of linking the semantics of predicates to their syntax, serving as a triggering point in this interface mechanism. In order to determine macrorole assignments, Van Valin’s Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy (A-UH) should be applied (Figure 2):

**Figure 2. Macrorole Assignment: The Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy (A-UH) (Van Valin 2005: 126)**



15. [**do'** (x<sub>EFFECTOR</sub>, Ø)] CAUSE [BECOME **be-LOC'** (y<sub>GOAL</sub>, z<sub>THEME</sub>)]

*Lexical and Constructional Templates: Restrictions in the Lexical-Constructional Linking Process*

As we have shown, the four predicates under concern share the same complex logical structure (examples 13, 14). It is at this stage, in the linking algorithm, where the lexical and constructional templates of these predicates are built up by making use of interface mechanisms such as macrorole assignment, which will allow us to account for the internal semantic restrictions that condition the sumpsumption processes of lexical and constructional templates.

In the case of *spread*, the two constructions (locative construction and *with*-construction) in which the predicate can participate (Tables 2 and 3) seem to be motivated by different macrorole assignment possibilities to the Undergoer since in the relevant part of the LS underlying these constructions (CAUSE [BECOME +**be-ON**' (y, z)], there are two non-actor arguments that are candidates for Undergoer assignment, and the choice of either argument will result in a particular construction which is further constrained by the rules for argument-marking prepositions, as proposed in Van Valin and LaPolla (1997: 376ff). Thus, the default linking which follows the selection principle A in the Actor-Undergoer Hierarchy results in the locative construction, where the non-macrorole argument (non-MR) - an oblique core argument (OCA) - is marked by the preposition *on/over* (see Table 5). The marked linking, on the other hand, results in the *with*-construction, in which the presence of the preposition *with* is subject to the rule for assigning *with* in English, which reads: "Assign *with* to non-MR b argument if, given two arguments, a and b, in a logical structure, with (1) both as possible candidates for a particular macrorole, and (2) a is equal or higher (to the left of b) on the AUH, b is not selected as that macrorole" (Van Valin 2005: 114)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, since the default choice for undergoer is not selected as such, it has to be marked by *with* as an oblique argument, whereas the other potential argument, the goal, y argument, is selected as undergoer (Table 5).

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<sup>2</sup> The important thing to note about this rule, as opposed to the rules for *to* and *from*, is that it does not refer to a specific argument position or positions in logical structures but rather to the macrorole assignment phase of the linking procedure (Van Valin, 2005: 114) and that the two arguments in question have to be candidates for the same grammatical status.

**Table 5. Spread: Macrorole Assignment to Undergoer**

<b>DEFAULT LINKING → LOCATIVE CONSTRUCTION</b>
[do' (he, [Ø (he, butter)])] CAUSE [BECOME <b>be-on'</b> (bread, butter)]
[X = Actor] [ Z = Undergoer]
(2) He (A) cut another slice of bread and <b>spread</b> the butter (U) on it (non- MR=OCA ) from edge to edge very carefully. (BNC-G3P W_misc)
<b>MARKED LINKING → WITH-CONSTRUCTION</b>
[do' (you, [Ø (you, cream)])] CAUSE [BECOME <b>be-on'</b> (cake, cream)]
[X = Actor] [ Y = Undergoer]
(4) [You (A)] <b>Spread</b> the cake [U] with cream [non-MR=OCA]. (BNC ABB W_instrumental)

These two different Undergoer assignment possibilities result in two different constructions with a difference in meaning, since in the marked assignment, the location (Und) is seen as the participant that is most affected by the action in the sense that it is being covered, whereas in the default assignment there seems to be a focus in the process of spreading (which can be modified by a manner adverb: *thinly/evenly*), and the Undergoer is now the primary affected participant in the sense that it is being relocated, with no implication of the surface being fully affected by the action.

The predicate *cover* also shows a different syntactic behaviour which responds to two potential macrorole assignments, in this case, for Actor, and also to the choice of the preposition *with*, which in this case is associated to its instrumental use: “*with* marks a potential actor which is not selected as actor” (Van Valin and LaPolla 1995: 378) and not to the rule for assigning *with* in English, as was the case with *spread*. Moreover, the predicate *cover*, unlike *spread*, is related to a causal chain in which the two potential candidates for Actor are assigned as the thematic role *effector*: the first *effector* (x), the instigator, acts on the secondary *implement-effector* (y), the *instrument*, which in turn acts on the *theme* (Van Valin and LaPolla 1995: 378-379). The assignment of Actor to either of these effectors explains why this predicate participates in the Locatum-subject alternation, in which the default assignment of Actor to the first effector following the A-UH will trigger the *with*-construction whereas the marked linking to the second effector will result in the locatum-subject construction (Table 6):

**Table 6. Cover: Macrorole Assignment to Actor**

<b>DEFAULT LINKING</b>
<b>Actor assignment to 1<sup>st</sup> effector →with-construction</b>
[do' (x, [...])] CAUSE [[ ... do' (y, [...])] CAUSE [BECOME pred' (z, y)]]
[do' (elephants, [use' (elephants, branches)]) CAUSE [[do' (branches, [cover' (corpse, branches)]) [x = Actor] [z = Undergoer]]
(3) ... the other elephants (ACT) covered the corpse (UND) with branches. (non-MR = OCA). (BNC G2V W_pop_lore)
<b>MARKED LINKING</b>
<b>Actor assignment to 2<sup>nd</sup> effector →Locatum-subject construction</b>
[do' (x, [...])] CAUSE [[ ... do' (y, [...])] CAUSE [BECOME pred' (z, y)] [y = Actor] [z = Undergoer]
[do' (∅, [use' (∅, portraits)]) CAUSE [[do' (portraits, [cover' (portraits, walls)]) CAUSE [BECOME be-on' (walls, portraits)] [y = Actor] [z = Undergoer]]
(7) Portraits of ancestors (ACT) covered the walls (UND). (BNC FPF W_fict_prose)

As far as the predicates *join* and *attach* are concerned, we will analyze how, in the lexical-constructional linking process, the core constructional templates presented below (examples 9 and 10) can be fused or subsumed into higher-level characterizations leading to their participation in the *together*-reciprocal construction (examples 11 and 12), in which the presence of *together* implies that the two entities that are joined or attached together now form a whole and, as a result, a new entity is created, which is often explicitly expressed in the sentence through a *to*-infinitive clause or a prepositional phrase (Table 7).

**Table 7. Join and Attach: Core Constructional Templates**

<b>Core constructional templates</b>
(9) What you do is <b>join</b> the bell to the two middle, or deck, feathers with a strip of leather, threaded with a bell. (BNC_CHE W_biography)
(10) Now you <b>attach</b> your lead dog to a tree, ... (BNC_A67 W_misc)
<b>Together-reciprocal construction</b>
[do' (x, ∅)] CAUSE [BECOME <b>be-next to'</b> (y, z) & BECOME <b>be-together'</b> (y $\wedge$ z)]  LS1: [x = A]; [z = U] LS2: [z and y = U]
(11) The combine tool is used to <b>join together</b> the blade and the handle to make a single filled object. (BNC- HAC W_pop_lore)
(12) We <b>attach</b> these three <b>together</b> , on the "ridge and furrow" system (COHA-1865-NF_ Woodward's Graperies)

Thus, in the *together*-reciprocal construction, we assume that there is a resultative construction subsumed, which is represented as a secondary

predication (BECOME **be-together**' ( $y \wedge z$ )) since it is not an inherent part of the predicates *join* and *attach*, and as such it is not governed by them. In this secondary predication, the two arguments share the same grammatical status, which has been expressed by means of the lambda symbol ( $\wedge$ ) showing that the two arguments are placed at the same level. Besides, this possibility of a new entity coming into existence after the process of joining/attaching is shown in the logical structure of the causative accomplishment examples in the *together*-reciprocal alternation showing that there are two simultaneous changes of state taking place: the logical structure (BECOME **be-next to**' ( $y, z$ )), which is part of the internal semantic configuration of these predicates, takes place at the same time as the resultative logical structure (BECOME **be-together**' ( $y \wedge z$ )). As a result of these two simultaneous changes of state taking place, there is a transformation implied which results in a new entity coming into existence of, which could be represented by adding a third predication (BECOME **exist**' ( $w$ )).

16. [[**do**' ( $x, \emptyset$ )] CAUSE [BECOME **be-next to**' ( $y, z$ )]

As can be observed, in the prepositional variants the predicates *join* and *attach* show an asymmetric relation between the entities that become joined or attached, whereas in the *together*-reciprocal variant the two entities display a symmetrical relation in the sense that the entities are examples of mutual attachment which very often implies that a new entity is involved (normally overtly specified in the syntax by means of a *to*-infinitive purpose clause or a prepositional phrase). Thus, if the arguments of the locative predicate fulfill the internal semantic constraints of showing a symmetric relation, then the subsumption of the lexical template and the higher-level resultative construction is licensed resulting in the *together*-reciprocal construction.

## Conclusion

With this research, I have tried to illustrate that both the Lexical Constructional Model and Role and Reference Grammar have adequate analytical tools for constructing the meaning of predicates and accounting for their different syntactic behaviour. In particular, I have provided the semantic representation of the position verbal predicates *cover* and *spread*, on one hand, and *join* and *attach*, on the other, at the core grammar level of description and have explained the reasons why verbs that can be classified as belonging to the same lexical subdomain have different syntactic behaviours.

In order to do so, I have provided the logical structure of the transitive uses of these verbs, which shows that they can be ascribed to the same Aktionsart category, *causative accomplishment* ([[**do**' ( $x, \emptyset$ )] CAUSE [BECOME **be-LOC**' ( $y, z$ )]). In spite of the fact that these four predicates share the same logical structure, each one has their own semantic features and constraints that make them unique in terms of their syntactic behaviour. Thus, we have seen how the most salient differences between the predicates *cover*

and *spread* are related to their different macrorole assignment possibilities which will condition the lexical-constructional linking process resulting in different grammatical constructions: the *with*-construction or the locatum-subject construction. The analysis of *join* and *attach* has been restricted to those transitive examples in which the semantic configuration of the arguments regulates the merging of the lexical template into a higher-level resultative construction represented by the *together*-reciprocal alternation, which would imply that the two entities that are joined or attached show a symmetric relation between each other.

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