Componential analysis and case grammar in translation  
(workshop – assignment #3)

1. Introduction
Case grammar and the componential model were originally developed as parts of larger theoretical frameworks and are meant serve descriptive purposes. But the methods of analysis associated with the two models may actually be quite useful tools to the translator.

In today's workshop, we will try to apply both types of analysis as practical tools in the translation process.

2. Componential analysis
According to the componential model, words display what is called distinctive features (or distinctive semes), which are, in a way, the building blocks that words consist of and can be broken down into. The distinctive features are binary in the sense that they can be either X or not X (indicated by +/-). This applies to all aspects of a word, including its semantic content.

Thus, the semantic difference between 'man' and 'boy' is a matter of a couple of semantic components:

'man' | 'boy'  
---|---
+  | +  
+  | +  
+  | -  
-  | +  

The same goes for 'man' and 'woman':

'man' | 'woman'  
---|---
+  | -  
-  | +  
+  | +  
+  | +  

This is a very useful method of distinguishing members of a lexical set (words that are semantically related such that they overlap):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>clean</th>
<th>pure</th>
<th>unadulterated</th>
<th>chaste</th>
<th>clear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Imagine if you had to translate the Danish word 'ren' into English, which could be translated into any item in this lexical set, depending on the textual context. A componential analysis like the one above can be very helpful in figuring out which target language word to chose.

(1) 'Rent vand'
    > 'Pure water’ = water not mixed with any other substance
'Clean water' = ”-”, water that has been purified
>'Unadulterated water'
>'Chaste water'
>'Clear water' = water you can see through

Note that the analysis may have to be more detailed than this. For instance, there may be differences in the nature of the physical substance:

(2) 'Rent røj'
>'Clean clothes' = washed clothes
>'Pure clothes' = ?nothing but clothes
>'Unadulterated clothes'
>'Chaste clothes'
>'Clear clothes'

You can also use the componential analysis with more pragmatic aspects of words, such as, for instance, the degree of formality:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'defecate'</th>
<th>'poo'</th>
<th>'take a dump'</th>
<th>'go to the bathroom'</th>
<th>'take a shit'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(+)</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This may help you find an expression with a corresponding level of formality in the target text so you will not translate, say, 'take a dump' as 'have afføring' in Danish.

There are numerous ways in which this model of analysis is useful, but it does have its limitations:

- the features are listed as if they were equals – in reality, people tend to perceive some features as more central than others
- the analysis is only applicable to cases of very clearly distinguishable features

3. Case grammar

Case grammar, also called **valency theory**, is originally a theory of syntactic structure based on the idea that the verb is the central element in the building up of clauses. This is no new idea – in fact, Otto Jespersen described the verb as the 'life-giving element of the sentence' way back in his *Philosophy of Grammar*.

The basic assumption of case grammar is that verbs come with 'cases' and 'case partners', which means that each verb expresses a situation - but not just the situation itself, it also defines the **roles** in the situation both semantically and formally (in that it requires syntactic arguments, or case partners, to express and specify these roles).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eat</th>
<th>form</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>V&lt;sup&gt;(out)&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>O</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>semantics</td>
<td>INGESTOR</td>
<td>EATING</td>
<td>INGESTED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note that the exact details of the cases, or roles, differ from version of case grammar to version of case grammar. Originally, the cases were quite generic such as AGENT, ACTOR, PATIENT etc. In the newest version, frame semantics, they are are very specific.

One use of case grammar in translation is the recovery of verbs and verbal force (that is, the verbal meaning) in verbless clauses, which is obviously central in the bilingual communication situation where the translator has to tease out the semantics from the source text and build up a semantic representation to encode into a target text. This is relevant in the translation of a lot of foreign languages into English, where stylistic constraints in many cases require the main verb to be there in English, while it may be left out in other languages. As it happens, Danish and English are quite alike in this respect. There are some situations where they differ, one being the exclusion of verbs in adjunctive adverbial clause in English:

(3) He smiled sardonically, *his finger on the trigger.*

In English, it is possible to leave out the verb in many adverbial clauses, whereas, in Danish, the verb still has to be there.

(4) a. *Han smilede sardonisk, sin finger på aftrækkeren  
b. *Han smilede sardonisk, fingeren på aftrækkeren

Of course, you can make a shift in grammatical structure and use a preposition phrase:

(5) Han smilede sardonisk med fingeren på aftrækkeren

But if you want to retain the grammatical structure and keep the adverbial clause, you will have to recover the verbal force so you can insert an appropriate verb in the target text. In this case, we have an ENTITY – the FINGER – and a LOCATION – the TRIGGER, and we know that the spatial relation between them is expressed by the preposition 'on', and that is is enough in English for this type of grammatical structure, but not in Danish. In Danish, the situational relation between the finger and the trigger has to be formally expressed, too. The prototypical situational relation between ENTITIES and LOCATION is that of BEING, so we can set up the following semantic representation of (3) (note, it's only the 'semantics' part which is the semantic representation):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>form</th>
<th>semantics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$S^h$ (his finger)</td>
<td>ENTITY (FINGER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$V^o$</td>
<td>BEING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$A$ (on the trigger)</td>
<td>LOCATION (ON TRIGGER)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now how do we express this in Danish? One way to do it is this:

(6) Hans finger var på aftrækkeren

Now, we just need to connect this to the main clause, using some sort of relevant subordinator:

(7) Han smilte sardonisk, mens hans finger var på aftrækkeren

That is one way to do it (I am sure there are more elegant ways to word it in Danish). However, there is another possible, more detailed, interpretation of (3) in which there is an extra participant in
the situation – namely, the gunman himself. This means that, now, the main situational relation is between him, the finger and the trigger:

Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S(ø)</th>
<th>V(ø)</th>
<th>O(his finger)</th>
<th>A(on the trigger)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Semantics

AGENT RELATION ENTITY LOCATION

(HE) (FINGER) (ON TRIGGER)

One way to synthesize this into Danish is:

(8) Han smilede sardonisk, mens han holdt sin finger på aftrækkeren

Now, 'holde' is of course a quite generic expression, but it is probably the best choice; if the writer intended for a more specific description, he or she would probably not have omitted the main verb in the first place.

Another use of case grammar analysis is in the translation of case gaps (i.e. clause arguments that have been left out). For instance, there are certain Danish verbs where it is okay to leave out certain arguments, while their English equivalents require the argument to be there:

(9) a. Han hilste, da han kom ind
b. *He greeted when he entered

The semantic representation would be this:

GREETER GREETING GREETED

This is possible in Danish, but not in English:

form

S V(hilse)

semantics

GREETER GREETING GREETED

English requires a direct object with 'greet', so the English structure is as follows:

form

S V(hilse) O

semantics

GREETER GREETING GREETED

And, so, the task of the translator is to fill in and specify the direct object in the English target text. In this case, the translator would have to have a look at the whole source text to figure out how exactly to fill in the gap. There are, of course, also cases where English allows case gaps, where Danish does not:

(10) a. I don't remember
b. *Jeg husker ikke

In Danish, you need a direct object to specify exactly what is not remembered.