

The Role of the Possessor/HAVE-Relation in Semantics

The possessor construction and the verb *have* convey certain core-relations, such as ontological dependence (like parthood), ownership and kinship, but they also comprise a great range of context-dependent readings, to the extent that it is often considered impossible to give a unified characterization of those various relations. Yet a *have*-relation seems to play a significant role in a range of different semantic phenomena even in the absence of an overt occurrence of *have*. Here are four such phenomena:

1. Intensional transitive verbs of absence like *need* are intimately connected to *have* (whatever it may convey), given the general availability of paraphrases of the sort *John needs a coat – John's need is satisfied only if John has a coat*.
2. Completion-related verbs absence such as *lack* (*John lack a trainer / wisdom / a coat / money*) likewise show a deep connection to *have*:
Something x lacks an N just in case it should have an N for it to be complete (and does not have it) (Moltmann 2024).
That is, *lack* applies to unrealized wholes for which the *have*-relation (whatever it may consist in) defines completion.
3. Predicates of replacement like *replace* (conveying the replacement of objects) apply to structured wholes constituted by the various connections that can be conveyed by *have*:
John's teacher / coat / coins were replaced (given that John **had** a teacher / a coat / coins).
4. Explicit property-referring terms like *the property of having wisdom / of being wise* are subject to significant and surprising constraints by not accepting eventive or concrete state predicates (# *the property of walking / sleeping / standing*); yet **have** + DP appears always possible with any relation *have* may convey (*the property of having a house / a coat / a breakdown / a cold / a frame / an insight...*).

I will discuss two ways of dealing with the phenomenon:

first, that a general characterization of the possessor/have-relation is still possible, let's say along the lines of a reference-point construction in Langacker's (1993, 1995) sense;
second, that the phenomenon is ultimately a syntactic phenomenon involving the underlying presence of the light verb HAVE, which as such constitutes a linguistic determinant of thought in the sense of Hinzen et al. (2024).

References

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