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**Under construction: theories of argument  
structure and empirical data from language  
description and documentation**

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## **Under construction: theories of argument structure and empirical data from language description and documentation**

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One of the major issues for current theories of the syntax-semantics interface is at which level the number and thematic roles of a verb's participant(s), or its argument structure, are specified. Lexicalist approaches are based on the assumption that argument structure features are specified at the lexical level and projected into syntax.

Constructionalist approaches argue for a specification of argument structure properties through the construction(s) in which verbs appear. An investigation of the semantic determinants of argument structure and the level at which they apply are extremely relevant in order to understand how participants of an event are mapped onto argument positions at the syntax-semantics interface. There are detailed (and partly conflicting) proposals for the design of this information structure made on the basis of English and a few other well-studied languages. In contrast, systematic cross-linguistic accounts of argument structure determining properties are in most cases available only for limited numbers of verbs or restricted semantic domains. Only in isolated cases, systematic studies of a representative number of verb types and an investigation of the discourse properties of these verbs in languages of non-Indo-European stock are available. Grammatical descriptions of non-European languages, if they cover verbal argument structure at all, tend to take an axiomatic point of view, being predominantly in favour of a lexicalist perspective, but recently also incorporating constructionalist ideas. Only very rarely, though, the level of information structure at which a verb's participants are specified is empirically investigated. This absence of data to corroborate perspectives on argument structure taken in language documentation and description is not surprising: it reflects the dichotomy present in most theoretical accounts, which implicitly posit that argument structure universally is either lexically specified or assigned by constructions.

It is the aim of this paper to challenge this view, to present empirical data that show that languages can differ in the properties determining argument structure, and to suggest a refined typology of argument structure based on empirical data. It will be argued that:

- languages can be localised on different positions of a cline with 'lexicalist' and 'constructionalist' languages as the respective endpoints;
- qualitative and quantitative data on the morphosyntax of a large number of verbs are needed in order to identify the argument structure orientation of a language;
- most descriptive and documentary accounts, not being investigations of argument structure in their own right, do not offer the necessary data allowing to determine argument structure orientation.

Therefore, in order to understand what options languages have, and what the consequences for the structure of the lexicon in languages of different types are, more detailed investigations of verbs across languages are needed. Since verbal argument structure is central to clause structure, a core area of grammar, the potential contribution of description and documentation to theory building in this domain is enormous.