Lack of Recursion in the Lexicon: the Three-Argument Restriction

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It is a universal property of argument structure that verbs cannot take more than three arguments –one external and two internal--, as in the English verbs *give* or *put*, unless if introduced either by an extra lexical preposition (1a), an applicative or causative morpheme (1b), or the additional head of a serial verb construction (1c) (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2000, Peterson 2007). In any case, the valency of the resulting predicate is restricted to that of a ditransitive verb. I call this the Three-Argument Restriction (TAR, see 1d), which remains one of the mysteries of human language. Since there is no known processing reason not to lexically associate more than three participants to a predicate, I claim that the TAR is syntactic in nature, and is one of a family of architectural constraints that determine and limit possible attainable languages (in this case possible argument structures). In this talk I examine the TAR and its challenges, including a case study involving Romance clitics. I further examine how such generalization could be derived within the framework of lexical syntax put forth by Hale and Keyser 2002. According to this proposal, deriving the TAR crucially involves negating the existence of a recursive function in the domain of argument structure, relegating such functions to the domain of sentences.

1a. Erika gave Alexandra a present *(through/on behalf of) Frances

1b. wa'-khe-yó:nye' Meri a:y-e-yo-h gwa'yea'
FACT-1sg.NOM.3ACC- **make**-PUNC Mary OPT-3.SG.NT.NOM-**kill**-PUNC rabbit
"I made Mary kill the rabbit"
(Baker 1996)

1c. Olú ti omo náà subú
Olu **push** child the **fall**
"Olu pushed the child down; Olu caused the child to fall by pushing him"
(Baker 1996)

d. "A single predicate must have at most two internal arguments and one external"