

Argument Deletion Without Events

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I am inclined to agree with Kenny that we cannot view verbs of action as usually containing a large number of standby positions, but I do not have what I consider a knock-down argument. (A knock-down argument would consist in a method for increasing the number of places indefinitely.)

Donald Davidson, 1967

Abstract In this paper I describe a formal language which is adequate to represent many important features of variable polyadicity without explicit appeal to events. The formalism adequately represents inferences from simple sentences with many noun phrases to sentences with some of these noun phrases deleted, while correctly rendering the converse arguments invalid. The formalism also deals with some apparent counterexamples to the general pattern of inference. Because this is possible, the question of whether natural languages make implicit use of events cannot be settled by purely logical considerations. The formalism demonstrated to enjoy the logical virtues of extensionality, soundness, and argument completeness.

0 Introduction Several authors, beginning with Anthony Kenny,¹ have observed a feature of English and other natural languages that has no straightforward representation in standard first-order logic. In standard first-order logic, each general term has a discrete number of arguments, but in natural languages otherwise similar sentences differ in the number of noun phrases they contain. Kenny calls this feature variable polyadicity. This is of logical interest because variable polyadicity allows a pattern of inference I shall call argument deletion. A simple sentence, a sentence with only one verb, may have several noun phrases. Such a sentence often² implies a similar sentence with one or more of the noun phrases removed, provided that the deleted noun phrase does not contain a sentence adverb.³ Most theories proposed in the literature to deal with this problem

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