Deriving Verb Classes: Where Root Semantics Meets Syntax

Verbs are commonly divided into classes based on their morphology and the syntactic behavior of their arguments. Such classes often are defined by semantic notions which are found to correlate with these morphosyntactic properties, as in Levin 1993. However, this semantic source for morphosyntactic variation often remains unexplained. In this talk, I will argue that some such correlations can be traced back to the semantic type of a verbal root, which constrains the elements that the root can compose with, thus affecting the overall structure of the vP. I will focus on a class of verbs I call "Root Creation Verbs" (called "Implicit Creation Verbs" in Levinson 2007), as illustrated in (1), which share the property of entailing the creation of an entity out of the material of the direct object, such that (1) for example entails the creation of a braid out of hair:

(1) Karina braided her hair.
(2) Zane sliced the bread.
(3) Stefan piled the cushions.

I will argue that these verbs semantically break down into a root which denotes a predicate of individuals and various heads, which mediate the relationship between this root and the verbal arguments. I will further show that this semantic decomposition should be extended to the syntax in order to account for the morphosyntactic properties of these verbs and the types of phrases they co-occur with across languages, providing evidence from English, Finnish, Norwegian, and Catalan. Root Creation Verbs will also be contrasted with other verb classes which are argued to be involve different root denotations, such as Explicit/Object Creation Verbs (derived from eventive roots) and Inchoative Verbs (derived from stative roots), providing the foundations for an ontology of roots which, it is hoped, will lead to further insight into the relevance of semantic classes to morphosyntactic verb classification.