The diachrony of argument structure

Elly van Gelderen

In this talk, I explore changes in a verb's meaning, in particular where inner aspect and theta-roles are concerned. I show that verbs change (i.e. are reanalyzed by the language learner) in predictable ways in that they (mostly) keep their inner aspect constant: telic unaccusatives reanalyze as (telic) causatives and durative unergatives as (durative) transitives but never as causatives or unaccusatives. I also look at the role of outer aspect in possibly facilitating these changes and find little influence. These data provide evidence for a lexical approach to argument structure which sees the inner aspect (Aktionsart) as defining the character of the verb.

The inner aspect of a verb and its argument structure change in predictable ways and provide an interesting perspective on the faculty of language and on how humans conceptualize events. Assuming (at least) three aspectual verb types, durative, telic, and stative, I show that telic unaccusatives (e.g. *drop*) are reanalyzed as causatives or copulas, due to the importance of the Theme with telic verbs, and that durative unergatives reanalyze as transitives (e.g. *climb*) because the Agent is central. Examples are given in (1) to (4), where (1) show an original unergative that is used as transitive in (2); (3) shows an unaccusative that is used as causative in (4).

(1)   *stigeð on lenge, **clymmeð** on gecyndo*

        `(It) rises in length, climbs in nature'. (Sol. 416)

(2)   *To **climbe** þe cludes all þe sunn sal haf þe might.*

        `To climb the clouds the sun shall have the power.' (CM 16267)

(3)   *æfter gereordunge hi **æmtian***

        `after repast they empty' (Benet, 82.13)

(4)   Hugo **empties** his pockets of screws. (COCA)

Unaccusatives can be seen as forming a continuum. Sorace (2000) famously divides unaccusatives and unergatives along a hierarchy and her gradations predict how the unaccusatives reanalyse as copulas, as shown in Table 1.

Sorace's term	example	copular aspect
Change of Location	come, fall, befall, drift, go	telic
Change of State	break, blush, become	telic
Continuation of a	remain, stay, persist, persevere	durative
pre-existing state	stand, lie, rest, loom	
Existence of State	seem, appear	stative
Uncontrolled process	--	
Controlled process (motional)	--	
Controlled process (non-motional)	--	

Table 1:   Unaccusatives as sources for copulas

I then chronicle other changes in the meanings of verbs, e.g. object experiencers to subject experiencers (e.g. *fear*) and causatives to ditransitives (e.g. *bring*), and how that affects the inner aspect and theta-structure. Here, there are changes in lexical aspect but again the verbs change in predictable patterns.

Argument structure can be seen as directly tied to the conceptual structure, as argued by Jackendoff in various publications (e.g. 1997) and handed over to the syntax in some form and then manipulated by the latter. Grammatical or outer aspect can thus emphasize the inner aspect or change/coerce it. Outer aspect has changed in a major way in the history of English. The prefixes on verbs (and some auxiliaries) indicate perfectivity in Old English but imperfective is not specially marked. At the end of Old English, definite articles start to appear, as well as telic adverbs, as the prefixes and special cases disappear, taking over the boundedness (perfectivity) marking. However, these never become obligatory and it isn't until the 19th century that the progressive *–ing* becomes obligatory with durative verbs. A second aim in this talk is therefore to examine the role of outer aspect in the changes in verb meaning. An example of such a role is that, as *fear* changes to a subject experiencer, it is frequently disambiguated by telic markers and when *stun* changes from a agentive durative to a telic causative, the use of past tense is frequent.

In chronicling the reanalyses, I use a vP-shell adapted from Hale & Keyser (2000) and Ramchand (2008). These work well as syntactic representations of the underlying conceptual structure. The data show that unaccusatives are reanalyzed to `fill up' the top part of the shell and unergatives to `solidify' the bottom part. If argument structure and syntax are separate, this means that the mechanisms of change in these systems are also different. In the syntax and interface systems, there are principles of economy (see e.g. van Gelderen 2011) that are not at work in the conceptual system. Here, verbs are reanalyzed both in simpler (copulas) and more complex ways (causatives) unlike in the syntax.