Parametric variation in the lexicalization of semantic properties: The role of grammatical aspect in shifting a verb’s basic Aktionsart.

1. Empirical domain—Aim of the study. In this talk we will pursue the hypothesis that in languages with a grammaticalized opposition between perfective and imperfective aspect, realised through the use of contrastive verb stems that are not mutually predictable (Greek among them), there is an implicational relation between the morphological encoding of grammatical aspect and the following collocations: (a) a resultative adjective in construction with a lexically 'non-terminative' verb, whereby the former 'shifts' the Aktionsart of the latter to 'terminative', the whole constituting a telic VP:

   (1)  a. wipe the table
        b. wipe the table clean

(b) a particle/adverbial expression next to an intransitive/unergative verb whereby the latter is turned into a (terminative) unaccusative verb:

   (2)  a. looked at the picture
        b. looked up the number
        c. danced all night
        d. danced to the end of love

and (c) cognate objects (CO hereafter) in construction with non-terminative verbs, which, according to the currently standard view (which we partly revise), also yield a telic reading for the resulting V+N combination

   (3)  smile a (mysterious) smile/cough a (terrible) cough

In particular, we will present and discuss evidence showing that in languages in which the perfective/imperfective opposition is morphologically marked on even part of the verb system (as in Romance, where it is marked on past verbforms only) the above constructions are expected not to be found.

Our aim is to provide a principled explanation for the occurrence/non-occurrence of resultative/directional or accomplishment readings for simple activity and motion verbs based on independent properties of the languages concerned. We argue that morphologically encoded aspect has the effect of 'fixing' the basic Aktionsart of verbs in such a way as to block the conversion by syntactic means of the containing VPs (which, in the absence of a resultative expression etc. denote atelic activities) into VPs denoting accomplishments. There can be no syntactically-driven reinterpretation of the overall aspectual values assigned to verb forms marked for grammatical aspect in any language that has a systematic (even partial, as in Romance) perfective/imperfective opposition.

2. Background--Analysis. Our research takes as a starting point Talmy’s (1985) pioneering work on the variable lexicalization of semantic properties in verbs of movement. We further build our account on the work of Tenny (1987, 1994), Snyder (1995) and Beck and Snyder (2001), among others, concerning the involvement of an aspectual/boundedness parameter in all the constructions mentioned in 1. The explanation proposed for the absence of such forms of secondary predication in Greek and similar languages heavily relies on the restrictive effects of grammatical aspect marking on the interpretation of a verb's inherent aspectual character (Aktionsart) - effects which render impossible the conversion by syntactic means of VPs denoting atelic activities into VPs denoting accomplishments. The distribution of resultative predication, the CO construction and V+Particle combinations in the world's languages is assumed to be a function of the complex interaction of the (morphologically marked) aspect on (monolectic) verb forms, their lexical semantics and the aspectual properties of whole predicates (VPs) (telicity). Focusing our attention on evidence from (the history of) Greek, we first show that every time a verb is used, a form marked for either perfective or imperfective aspect (e.g. agapa-lagapis- ‘love’, vjen-lvijik- ‘go out’, lin-lis- ‘loose’, perpat-perpatis- ‘walk’/ ‘stroll’) is inescapably selected, and that there is no one form in the language that can serve as an aspectually neutral verbal 'root' and that might in principle receive its marker of viewpoint aspect in the syntax (e.g. through V raising to an AspPhrase). In English, in contrast, monolectic verb forms are not marked for aspect, and for this reason the constructions listed in 1 are encountered. In
the general spirit of Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995), we assume that the two aspect stems of a verb are best treated as variant forms of a purely abstract lexeme, linked by redundancy rules in the case of any partial subregularities, and that the meaning of perfective or imperfective viewpoint aspect varies with the lexical aspectual character of the verb in question, thus requiring the latter to be established once and for all before the impact of the former can be computed.

The second major point the paper raises is the role of goal marking prepositions as a trigger of turning an unergative verb into an unaccusative. Thus, although the way that grammatical aspect is encoded on verb forms is a crucial factor underlying the (non) existence of the constructions in 1, there is another crucial parameter—prior to and orthogonal to grammatical aspect—underlying the data (2c-d) in particular. The telicity shift in the verb’s basic meaning—from simple activity/unergative to unaccusative—can only be triggered by an unambiguously goal introducing PP, which is capable of inducing a ‘result-location’ meaning. Languages that have such Ps also have the construction in (2d) (English, German, Ancient Greek), languages that do not have goal-marking Ps do not (MGreek, Spanish, Italian—see Folli & Ramchand (2001) for a similar view and a further distinction between simple and dynamic Ps in Italian and Scottish Gaelic).

3. Conclusion. The presence or absence of resultative predication—understood in a broad sense, as embracing all the constructions in 1, is not an accidental property of languages but the automatic product of their morphological and lexical-semantic constitution. One major conclusion of the paper is that the phenomena in (1) and (3) on the one hand and in (2c-d) on the other should be kept apart despite the immediate involvement of grammatical aspect in all three of them, as they are primarily determined by the presence of dynamic or goal marking prepositions in a language. Therefore, in accounting for the cross-linguistic variation concerning the existence of the constructions in 1, the factors of grammatical aspect and the presence of goal prepositions should be considered (concerning the latter, it will be pointed out that Beck & Snyder’s typology should also take into account the properties of locative/goal Ps in the world’s languages).

The other conclusion is more theoretical: although the general issue of resultative predication/unaccusativisation/CO construction formation has always been thought of as lying at the syntax-(lexical)-semantics interface, we provide evidence that the key to its solution in fact lies at the interface of (lexical) semantics and morphology.

Finally, at the typological/empirical level, the paper, by providing a testable hypothesis, lays a solid basis for further exploring any implicational relations between resultative predication and general morphological (and possibly also other) properties of individual languages (and not just root compounding, e.g., as in Snyder 1995; 2001).


