Severing the external argument from the aspectual verb

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Introduction

Aspectual verbs are acceptable in a wide range of syntactic/semantic contexts:

(1) a. It began (raining / to rain).
   b. The war began.
   c. John carefully began (opening / to open) the door.
   d. John began the book.
   e. The general began the war.
   f. 'A' begins the alphabet.

A crucial feature of the analysis is empirical coverage by factoring out the agentive relation associated with the subject in (1b-c) (with or without an s-introduced agent: (1d-e) vs. (1a-h)) or by saturating it by an overt DP subject (1f).

Piñango and Deo’s (2015) core proposal

Much work on aspectual verbs focuses on sentences like (2), treating (2a) as basic and deriving (2b) via coercion (e.g., Postojnsky 1995; Jackendoff 1997).

(2) a. John began (reading / to read) the book.
   b. John began the book.

Leading idea of the coercion approach: begin requires an overt complement.

Piñango & Deo (2015): This approach “fails to explain the broader distributional and interperopositional properties of aspectual verbs” (p. 9), given data like (3):

(3) a. A fountain begins the trail.
   b. A prayer began the banquet.
   c. Midnight ends the day.
   d. A begins the alphabet.
   e. A little porcelain pot finished the row.

Piñango and Deo’s (2015) core proposal

Leading idea: Aspectual verbs select for “structured individuals”, i.e., “entities that can be construed as one-dimensional directed path structures” (Keifka 1998).

(4) a. \(\exists x \in \text{struct} - \text{ind}_{\text{struct}}(x) = \{ x | x \in \text{struct} \land \exists x' \leq x \leq x'' \land f(x) \leq f(x') \}
   \)
   b. An individual of any type \(x\) of any type \(x\) is taken to be a structured individual relative to a function \(f\) of any type \(x\) iff \(f(x)\) is an axis and \(f\) is a homomorphism from the part structure of \(x\) to the axis \(f(x)\).

Example (Piñango and Deo 2015:25):

(5) a. \(\text{begins} = \lambda x. \lambda y. x \cdot \text{struct} - \text{ind}_{\text{struct}}(x) \cdot \lambda z. f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x)
   \)
   b. begins\((x)/y\) is defined iff \(x\) is a structured individual with respect to the contextually determined function \(f\). If defined, begins\((x)/y\) is true iff there is some function \(f\) (possibly identical to \(f\)) such that \(f(y)\) is a “small” initial subset of the axis \(f(x)\).

Coverage of raising and intransitive uses

Piñango and Deo treat aspectual verbs as two-place predicates, yet in (8)-(9), they appear to behave as one-place predicates.

(8) RAISING
   a. The shit continued to hit the fan.
   b. There began to be trouble.
   c. It started to rain.
   d. The rock stopped rolling down the hill.

(9) INTRANSITIVE
   a. The war began.
   b. The banquet started.
   c. The trouble continued.
   d. The rain forecast.

Piñango and Deo’s (2015) core proposal, cont’d

The with-alternation asymmetry

The transitive non-agitative sentences \(x \text{ VEBR} y \text{ VEBR} j(10)\) have paraphrases \(j \text{ VEBR} x\) (10), but not control, “coercion,” or transitive agitative sentences (11).

(10) a. The trail begins with a fountain.
   b. The banquet began with a prayer.
   c. The day ends with (an) Midnight.
   d. The alphabet begins with ‘A’.
   e. The row finished with a little porcelain pot.

(11) a. #Reading the book began with John.
   c. The war began with the general.

Desiderata for a revised account

Raising and intransitive sentences

Proposal: In raising and intransitive sentences, Aspect quantities over the y-argument of the aspectual verb.

(12) \[\text{PRF} = \lambda P \cdot \exists x \cdot f(x) \ni y \ni (\lambda z. f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x)) \land \exists x' \leq x \land \text{PRF} \]

Piñango and Deo’s (2015) core proposal

Control, “coercion,” and transitive agitative sentences

Proposal: In control, “coercion,” and transitive agitative sentences, Aspect quantities over the y-argument, and \(v\) introduces the Agent.

(13) \[\text{PRF} = \lambda P \cdot \exists x \cdot f(x) \ni y \ni (\lambda z. f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x)) \land \exists x' \leq x \land \text{PRF} \]

Piñango and Deo’s (2015) core proposal

Same as in Piñango & Deo:

(17) \[\exists x \cdot f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x) \ni \text{PRF} \]

Consequence: Transitive non-agitative sentences do not combine with Aspect. (The y-argument of the aspectual verb is saturated by the subject, rendering the sentence stative. cf. Katz 2000). Some suggestive data:

(18) \[\lambda A \cdot \exists x \cdot f(x) \ni y \ni (\lambda z. f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x)) \]

(19) \[\lambda P \cdot \exists x \cdot f(x) \ni y \ni (\lambda z. f(x') < \text{small-into} f(x)) \land \exists x' \leq x \land \text{PRF} \]

We hypothesize that only arguments introduced by the aspectual verb itself participate in the with-alternation, thereby explaining the contrast between (10) and (11).

Transitive non-agitative sentences

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If our analysis is on the right track, the syntactic-semantic versatility of aspectual verbs has two sources:

1. Optional presence of \(v\), familiar as well in the causative/indicative alternation (20).
2. The flexibility of the y-argument of the aspectual verb to be dealt with either by Aspect or by a subject DP, a phenomenon not attested elsewhere, as far as we know.

Conclusions