

Aspectual composition and scalar change

Current theories of aspect acknowledge the pervasiveness of verbs of variable telicity, and are designed to account both for why these verbs show such variability and for the complex conditions that give rise to telic and atelic interpretations. Previous work has identified several sets of such verbs, including incremental theme verbs, such as *eat* and *destroy*; degree achievements, such as *cool* and *widen*; and (a)telic directed motion verbs, such as *ascend* and *descend*. As the diversity in descriptive labels suggests, most previous work has taken these classes to embody distinct phenomena and to have distinct lexical semantic analyses.

In Kennedy and Levin 2008, we suggest that it is possible to provide a unified analysis in which the behavior of all of these verbs stems from a single shared element of their meanings: a function that measures the degree to which an object changes relative to some scalar dimension over the course of an event. Focusing on the case of degree achievements, we claim that such measure of change functions are derived from two more basic concepts: an underlying measure function, which we take to be the basic denotation of expressions that are lexicalized in many languages as gradable adjectives, and a general operation mapping basic measure functions into functions which measure the difference between two objects on a scale, which underlies the semantics of comparatives.

The goal of this talk is twofold. First, I will provide further arguments supporting the link between comparison and scalar change based on cross-linguistic data involving the morphosyntax of change of state verbs and the syntax and semantics of verbal comparatives. Building on these observations, I will then show how the basic account of degree achievements in Kennedy and Levin 2008 can be extended to other verbs of scalar change, in particular the class of ‘incremental theme’ verbs. I will conclude by discussing the implications of the analysis for typological variation in aspectual composition, the structure of the verb phrase, and comparison.

References

Kennedy, Christopher and Beth Levin. 2008. ‘Measure of change: The adjectival core of verbs of variable telicity’. In McNally, Louise and Christopher Kennedy (eds.), *Adjectives and Adverbs: Syntax, Semantics, Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.