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Stability and instability in lexical aspect

This paper investigates changes in lexical aspect and theta-roles in intransitives. It reviews earlier work (e.g. van Gelderen 2018) that argues telic, durative, and stative verbs generally keep their original lexical aspect and then looks at possible counterexamples in the class of movement verbs. The reason is sought in the Sorace (2000) Hierarchy. The methodology is dictionary and corpus-based.

The argument structure of verbs in spoken, written, and signed languages is pretty uniform. Thus, verbs of `falling' involve a Theme and an optional causer and verbs of `working' an Agent. Aspect is relevant to that uniformity as well since the former verbs will be telic and the latter durative. This paper shows that, when (spoken/written) languages change, the basic argument structure and aspect don't change for most unaccusatives and unergatives. There are, however, systematic reports (e.g. Rosen 1984; Keller & Sorace 2003) that certain verbs are unergative in one language and unaccusative in another and verbs that alternate between different aspects (e.g. Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2014). There are also a few instances where earlier meanings are unaccusative and later ones unergative and these will be discussed in this paper and a possible account will be given.

Causative-inchoative verbs have been the subject of much earlier research (e.g. Kulikov 2009, Narogg 2009, Ottosson 2013) which shows that, as the causative suffix becomes intransparent, the unaccusative and causative classes converge into a class of labile verbs. Their lexical aspect remains stable. Typical durative verbs, such as plegan `play' and creopan `crawl', keep their lexical aspect as well.

In this paper, I look at some intransitive verbs that are ambiguous between having a Theme theta-role (involving a telic change of location), as in (1), and an Agent theta-role (involving a durative manner verb), as in (2).

(1)   ***Swimmað***   *eft*   *on*   *weg.   Fleotendra   ferð*
        float   again   on   way   Fleeting   spirit …
        `They (memories) float away again. The spirit of the fleeting ones …'
        (OED, Wanderer 53-4)

(2)   Com   þa   to   lande   lidmanna   helm   swiðmod   **swymman.**
        came   then   to   land   seafarer's   leader   strong.mood swimming
        `The seafarer's leader came to land swimming bold-heartedly.' (OED, Beowulf 1624)

The class of controlled process that `swim' is part of is a non-core unergative in Sorace's (2000) continuum of intransitives and is shown in Keller & Sorace (2003) to be subject to variation in auxiliary-selection.

Buck (1949: 680) writes that notions of float, swim, and sail are closely related in Indo-European and Bosworth & Toller's Dictionary confirms this for Old English in its three main uses of *swimman*: (a) "of living creatures moving in or on water", (b) "of a vessel moving on water", and (c) "of lying on the surface of water", which the OED follows, and this doesn't

change much in the Middle English period as evidenced in the MED. By 1600, the durative meaning of swim prevails.

I examine all 31 instances of swimman in the Dictionary of Old English corpus to see if the grammatical aspect connected to these verbs is more telic (perfective) or more durative-coercing (present and progressive) and also what the prevailing animacy of the subject is. It may be that the lexical aspect was not as ambiguous as it seems. I also examine another controlled process verb, i.e. *speed*, and a verb of `continuation of pre-existing state', i.e. *float*, because these too have been seen as ambiguous in the work of Keller & Sorace. I conclude that motion is one of the factors that makes verbs of controlled motion less agentive and that the stativity of verbs of continuation of a pre-existing state renders them less telic. The main question is what makes changes possible to verbs that are non-core in the Sorace Hierarchy.

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