

Michal Kořenář: *At the boundary between lexical and grammatical aspect: an eye tracking study* – master thesis

The master thesis of Michal Kořenář is concerned with lexical and grammatical marking of aspect in contemporary Dutch. The central question is: how are different combinations of lexical and grammatical aspect of Dutch verbs reflected in eye movements. The idea behind is that eye movements are triggered by mental conceptualisation. In other words, Kořenář aims to test the well-known cognitive hypothesis that language bears measurable influence on cognition.

The first part of the study concentrates on the terminology problem. The author defines aspect in a traditional way as the internal temporal structure of an event. Lexical aspect, then, denotes inherent temporal characteristics of verbal predicates (event telicity or Aktionsart). It concerns verbs which reach an endpoint. On the other hand, grammatical aspect is defined as being expressed by morpho-syntactic grammatical markers that are unique to language (perfective/imperfective). The question arises why only the latter is unique. It seems plausible to admit that lexical aspect is unique too. Furthermore, the distinction itself between lexical and grammatical aspect seems problematic. As telicity isn't exclusively determined by the lexicality of the verb, lexical aspect is also syntactically or morphologically marked, for instance by the presence of a direct object or a verbal particle, respectively.

After a section discussing the relevant literature, the author presents the used psycholinguistic research method, the experimental design being based upon the theoretical work of Verkuyl (1972, 1973, 1993, 2005, 2008). Eye movements of participants are measured while listening to five sets of five similar spoken sentences. The sets differ in lexical and grammatical aspect: atelic imperfective, atelic perfective, telic imperfective, telic perfective and atelic progressive. The results of the experiment affirm the connection between eye movements and language processing. In other words, the study shows that it is possible to account for differences in various verbal forms by the means of spontaneous eye movements. Furthermore, it seems that aspect in Dutch behaves differently than in English.

However, several questions arise. Let's make a selection. The explanation of the difference between the weak and the strong version of the language-cognition-interface is not clearly formulated. The author claims that the strong version sees language as the determiner of cognition, whereas the weak version assumes that language and linguistic categories just influence the way we see the world. As a matter of fact, in both cases language influences cognition and not the cognition the language. The whole model of Kořenář is based on this insight, i.e. his aim is to gather more evidence for the hypothesis that language influences conceptualisation. Would it not be more prudent to adopt the view that the difference between the strong and weak version of the language-cognition-interface mentioned above is gradual and that it is highly probable that the influence is mutual between language and cognition?

The author, then, does not seem to make a distinction between conceptualisation and cognitive grammaticalization. In his view cognitive concepts are combined with each other, which results in mental representation of our world experience. The question is: is language playing a role in assembling these concepts to mental representations? In

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other words, does the author distinguish between ‘concept’ and (mental) linguistic sign (i.e. signifiant-signifié)?

Another question is about the so-called “three basic linguistic components (form, meaning and function).” (p. 12). Elsewhere: “structure, meaning and function” (p. 14). As structure is not directly observable, the question arises how the author defines ‘form’. And what does ‘function’ exactly mean?

Then, Kořenář points out that “the activity reading Russian literature does not reasonably imply a natural endpoint. In contrast, reading two chapters of *Ana Karenina* may take some time to finish, but entails a natural endpoint to be reached, making it an accomplishment.” (p. 22) It would probably be useful to distinguish between ‘information’ and ‘meta-information’, i.e. the semantic level and the level of pragmatic inference, respectively. Reading Russian literature implies a natural endpoint too. The pragmatic problem is that in our world it is not very probably. In others words, it’s not a language problem (semantics), but a world problem (pragmatics).

Sentence (16) *De Graafschap zal de ruimtes klein maken en opportunistisch spel laten zien.* (p. 32) doesn’t sound very natural. The author is right saying this sentence without *zal* is not interpretable as a future tense. But that doesn’t necessarily imply the sentence with *zal* has a futural meaning.

Despite some critical comments, Michal Kořenář has written an excellent text. He is a very talented researcher. His linguistic knowledge is impressive and, unlike some redundancy’s, the research methodology is solid. Hence, I would like to assign the highest grade: 1.

Praha

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Prof. dr. hab. Jan Pekelder

