FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
Univerzita Karlova

Ústav obecné lingvistiky

VYJÁDŘENÍ ŠKOLITELE K DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCI

At the boundary between lexical and grammatical aspect: an eye tracking study
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This is an interesting thesis based on sophisticated experimental research, which is relevant in its general framing and theoretical approach but also as a welcome empirical contribution to Dutch linguistics. It poses fundamental questions about language processing, conceptualization, and mental representation of the interaction between aspect and Actionsart and seeks to elucidate their relationship on the basis of a subset of Dutch aspectual patterns by relating their interpretation to eye movement during processing. The thesis can be seen as a pilot study whose results should be further tested on a larger sample, as the author notes himself.

The thesis consist of four chapters of unequeal length, which, however, is typical for experimental studies. Chapter 1 is a thorough critical overview of the relevant literature, assessing and reflecting the pitfalls, both terminological and conceptual, that notoriously plague aspectual research in general. The author also provides an informative overview and critique of the relevant experimental literature, for the most part in a way that is accessible also to readers not closely familiar with the field. Chapter 2 provides an appropriately detailed description of the experiment, participants, materials, and method, carefully arguing for the specific choices made in all these respects. The operationalization of the relevant aspectual features for the purposes of the experiment is based on careful definition of four distinct parameters along the axis of perfectiveness and telicity. The design of the experiment is tight and well-defined, with meticulous attention to preventing as many distractions as possible, so that the results are not compromised, and the experiment is based on clearly stated hypotheses. This is also where the less commonly used methodological choice is made and explained: the author uses an eye-tracking experiment in a blank-screen paradigm, which is expected to better simulate spontaneous, unprimed conditions. Chapter 3 summarizes the experimental results and Chapter 4 provides interpretation of the results and assesses to what extent and in what way the hypotheses were confirmed.

The main contribution of the research presented in the thesis can be summarized as follows: (i) it is grounded in a currently very active area of research, focused on advancing our understanding of the embodiment of cognition at lexico-semantic and morphosyntactic level; (ii) it is methodologically innovative in that it tries to get closer to simulating real-world processing conditions in a lab setting, by using the blank-screen method, which minimizes priming effects; (iii) it provides some fine-grained analyses of certain types of tenses and aspectual configurations specific to Dutch, which is interesting linguistically since aspect is tied in with tense and telicity is not inherently marked lexically; and (iv) it provides experimentally obtained evidence that in disantangling the meaning and function of grammatical categories it isn't enough to establish paradigmatic relations of a given form but we must take into account and integrate syntagmatic relations as well.

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The thesis could be easily worked into a publishable paper, after some revisions, which mostly have to do with some loose ends left hanging. The following questions and comments might help in this respect; some are food for thought in further work on this topic, some reflect my own curiosity, some are a matter of making the exposition better or easier to follow:

p. 37, commentary concerning ex. (17):
      - is this really a matter of the speaker's self-identifying with parts of the reality? Could it not be an issue of 'information packaging' (in the sense of "temporal package" mentioned on p. 41, quite aptly, I think) and simply classifying events? Such cognitive packaging may well be independent of the speaker's actual involvement – it's really a clue for the hearer to understand the types of past events, isn't it? And the line (b) in Table 3 seems to point quite naturally toward such an analysis.
      - related question: could you have both events in (17) expressed by the same form (of either kind)? What would it mean, how would it be different in interpretations?

p. 46, top paragraph: what is N400 effect? It comes out of nowhere and not every reader will know what it is.

p. 68-69, very interesting discussion of verbs of motion, I agree that they tend to behave differently in many respects, and it's nice to see that ocular effects confirm it as well. I just wonder about one thing: could it be that ikonicity also plays a role (concerning the issue of eye movement applying to "visual rather than grammatical processing"), and has anybody studied this aspect of the processing? What's the difference between the visual and grammatical processing? Also, landscape (mentioned on the following page) as a stimulus might invoke motion without explicitly mentioning it, no? Simply because of what we know landscape is and how one typically engages with it… (cf. Frame Semantics)

p. 74-76, I find it interesting that the verbs used in the experiment do not behave entirely uniformly. The differences may not be significant statistically, but still, one can't but notice that e.g. the verbs *read* and *sing* seem to behave the same in both measures (dispersion and fixations) and that in the fixations there is a noticeable difference between *read* and *sing* on the one hand and *wash* on the other. Do we have any idea why this might be, or is it just by chance?

p. 75 (and on) – more of an observation than a question: it follows from the discussion of Table 5 (and the diagrams in Table 4) that both telicity and perfectiveness contribute as 'dominant' features toward low dispersion, i.e. toward completeness – i.e one of them is enough and their combination isn't all that stronger in comparison. This

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would be a linguistically very important and relevant conclusion to make that could refine our understanding of how aspect works in different languages and how the different factors manifest themselves. Similarly, imperfectiveness and atelicity seem to be both strong contributors to associate with a low number of fixations, although the effect is much smaller. That, too, tells us something about the relative weight among the four parameters, doesn't it?

I also find it interesting that the initial hypotheses were all confirmed in the dispersion parameter, but disproved in the fixation parameter. This seems too consistent to be just a chance and one wonders if there might be also an explanation other than the technological one offered by the author. Perhaps it is indeed all just the hardware and software, but still, it is an intriguing outcome.

The text is properly structured, well-written in solid academic English (with only minor mishaps here and there, which don't hamper fluid reading and can be expected), equipped with an adequate number of footnotes. The one thing that could've been better is the editing of the last chapter – it's as if the author ran out of time and didn't give it one more read, which gives this chapter a sloppy feel. Plus one notices a typo right in the Table of contents in numbering the chapters, which is then consistently wrong in the text as well. The bibliography is impressive both in its size and scope and goes way beyond what would be expected from good M.A.-level research.

Overall, this thesis without a doubt reflects a level of sophistication and independence that is expected at this stage of the author's career and I suggest the grade „výborně".

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