Aspect in performative contexts across languages

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Performatives are conceptually special in that they involve illocutionary acts that can be performed simply "by uttering a sentence containing an expression that names the type of speech act" (Searle 1989: 536), as in *I (hereby) quit.* In English, this special status is grammatically reflected in the marked use of the simple present with performatives, which contrasts with the preference of canonical present-time event reports for the present progressive (cf. **I talk right now* versus *I promise to quit*). Assuming a perfective aspectual value for the English simple present, this is indeed remarkable: in English as well as cross-linguistically, present-time events cannot normally be reported by means of perfective constructions (De Wit forthcoming). However, any initial conclusions one might draw from these facts about English performatives will immediately be challenged by conflicting observations from other languages: Slavic languages, for one, hardly ever use perfective aspect in performative contexts (Dickey 2000).

In this study we chart the aspectual characteristics of explicit performative utterances in a diverse sample of sixteen languages on the basis of native-speaker elicitations. We conclude that, as expected, there is not one single aspectual type (e.g., perfectives) that is systematically reserved for performative contexts. Instead, the particular aspectual form of performative utterances resorted to in a given language is *epistemically* motivated, in the sense that a language will turn to that aspectual construction which it generally selects to refer to situations that are fully and instantly identifiable as an instance of a given situation type at the time of speaking. We use Croft & Poole's (2008) method of multidimensional scaling to demonstrate this: regardless of the exact value of a given aspectual marker, if it is used to mark performatives, then it also commonly appears in the expression of states and habits, which have the subinterval property (they can be fully verified based on a random segment), demonstrations, and other special contexts featuring more or less predictable and therefore fully and instantly identifiable events. We show, furthermore, that performative utterances do not normally feature progressive aspect (as in English), since progressive constructions are dedicated to the expression of contingent – i.e. not instantly verifiable – situations. Attested occurrences of progressive performatives in English (De Wit & Michaelis ms.) are analyzed as exceptions that prove the rule, since these occurrences systematically involve performatives that diverge in a way from canonical performatives, and that are thus construed as contingent.

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