

A Look at the Role of Aspect in Reasoning about Events

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Communication would be impossible without the ability to describe and interpret everyday events in the world. An important dimension of this, in any language and in any situation, involves the temporal dynamic of events. Is an event described as long and ongoing, or as short and instantaneous? Is it described as a single or repeated instance? Differences like these matter a great deal to how an event is interpreted, and ultimately, to what opinions and attitudes are formed.

Aspect has been studied in depth by linguists, especially those with an interest in the semantics and structure of linguistic form of relevance to temporality. This includes how aspect interacts with tense and modality, how it is realized within a single language or across languages, and how it evolves over time (e.g., Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca, 1994; Comrie, 1976; Croft, 2012; Michaelis, 2004). Despite a wealth of knowledge about how aspect works synchronically and diachronically, there is still much to learn about how it influences everyday reasoning about events in the world.

In the presentation, I report some of my experimental semantics research on the role of aspect in reasoning about events. One line of research investigates how aspect can bring on shifts in attitude toward political candidates' in campaign messages (Fausey & Matlock, 2011). Another line of research examines how aspect in queries about accidents affects how they are described in speech and gesture (Matlock, Sparks, Matthews, Hunter, & Huettenlocher, 2012). Yet another line of research uses eye-tracking to investigate how and when aspect brings on shifts in eye movements during the comprehension of action stories (Huettenlocher, Winter, Matlock, Ardell, & Spivey, 2014). I end by discussing how behavioral research is valuable to gaining a clearer, more nuanced understanding of aspect in everyday communication of events.

References

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