Stative-eventive ambiguities

A substantial amount of current work in lexical semantics has focused on argument structure and its relationship to event structure. In this context, the study of aspectual behavior has been particularly important in highlighting the nature of the relationship between syntactic form and semantic interpretation. In this paper, I investigate stative verbs in German and their relevance for ongoing discussions on the syntax and semantics of vP and VP. The central claim that I put forward is that stative verbs do not correspond to a uniform "basic stative predicate". Rather, the absence of both the DO-operator *and* the BECOME-operator are responsible for a stative reading.

   Facts: As noted at different points in the literature, several classes of verbs display a stative-eventive amiguity; i.e., the verbs in (1) may be interpreted stative or eventive, depending on the kind of object present.

(1)   a. **Stative causers / instrumental alternation; Kratzer (1996)**
        Die Haare verstopfen den Abfluß. (*The hair obstruct the sink.*)

      b. **Object-experiencer verbs**
        Der Witz ärgert Maria. (*The joke annoys Maria.*)

      c. **threaten-type verbs**
        Die Welle droht, die Sandburg zu zerstören. (*The wave threatens to destroy the sandcastle.*)

      d. **help-type verbs**
        Das Medikament hilft dem Hans. (*The drug helps Hans.*)

      e. **endanger-type verbs**
        Das Gift gefährdet die Umwelt. (*The poison endangers the environment.*)

      f. **perception verbs**
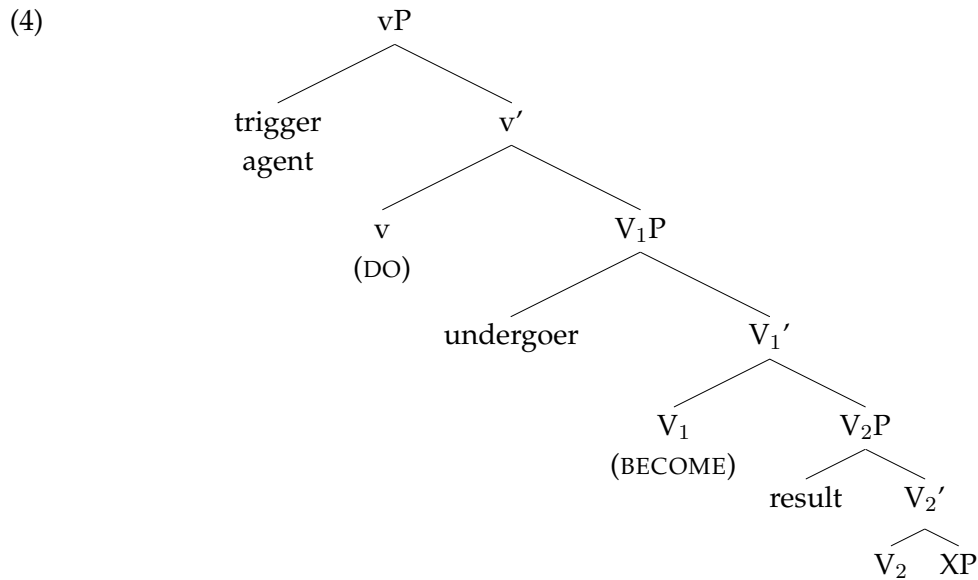   Maria hört das Geräusch. (*Mary heard the noise.*)

Employing the tests for stativity in Maienborn (2003), I will show that all the verbs in (1) do show stative readings. Next, the elements triggering the eventive reading will be identified: first, if the subject is animate and intentionally acting, all of the verbs in (1) are eventive.

(2)   Maria ärgert Hans absichtlich mit bösen Bemerkungen. (*Maria annoys Hans intentionally with evil comments.*)

Second, there are eventive readings which do not rely on an animate agent. They are eventive because a resultant state is reached over time.

(3)   Die Haare haben nach und nach / langsam den Abfluß verstopft. (*The hair have obstructed the sink bit by bit / slowly.*)

Proposal: Following Ramchand (2003), I assume a three-way layered VP structure. The stative/eventive ambiguity manifests itself in the functional layers of the verbal projections. The vP-layer and the V_1 may refer either to stative or eventive predicates.

(4)

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                        vP
                   ╱         ╲
              trigger         v′
              agent       ╱       ╲
                         v          V₁P
                        (DO)     ╱        ╲
                            undergoer       V₁′
                                        ╱        ╲
                                      V₁           V₂P
                                   (BECOME)      ╱     ╲
                                            result      V₂′
                                                     ╱     ╲
                                                   V₂       XP
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Outlook: Stative verbs, in contrast to eventive verbs, have been captured within the theory of the syntax-semantics interface by means of a *stative* feature. Although the implementations differ, the common assumption is that stative verbs have a "stative" aspectual projection (Borer (2005)) , a "stative" little *v* projection (Kratzer (1996)), or a "stative" BE-operator within the verbal domain (Harley (1995)).

This paper claims, in contrast to the common assumptions, that there is no single feature that renders a verb stative. Rather, event structure is read off directly from syntactic structure. This claim is supported by the fact that there are several verbs which are ambiguous between a stative and an eventive reading. Crucially, the DO operator and/or the BECOME operator are present in the eventive readings but not in the stative interpretations.

References

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