

A corpus investigation into lexical aspect as a lexicogrammatical feature of the intransitive construction

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Lexical aspect (i.e. aktionsart, ontological/situation aspect) concerns the construal of inherent temporal structures by situations (Vendler 1967; Smith 1991). Though it is widely acknowledged that the grammatical properties of an eventuality in a clause are essential in determining the lexical aspect (Smith 1991; Declerck et al. 2006), certain lexical verbs are commonly representative of specific situation types e.g. typical verbs of 'states' include be, have and resemble (Van Rompaey 2013, p.198). In terms of intransitives, literature has provided fundamental contributions on the link between the two intransitive verb types 'unergative' and 'unaccusative', and lexical aspect (Tenny 1987; Dowty 1991; van Gelderen 2018). For example, unaccusatives have been identified as telic whereas unergatives are atelic (Dowty 1991; van Gelderen 2018, p.10). However, unaccusativity research appears to focus predominantly on the unaccusative side as opposed to unergatives (also known as 'pure' intransitives). Additionally, whilst the focus of lexical aspect has been predominantly directed towards verbs alone, less attention has been paid to whether the wider constructions denote specific lexical aspect categories themselves i.e. whether certain aspectual types can be considered a lexicogrammatical feature of pure intransitive constructions. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between lexical aspect and constructions, with a focus on pure intransitive constructions in particular, in order to determine the variation of situation types within and between constructions.

This study was based on 10 verbs that commonly occur in pure intransitive constructions: sneeze, meditate, frown, converse, stare, resign, jog, walk, compete and climb. The verbs were selected using several resources (Levin 1993; Francis et al. 1996; Fontaine 2013; Hartmann et al. 2013; Bartlett 2014; Banks 2015), then used in a query search in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008-) to obtain the wider constructions. A total of 2500 concordance lines (250 lines per verb) were analysed using Hanks' (2004) Corpus Pattern Analysis (CPA), an approach that reveals how meaning is mapped onto verbal patterns (ibid, p.87). In CPA, patterns are grouped according to their syntactic structure and an associated meaning or 'implicature'. Each concordance was also analysed for lexical aspect (summarised in Van Rompaey 2013, pp.181–219); the five main situation types concerned with this research are activity, semelfactive, accomplishment, culmination (i.e. achievement) and state. In line with this study's aims, the patterns revealed from CPA were investigated in relation to their lexical aspect. Results reveal both homogenous patterns in terms of situation type, as well as intransitive patterns that have multiple situation types. Predominant influences on the lexical aspect of the constructions include verbal semantics, the head of the prepositional complement, the noun phrase in the prepositional complement, and adverbials. Overall, results reveal multiple intransitive patterns with prototypical aspectual meaning, and point towards an inherent prototypical meaning of the intransitive. This paper shows how a corpus approach can appropriately reveal the typical relationship between specific intransitive constructions and aspectual type.

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