

An exploration of Lexicalization, Selectional Restrictions and Coercion: The case of the English aspectual verb

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June 25, 2025

Linguistik Kolloquium, SoSe 2025

In this talk I revisit a long standing debate in lexical semantics regarding the nature of English aspectual verb composition. I focus on two competing semantic analyses and the various kinds of evidence that have been invoked to adjudicate between them. At issue are the distinct architectures of the grammar-meaning interface that these analyses suggest but which are rarely discussed; at issue is then the implications of the characterization of lexical meanings for our understanding of the larger non-linguistic semantic system that those meanings need to connect with.

Traditionally, English aspectual verbs like *begin*, *start* and *finish* were assumed to select exclusively for eventive complements e.g. *Ana began the meeting*. The standard view held that, as a result, cases of aspectual composition with an entity-denoting expression e.g., *Ana began the book* led to a type-mismatch which could only be resolved by ‘coercing’ the entity-denoting expression into an event-denoting expression yielding a reading like e.g., *Ana began doing something with the book* (e.g., Jackendoff, 1997, Pustejovsky, 1995). Presupposing such an event-selecting lexical semantics for this verb class, the experimental literature interpreted, associated processing and neurological effects as being reflexes of entity-to-event type-shifting (e.g., Piñango et al., 1999, McElree et al., 2001, Pytkannen & McElree, 2007). Crucially, this analytical approach demands a view of word meaning whereby lexicalization is the means by which meaning is stored in the mental lexicon separate from the larger conceptual knowledge system from which it presumably emerged.

More recent empirical and experimental data successfully challenged this mismatch-based approach for aspectual verbs, in support of an analysis that grounds the semantic class in non-linguistic, structural conceptual constraints. Specifically, under this analysis English aspectual verbs lexically select for structured individuals—entities that can be construed as one-dimensional directed path structures (Krifka, 1998) in some ontological dimension (Piñango & Deo 2016). On this view, associated processing and neurological effects result from exhaustive lexical retrieval (on the verb) and ambiguity resolution (on the complement). Lai 2017, Lai et al., 2017, Lai et al., 2019, Lai & Piñango, 2019, Lai et al., 2023).

Interestingly, such an analysis, while providing wide empirical coverage, is no longer consistent with the traditional lexicon-conceptual structure distinction. Instead, it suggests a model whereby so-called lexical meaning is only the structure made salient by context from an otherwise non-linguistic conceptual structure system. The bulk of the talk will focus on a discussion of the general features of such a system as motivated by the structured individual analysis, and a fresh look at fundamental notions in linguistic analysis like lexicalization, in semantic analysis like selectional restrictions, and in approaches to resolutions to restriction violations, such as coercion.

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