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Event theory: non eventive constructions in Japanese and Spanish and applications for the teaching of Imperfective in the L2 classroom

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“Event theory: non eventive constructions in Japanese and Spanish and applications for the teaching of Imperfective in the L2 classroom”.
Roger Civit i Contra

Contributions and originality of the dissertation

This dissertation offers a new way of analyzing the interactions between lexical and grammatical aspect. Lexical aspect refers to the internal action type of the verb. Grammatical aspect is signaled in the form of morphemes attached to verbs. Languages like Spanish in which the past tense distinguishes overtly two grammatical aspects (imperfective and preterite) pose enormous difficulties for L2 learners. This work attempts to unveil the factors that play a part in the different combinations that are (im)possible between those two bastions of aspectuality, in order to eventually find a way to teach them effectively in the FL classroom. The original contributions of the thesis are:

- The dissertation offers an innovative look at the action types traditionally assumed in the literature (states, activities, achievements and accomplishments). It analyzes the atoms that underlie each of them, identifying pure and hybrid action types. Other researchers have analyzed the sub-events included in compounded events such as accomplishments, but this is the first time, to our knowledge, that this is systematized on the basis of a combination of a few variables that are part of all the action types and that make different predictions for pure and hybrid Aktionsart concerning grammatical aspect.
- The dissertation offers an analysis of aspectuality based not only on the interaction of lexical aspect with grammatical aspectual morphemes but also and crucially, with the presence/absence of an event quantifier in the construction. This means that the semantics literature on event quantifiers finds its place in a syntactic analysis of the properties of aspectuality.
- The thesis also offers a comparison of the aspectual systems of Spanish and Japanese, and a theoretical analysis of the latter that includes not only the standard language but also the Uwajima dialects, which present a different aspectual system from the standard.
- Finally, the thesis opens the way to an improvement of the methods for teaching the imperfect in Spanish as L2 lessons, in particular to Japanese speakers.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. The introductory one introduces the problem. Two kinds of mistakes by learners of Spanish as a L2 are identified: use of imperfective past instead of perfective (preterite) and use of perfective past instead of imperfective, when stative verbs are involved. Both of them are exemplified by various constructions that contain different adverbial expressions. In order to examine the possible origin of these mistakes and to describe the linguistic features that underlie these constructions, the thesis undertakes a theoretical analysis of the matter.

Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature on aspect and tense in Spanish, as well as on action types or Aktionsart. Chapter 3 reviews what Japanese researchers have said about grammatical aspect in Japanese, both in standard and in the Uwajima dialects. These two chapters show the differences between both languages and set the tone for chapter 4, in which a comparison is established that throws some light on the nature of aspect in human languages in general. The comparison reveals that the Uwajima dialect makes overt distinctions that are similar to Spanish, but that are not overtly marked in standard Japanese. In the Uwajima dialect, the morphemes *-toru* or *-yoru* are used instead of the standard *-teiru*, reflecting perfective (continuation of result or perfective of action) and progressive (continuation of action) interpretations respectively. In the Uwajima dialect, both resulting state and action perfective share the *-toru* marker. As the author states, the interpretation depends on lexical properties of the verbs. The marker *-yoru* can also express a time before the beginning of an event (prospective aspect). This is exemplified with verbs like “*tobu*” (fly). The form “*tobiyoru*” may mean progressive aspect or prospective aspect. For other researchers like Oki (2000), this means a neutralization of aspect. However, in this dissertation an alternative explanation is offered: the verb “*tobu*” can express two event structures, an achievement and an activity, due to its internal aspectual components. It is the interaction of these grammatical aspect markers with the Aktionsart of the verbs that result in different interpretations. He systematizes the interactions as follows:

- Yoru* expresses progressive aspect when it interacts with the [+durative] feature of Aktionsart of an activity or accomplishments.
- Yoru* expresses prospective aspect when it interacts with the [-durative] feature of Aktionsart of an achievement.
- Toru* expresses action perfective aspect when it interacts with aspectual features of finiteness as the final limit of an accomplishment or the arbitrary limit applied to an activity is reached.
- Toru* expresses inchoative aspect when it interacts with the aspect of an achievement marking the beginning of a durative event.

As part of the comparison between standard Japanese and Spanish, the author examines the properties of non-processes, a category introduced by Kamata (1996). The author identifies this category as one with more than one event in its structure. This, together with achievements of type 3 identified by De Miguel and Lagunilla (2000) leads to the rest of the analysis, which attempts to find the elements that conform the different Aktionsart. The insight gained from non-processes in Japanese throws some light on lexical aspect in Spanish and English as well, and leads the author to his final proposal, which is developed in chapters 5 and 6.

The proposal consists of a reclassification of Aktionsart on the basis of the elements identified by Pustejovsky (1991): T(ransition), S(tate) and P(rocess). The author takes these three elements and classifies the Aktionsart into Pure (activities, achievements/semelfactives and individual level stative predicates) and Hybrid (accomplishments, achievements of type 3, non-processes and stage-level predicates, divided in turn in two categories:

resulting stage-level predicates and non-resulting stage-level predicates). Hybrid Aktionsart are quantifiable and therefore can enter into a construction with an event quantifier. Depending on their status as a pure or hybrid Aktionsart, the interaction with imperfect and preterite yield different meanings and (un)grammaticalities. In this way, the possible and impossible sentences are explained.

Ignorance of these systems by teachers and students leads to the learner errors that were identified in the introduction. This is discussed in chapter 7. Chapter 8 presents the general conclusions.

Thus, the thesis presents a theoretical basis for the description of aspectual phenomena and makes the case for a pedagogy that increases the linguistic conscience in both teachers and students of languages.

Oral defence

The oral defence took place on Feb 23rd, 2015, from 10:00 to 12:00. The committee was presided by Dr. Montserrat Sanz, and composed of Dr. Noritaka Fukushima and Dr. Ryujin Nomura, from Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, and Prof. Hiromi Yamamura, from the University of Kyushu.

The committee commented on the achievement of the candidate in having been able to combine three important theoretical pillars of aspectuality: lexical aspect, grammatical aspect and, crucially, event theory, which acts as the “auxiliary line” that allows us to see the relations between the other two. The fact that the thesis is also a contrastive study between Japanese and Spanish, soundly based on features, was valued as an important contribution. Finally, this research is linked to pedagogical practice, which was also seen as important.

Questions about the theoretical part

The candidate was asked for his opinion about the terminology for perfect/indefinite/imperfect. These terms are viewed as confusing and the candidate replied that, especially in their translation to Japanese, they are not very appropriate. He was also asked about the individual-predicate levels that appear in constructions with an EvtQ. The thesis claims that they can have two distinct interpretations, one in which the predicate becomes stage-level, and the other one in which the whole proposition is under the scope of the quantifier. He was asked whether these could be unified. The candidate pointed out that the interpretation in which the individual-level predicate behaves as a stage-level one is a result of the interactions between the event quantifier and the grammatical morphemes. After a discussion, another member of the panel pointed out that the internal structure of the quantified part (divided into restrictor and scope) is responsible for the two interpretations. Mr. Civit was also asked about the relationship between his analysis of the imperfect and the presence/absence of adverbial expressions. The candidate reflected upon this and admitted that more research is necessary to clarify all the interactions with adverbials. He was asked to evaluate the difference between “El año pasado María iba a la playa todos los días” and “El año pasado María fue a la playa todos los días”, about sentences like “Cuando llegué, eran las ocho”, or “A las dos, fueron las tres” (when the

time is changed in countries in which it is). The candidate evaluated that in many of these cases, there is a coercion into being used as stage-level predicates by the presence of an EvtQ, and he commented on his proposal about hybrid Aktionsart being able to be turned into simpler Aktionsart by being inserted in constructions with no EvtQ. It was also pointed out that sentences like “la película fue interesante” or “las vacaciones fueron una maravilla” are sentences that show a personal opinion of the speaker, and that these are always events. Therefore, there is a relation between the event and the fact that they can only be said if the speaker has experienced the proposition personally. Mr. Civit agreed that these presented stage-level propositions.

It was also pointed out that the Uwajima dialect cannot be accurately called a “Western dialect”, since its origins involve the samurai that came from North-East Japan. The properties of other dialects in which the aspectual distinctions are marked were pointed out to him, and he was advised to attempt a field study in the future involving surveys among speakers of those dialects.

He was also asked to insert a reference to some work done on Spanish aspect by Takashi Nishikawa.

Questions about the pedagogical proposal

A member of the panel asked if the candidate thought that his proposal for an exercise to elevate linguistic sensitivity to these issues must be passed to students or only to teachers. He answered that, in some way or another, after teachers are aware of these theoretical distinctions, exercises should be designed to be conducted among students. Another member asked him how to link his exercise on the identification of lexical aspect with the teaching of the distinction between preterite and imperfect. The candidate pointed out that, once this exercise is done in the L1 of the students in the beginning stages, it would be convenient to do it in Spanish when a certain level is achieved.

General assessment

The committee considers that the thesis offers a new way of conceiving of the interaction between the different aspectual systems involved in constructions. The conclusions have been arrived at from a comparison between Japanese and Spanish, but are of a theoretical and abstract nature, and therefore can be extended to other languages as well. The thesis has accomplished the task of compiling previous analysis of Aktionsart in a new light and therefore arriving at generalizations that were previously missing. The literature on events, which has been fruitful in the last decades, is also interwoven with grammatical and lexical aspect to explain the cases in which an imperfective or a preterite are not possible and the interpretations of those in which they are.

The oral defence clarified all the points that the committee had questions about. Therefore, the committee renders the thesis worthy of a passing grade

and grants the candidate the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics and Language Sciences.

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