Agentivity and Telicity: Variation with Intransitive Verbs

Following a. o. Perlmutter (1978), intransitive verbs have been classified into unaccusative and unergative. On the semantic level, this classification is based on agentivity and telicity: unaccusative verbs are claimed to be non-agentive and telic, unergative verbs agentive and atelic. On the morphosyntactic level, unaccusatives select BE as an auxiliary and are barred from impersonal passivization; unergatives, by contrast, select HAVE and may be used in the impersonal passive. Research on this topic has received a new impetus from the insight that telicity is a multi-dimensional notion that is based on a scale of finer grained concepts. This scale is better suited to explain the cross-linguistic (macrovariation) and intralinguistic variation (microvariation) in the morphosyntactic behaviour of intransitive verbs that is problematic for the older, binary classification of intransitive verbs. Agentivity too has been claimed to be arranged on a scale that is inverse to the telicity scale (e. g. Sorace 2000, Keller & Sorace 2003, Legendre 2007).

The purpose of this talk is a) to offer a conceptual-semantic grounding of the scale of agentivity and of its relation to the telicity scale and b) to show that telicity and individuation (i.e. referentiality) interact, so that the individuation scale has to be considered as an important additional factor in determining the morphosyntactic behaviour of intransitive verbs.

Whereas the telicity scale is semantically well-founded (cf. Legendre 2007, in particular), the scale of agentivity lacks a conceptual-semantic grounding in the literature cited above. I will show that a multi-dimensional agentivity notion (cf. Lakoff 1977, Dowty 1991, Primus 2011) is needed in order to explain the fact that highly agentive intransitive verbs (e. g. verbs referring to working or laughing) exhibit no micro- and macrovariation in passivization while intransitive verbs that are low on the agentivity scale show more micro- and macrovariation. The conceptual grounding of the agentivity scale proposed here is completely independent of the telicity scale, so that no inverse correlation between the scales is expected. The fact that passivization is constrained by both agentivity and telicity is not due to a direct (inverse) correlation between these notions but rather by the fact that impersonal passivization leads to a referential demotion of the subject argument. In this view, the telicity restriction is not a strict independent constraint on passivization but rather an epiphenomenon of the referential non-individuation of the argument undergoing a change of state.

As to auxiliary selection, the results of an acceptability study conducted for German suggest that, contrary to the assumption in the literature (e.g. Keller & Sorace 2003), agentivity - tested by manipulating the animacy of the participant - and auxiliary selection do not interact, at least not in the predicted way. In auxiliary selection, telicity is the basic factor that closely correlates with the individuation property of the nominal argument.
References