Dissertation Summaries

The Acquisition of Aspect and Motion Verbs in the Native Language
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Maria Kotroni
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
mkotroni@hotmail.com

Abstract

This investigation focuses on the subtle features of the Syntax-Semantics and Syntax-Discourse Interfaces as they are manifested in the comprehension and production of typically developing children acquiring Greek as a native language. Many studies have concluded that aspectral semantics is acquired at any early age in children. The results of the present study are consistent with this observation. Moreover, it offers proof that the integration of pragmatics and compositional properties of telicity, which are necessary in order to overcome the lexical aspect of manner-of-motion verbs in non-locative contexts (due to lack of coercion, which does not occur with motion verbs), leads to processing load and results in a delay of acquisition after a child reaches 10 years old.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Both the linguistic and philosophical literature have given a prominent role to the study of aspect. In parallel, studying acquisition at interfaces promises in child linguistic development and this has offered linguistic interfaces prominent status in acquisition research.

In this respect, the main objective of the present thesis is to investigate the subtle properties of Syntax-Semantics and Syntax-Discourse Interfaces as they are manifested in the comprehension and production of typically developing children acquiring Greek as a native language. This objective is addressed through the investigation of the structure and the interpretation of a subclass of activity predicates, namely ambiguous manner-of-motion verbs. Manner-of-motion verbs have attracted the attention of many scholars due to their variable behavior, as they present interesting semantic and syntactic characteristics. The expression of motion is interpreted with respect to the linguistic phenomenon of aspect, both as a semantic and as a grammatical category. In this respect, the present study investigates whether and how native speakers of Greek use the perfective-imperfective distinction (grammatical aspect) to differentiate between atelic locative, atelic directional and telic (endpoint-reached) interpretations (conceptual features of lexical aspect). The interaction of aspect with the attribution of a locative vs. non-locative interpretation is related to the Syntax-Semantics Interface, whereas the integration of aspect and the telic vs. atelic interpretation preference falls into the scope of Syntax-Discourse Interface. With respect to the compositional nature of the predicate, argument structure and its relation to the predicate interpretation are also under investigation. The present thesis, finally, discusses relevant implications that this integration of the aspectual character of the lexeme with the choice of grammatical aspect and its argument structure has in a delayed or defective child language acquisition.


2 The Role of Interfaces in the Interpretation of Aspect and Motion

In order to explore the role of interfaces in the interpretation of aspect and motion, a series of off-line experiments were run across both the comprehension and the production modality.

First of all, an acceptability judgment task contributed to the identification of the acceptability of motion verbs, on the basis of their inherent aspectual meaning, and to the determination of the critical items employed in the main study. In this task, motion verbs ambiguous between a non-locative and a locative inherent meaning with or without directed motion respectively were examined. 142 adults, monolingual native speakers of Greek, were recruited. The verbs were marked with both perfective and imperfective aspect and they were followed by a PP_path introduced by the preposition se (‘in’) in two word orders. The sentence is ambiguous and can be interpreted either as locative or non-locative. The resolution lies at the context. Therefore, the PP_path can either be an adjunct, in a locative context, or a complement, in a non-locative context. Moreover, a PP_temp was also used in the sentence introduced either by the punctual temporal p se, i.e. se mia ora (‘in an hour’) which favors a non-locative telic reading or the durative temporal p ja, i.e. ja mia ora (‘in an hour’), which favors an atelic locative reading. Based on these observations, the pre-study concluded that some verbs are ambiguous and the role of aspect is significant, whereas some other verbs are inherently interpreted as atelic locative or non-locative regardless of aspect. There were also intermediate points between the two ends of the hierarchy. Thus, the verbs tested are classified in a hierarchy of acceptability.

Moreover, the main body of the thesis comprises a comprehension and a production study. The critical sentences, either provided or derived, denoted a motion event expressed by a manner-of-motion verb and a PP_path (1).

(1) ο άνδρας έτρεξε/έτρεχε στο σαλόνι
the man run-3sing.past.perf/imperf in/into.the living-room
‘The man ran/was running in/into the living room.’
The comprehension study comprises two offline sentence-video matching tasks which aim at investigating the degree to which native speakers of Greek use the perfective-imperfective distinction to differentiate between locative and directional atelic readings (Syntax-Semantics interface), regarding the first task, and telic-endpoint reached vs. atelic-locative interpretations (Syntax-Discourse interface), regarding the second task. 196 children divided in two age groups (5;7 and 9;6) and 76 controls participated in both tasks. 36 couples of videos for each task related to the items were also employed. Each couple of videos illustrated each experimental item in two different events, i.e. they illustrated either a locative event (e.g. a man was in the living room and he was running therein) or a directional event (e.g. a man was in the kitchen and he was running towards the living room), regarding the first task, and a telic event (e.g. a man was in the kitchen and ran and reached the living room) or an atelic-locative event (e.g. a man was in the living room and he was running there), regarding the second task. In each motion event, the verb (either real or novel) appeared in both aspectual forms (perfective and imperfective). The participants watched simultaneously two videos depending on the task and they had to choose which video matched the sentence that they listened to the most. Regarding the Syntax-Semantics and Syntax-Discourse interfaces, the findings indicate that at the age of 5;7, grammatical aspect is not acquired, which is in place at 9;6, when still the integration of the aspectual character of the lexeme with Grammatical Aspect is not yet fully target like. These findings assume the compositional nature of aspect, involving both grammatical and discourse information, and a developmental trend in its acquisition.

However, what seems to inhibit comprehension of manner-of-motion verbs, i.e. the interface involved, is predicted to intervene in the early acquisition of production. This study examines how (a)telic events are expressed by Greek adults and typically-developing children and investigates the effect of aspect on the expression of telicity. The use or not of a prepositional phrase, the preposition type and the verb type (manner-of-motion verb, periphrasis, bare motion verb) are also taken into consideration. 102 children (5;7 and 9;3) and 48 controls were asked to describe the event shown on the screen. This speech elicitation task aimed at examining the effect of aspect on the expression of motion. The materials designed for the comprehension study were also used in the production one. The production task consisted of 36 short critical video stimuli (one video at a time), which depicted and favored the use of ambiguous manner-of-motion verbs. The same event was presented in three conditions: telic, atelic locative and atelic directional.

The production data pointed out that the production of motion expressions to describe locative events is distinct from that observed for non-locative
events both in terms of argument structure, type of PP and type of construction used, with locatives being acquired later than non-locatives. The cutoff point for adult like production of motion seems to be late compared to performance in terms of preference, i.e. after the age of 5;7, but still before the age of 9;3. Manner-of-motion verbs are a complex category. The main reason that causes a delay in the acquisition of the production of locatives is the opacity in the expression of path, due to a less transparent interaction between the aspectual features of the verb and the noun of the PP. When the additional conceptual features of terminativity and telicity are at place even as implicatures, which is the case in the expression of motion in atelic directional and telic events, path is expressed in the adult range. However, in the case that such lexical cues are not at place (as in locative events), an interaction of the aspectual features of the verb with other arguments in the motion predicate is required. This is not always straightforward in path languages like Greek, where path is primarily encoded in the verb and not in non-verbal elements, especially when the argument that is supposed to express the trajectory of motion is adjacent to the v, but to the vp. Thus, the expression of motion is delayed in the case it is not pragmatically transparent.

Therefore, despite the apparent discrepancy between comprehension and production, the assumptions already made concern the two sides of the same coin. The results, overall, indicated that the aspectual value of the motion verb is compositional in nature. Children are aware of this nature from an early age, but they fail to integrate aspect in discourse, which protracts adult like acquisition of motion at around the age of 10.

3 Conclusion

The results of the present study are consistent with the assumption of the late acquisition of aspect. Moreover, it provides evidence that the integration of pragmatics and compositional properties of telicity which are needed to overcome the lexical aspect of manner-of-motion verbs in non-locative contexts (due to lack of coercion, which is inhibited with motion verbs) leads to processing load and results in an acquisition delay after the age of 10 years old.

References


