chapter 5

Sentence Semantics 1: Situations

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 3 we discussed aspects of word meaning. In this chapter we investigate some aspects of meaning that belong to the level of the sentence. One aspect is the marking of time, known as **tense**. How this is marked varies from language to language: it might be marked on a verb in languages like English or by special time words as in Chinese, as shown in 5.1a–c below:[1]

5.1   a. Tā xiànzài yŏu kè
          he now   have classes
          'He now has classes.'
    b. Tā zuótian yŏu kè
          he yesterday have classes
          'He had classes yesterday.'
    c. Tā míngtian yŏu kè
          he tomorrow have classes
          'He will have classes tomorrow.'
                   (Tiee 1986: 90)

Here the verb *you* 'has/have' does not change form: the time reference is given by the time words, *xiànzài* 'now', *zuótian* 'yesterday' and *míngtian*

'tomorrow'. We can compare this with the English translations where the verb *have* changes for tense to give the forms, *have, had* and *will have*.

However it is marked, the location in time identified by tense belongs not to a single word but to the whole sentence. Take for example the English sentence 5.2 below:

5.2   Hannibal and his armies brought elephants across the Alps.

Though it is the verb *bring* which carries the morphological marker of tense, it seems sensible to say that the whole event described belongs in the past. In this chapter we will look at a number of semantic categories which, like tense, belong at the sentence level and which can be seen as ways that languages allow speakers to construct different views of situations. We begin by looking in section 5.2 at how languages allow speakers to classify situations by using semantic distinctions of **situation type, tense** and **aspect**. Then in section 5.3 we look at how systems of **mood** and **evidentiality** allow speakers to adopt differing attitudes towards the factuality of their sentences. Each of these are sentence-level semantic systems which enable speakers to organize descriptions of situations.

5.2 Classifying Situations

5.2.1 Introduction

We can identify three important dimensions to the task of classifying a situation in order to talk about it. These dimensions are **situation type, tense** and **aspect**. Situation type, as we shall see in section 5.2.2, is a label for the typology of situations encoded in the semantics of a language. For example, languages commonly allow speakers to describe a situation as static or unchanging for its duration. Such **states** are described in the following examples:

5.3   Robert loves pizza.

5.4   Mary knows the way to San José.

In describing states the speaker gives no information about the internal structure of the state: it just holds for a certain time, unspecified in the above examples. We can contrast this with viewing a situation as involving change, e.g.

5.5   Robert grew very quickly.

5.6   Mary is driving to San José.

These sentences describe **dynamic** situations. They imply that the action has subparts: Robert passed through several sizes and Mary is driving through various places on the way to San José.

This distinction between static and dynamic situations is reflected in the choice of lexical items. In English, for example, adjectives are typically used for states and verbs for dynamic situations. Compare the states in the a examples below with the dynamic situations in the b sentences:

5.7   a.   The pears are ripe.
       b.   The pears ripened.

5.8   a.   The theatre is full.
       b.   The theatre filled up.

This is not an exact correlation, however: as we saw above there are a number of **stative verbs** like *be, have, remain, know, love* which can be used to describe states, e.g.

5.9   The file **is** in the computer.

5.10   Ann **has** red hair.

5.11   You **know** the answer.

5.12   The amendment **remains** in force.

5.13   Jenny **loves** to ski.

We will say that adjectives and stative verbs are inherently static, i.e. that it is part of their lexical semantics to portray a static situation type.

We have already briefly mentioned the dimension of **tense**. As we will describe in section 5.2.3, many languages have grammatical forms, such as verb endings, which allow a speaker to locate a situation in time relative to the 'now' of the act of speaking or writing. **Aspect** is also a grammatical system relating to time, but here the speaker may choose how to describe the internal temporal nature of a situation. If the situation is in the past, for example, does the speaker portray it as a closed completed event, as in 5.14 below, or as an ongoing process, perhaps unfinished, as in 5.15?

5.14   David wrote a pornographic novel.

5.15   David was writing a pornographic novel.

This is a difference of aspect, usually marked as with tense by grammatical devices. Tense and aspect are discussed together in section 5.2.4 and we

discuss the problems of comparing the aspectual systems of different languages in 5.2.5. Finally section 5.2.6 is a brief look at how these dimensions combine to allow speakers to portray different situations.

5.2.2   Verbs and situation types

We saw in the last section that certain lexical categories, in particular verbs, inherently describe different situation types. Some describe states, others are dynamic and describe processes and events. In this section we describe elements of the meaning of verbs which correlate to differences of situation type.

Stative verbs   In the last section we saw examples of inherently stative verbs like *be, have, know* and *love*. These verbs allow the speaker to view a situation as a steady state, with no internal phases or changes. Moreover the speaker does not overtly focus on the beginning or end of the state. Even if the speaker uses a stative in the past, e.g.

5.16   Mary loved to drive sports cars.

no attention is directed to the end of the state. We do not know from 5.16 if or how the state ended: whether Mary's tastes changed, or she herself is no longer around. All we are told is that the relationship described between Mary and sports cars existed for a while. We can contrast this with a sentence like 5.17 below, containing a dynamic verb like *learn*:

5.17   Mary learned to drive sports cars.

Here the speaker is describing a process and focusing on the end-point: at the beginning Mary didn't know how to drive sports cars, and at the end she has learnt. The process has a conclusion.

Stative verbs display some grammatical differences from dynamic verbs. For example, in English progressive forms can be used of dynamic situations like 5.18a below but not states like 5.18b:

5.18   a.   I am learning Swahili.
         b.   *I am knowing Swahili.

As noted by Vlach (1981), this is because the progressive aspect, marked by *-ing* above, has connotations of dynamism and change which suits an activity like *learn* but is incompatible with a stative verb like *know*. We discuss the English progressive in sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.5 below.

Similarly it usually sounds odd to use the imperative with statives; we can compare the following:

5.19   a.   Learn Swahili!
          b.   ?Know Swahili!

Once again, we can speculate that imperatives imply action and dynamism, and are therefore incompatible with stative verbs.

It may be, however, that the distinction between state and dynamic situations is not always as clear-cut. Some verbs may be more strongly stative than others; *remain* for example, patterns like other stative verbs in not taking the progressive, as in 5.20b below, but it does allow the imperative, as in 5.20c:

5.20   a.   The answer remains the same: no!
          b.   *The answer is remaining the same: no!
          c.   Remain at your posts!

It is important too to remember that verbs may have a range of meanings, some of which may be more stative than others. We can contrast the stative and non-stative uses of *have*, for example, by looking at how they interact with the progressive:[2]

5.21   a.   I have a car.
          b.   *I am having a car.
          c.   I am having second thoughts about this.

5.22   a.   She has a sister in New York.
          b.   *She is having a sister in New York.
          c.   She is having a baby.

Dynamic verbs   **Dynamic** verbs can be classified into a number of types, based on the semantic distinctions **durative/punctual** and **telic/atelic** which we will discuss below. These different verb types correlate to different dynamic situation types. One possible distinction within dynamic situation types, for example, is between **events** and **processes**. In events, the speaker views the situation as a whole, e.g.

5.23   The mine blew up.

while in a process, we view, as it were, the internal structure of a dynamic situation, e.g.

5.24   He walked to the shop.

Processes can be subdivided into several types, for example **inchoatives** and **resultatives**. Inchoatives are processes where our attention is directed to the beginning of a new state, or to a change of state, e.g.

5.25   The ice melted.

5.26   My hair turned grey.

Resultatives are processes which are viewed as having a final point of completion: our attention is directed to this end of the process, e.g.

5.27   Ardal baked a cake.

5.28   Joan built a yacht.

One difference between these types concerns interruption. If the action of melting is interrupted in 5.25 or my hair stops turning grey in 5.26, the actions of melting and turning grey can still be true descriptions of what went on. However if Ardal in 5.27 and Joan in 5.28 are interrupted halfway, then it is no longer true to describe them as having baked a cake or built a yacht. In some sense, to use resultatives we have to describe a successful conclusion. In this section we look at two important semantic distinctions in verbs which underlie these different dynamic situation types.

The first distinction is between **durative** and **punctual**: **durative** is applied to verbs which describe a situation or process which lasts for a period of time, while **punctual** describes an event that seems so instantaneous that it involves virtually no time. A typical comparison would be between the punctual 5.29 and the durative 5.30:

5.29   John coughed.

5.30   John slept.

What matters, of course, is not how much time an actual cough takes but that the typical cough is so short that conventionally speakers do not focus on the internal structure of the event.

In Slavic linguistics the equivalent of verbs like *cough* are called **semelfactive** verbs, after the Latin word *semel*, 'once'. This term is adopted for general use by C. S. Smith (1991), Verkuyl (1993) and other writers. Other semelfactive verbs in English would include *flash, shoot, knock, sneeze* and *blink*. One interesting fact is that in English a clash between a semelfactive verb and a durative adverbial can trigger an **iterative** interpretation, i.e. where the event is assumed to be repeated for the period described, e.g.

5.31   Fred coughed all night.

5.32   The drunk knocked for ten minutes.

5.33   The cursor flashed until the battery ran down.

In each of these examples the action is interpreted as being iterative: 5.31 is not understood to mean that Fred spent all night uttering a single drawn-out cough!

The second distinction is between **telic** and **atelic**. **Telic** refers to those processes which are seen as having a natural completion. Compare for example:

5.34   a.   Harry was building a raft.
        b.   Harry was gazing at the sea.

If we interrupt these processes at any point then we can correctly say:

5.35   Harry gazed at the sea.

but we cannot necessarily say:

5.36   Harry built a raft.

As we saw earlier, telic verbs are also sometimes called **resultatives**. Another way of looking at this distinction is to say that *gaze* being atelic can continue indefinitely, while *build* has an implied boundary when the process will be over.

It is important to recognize that although verbs may be inherently telic or atelic, combining them with other elements in a sentence can result in a different aspect for the whole, as below:

5.37   a.   Fred was running. (atelic)
        b.   Fred was running in the London Marathon. (telic)

5.38   a.   Harry was singing songs. (atelic)
        b.   Harry was singing a song. (telic)

This telic/atelic distinction interacts with aspectual distinctions: for example, a combination of either the English perfect or simple past with a telic verb will produce an implication of completion. Thus, as we have seen, both 5.39 and 5.40 entail 5.41:

5.39   Mary painted my portrait.

5.40   Mary has painted my portrait.

5.41   The portrait is finished.

However, the combination of a progressive aspect and a telic verb, as in 5.42 below, does not produce this implication: 5.42 does not entail 5.41 above:

5.42   Mary was painting my portrait.

Comrie (1976) gives examples of derivational processes which can create telic verbs from atelic verbs, e.g. the German pairs in 5.43:

5.43   a.   *essen* 'eat', *aufessen* 'eat up'
         b.   *kämpfen* 'fight', *erkämpfen* 'achieve by fighting'

He contrasts the following sentences:

5.44   a.   die Partisanen haben für die Freiheit ihres Landes gekämpft.
         b.   die Partisanen haben die Freiheit ihres Landes erkämpft.
              'The partisans have fought for the freedom of their country.'
                                                      (Comrie 1976: 46–7)

where 5.44b implies that their fight was successful while 5.44a does not.

5.2.3   A system of situation types

Speakers use their knowledge of these semantic distinctions – stative/ dynamic, durative/punctual, telic/atelic – to draw distinctions of situation type. We have seen that some verbs, like *paint*, *draw* and *build*, are inherently telic while others like *talk*, *sleep* and *walk* are atelic. Similarly some verbs are inherently stative, like *know*, *love* and *resemble*, while others, like *learn*, *die* and *kill*, are non-stative. We have also seen from examples like 5.37 and 5.38 above that while these distinctions are principally associated with verbs, combining a verb with other elements in a sentence, like object noun phrases and adverbials, can alter the situation type depicted.

The task for the semanticist is to show how the inherent semantic distinctions carried by verbs, and verb phrases, map into a system of situation types. One influential attempt to do this is Vendler (1967). Below are the four kinds of situations he identified, together with some English verbs and verb phrases exemplifying each type (Vendler 1967: 97–121):

5.45   a.   States
              desire, want, love, hate, know, believe
         b.   Activities (unbounded processes)
              run, walk, swim, push a cart, drive a car
         c.   Accomplishments (bounded processes)
              run a mile, draw a circle, walk to school, paint a picture, grow up,
              deliver a sermon, recover from illness
         d.   Achievements (point events)
              recognize, find, stop, start, reach the top, win the race, spot someone

C. S. Smith (1991), building on Vendler's system, adds the situation type **semelfactive**, distinguishing it from achievements as follows:

5.46   *Semelfactives* are instantaneous atelic events, e.g. [knock], [cough].
        Achievements are instantaneous changes of states, with an outcome of
        a new state, e.g. [reach the top], [win a race].   (Smith 1991: 28)

She identifies three semantic categories or features: [stative], [telic] and
[duration], with roughly the characteristics we have already described, and
uses these to classify five situation types, as follows (1991: 30):

5.47 | **Situations** | **Static** | **Durative** | **Telic** |
        | ------------------ | ---------- | ------------ | --------- |
        | States | [+] | [+] | n.a. |
        | Activity | [−] | [+] | [−] |
        | Accomplishment | [−] | [+] | [+] |
        | Semelfactive | [−] | [−] | [−] |
        | Achievement | [−] | [−] | [+] |

We can provide examples of each situation type, as follows:

5.48   She hated ice cream.   (State)

5.49   Your cat watched those birds.   (Activity)

5.50   Her boss learned Japanese.   (Accomplishment)

5.51   The gate banged.   (Semelfactive)

5.52   The cease-fire began at noon yesterday. (Achievement)

It is important to remember that these situation types are interpretations of
real situations. Some real situations may be conventionally associated with
a situation type; for example, it seems unlikely that the event described in
5.53 below would be viewed other than as an accomplishment:
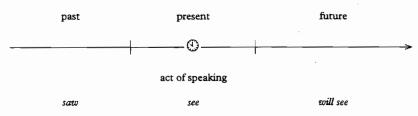
5.53   Sean knitted this sweater.

Other situations are more open, though: 5.54 and 5.55 below might be used
of the same real-world situation, but give two different interpretations of it:
5.54 as an activity and 5.55 as a state:

5.54   Sean was sleeping.

5.55   Sean was asleep.

5.2.4   Tense and aspect

Tense and aspect systems both allow speakers to relate situations to time,
but they offer different slants on time. Tense allows a speaker to locate a

Figure 5.1 Simple tenses

situation relative to some reference point in time, most likely the time of speaking. Sometimes in English this information is given by a temporal adverb; compare the following:

5.56   Yesterday they cut the grass.

5.57   Tomorrow they cut the grass.

Here, because the shape of the verb *cut* does not change, the temporal information is given by the adverbs *yesterday* and *tomorrow*. Usually in English, though, tense is marked on the verb by endings and the use of special **auxiliary verbs**, as in the forms of *speak* below:

5.58   She spoke to me.

5.59   She will speak to me.

5.60   She is speaking to me.

Tense is said to be a **deictic** system, since the reference point for the system is usually the act of speaking. As we shall see in chapter 7, deictic systems are the ways in which a speaker relates references to space and time to the 'here and now' of the utterance. Most grammatical tense systems allow the speaker to describe situations as prior to, concurrent with, or following the act of speaking. So in English, we have the three tenses: past, future and present as in 5.58–60 above. These are basic tenses and we could use a diagram like figure 5.1 to represent them, metaphorically representing time as a line moving left to right, and using the clock symbol for the time of the act of speaking.

More complicated time references are possible. For example, the speaker can locate an event in the past or future and use that event as the reference point for its own past, present and future. To do this in English, complex tenses are used. If a speaker in 1945 said, for example:

5.61   By 1939 my father had seen several arrests.