Main Session: actionality/aktionsart, formal semantics approaches, theoretical perspectives

The *Aktionsart* of German Phase Verbs

Phase verbs (PhV) display a certain degree of flexibility wrt the satisfaction of the selectional restrictions on their internal argument. They require an entity of event type (1a), but can also combine with physical objects (1b), triggering an operation of meaning adjustment or enrichment, cf. Asher (2011), Egg (2005), or Pustejovsky (2011).

(1) a. Max begann die Lektüre des Buchs.
         Max began   the reading of the book.

     b. Max begann das Buch.
         Max began   the book.

However, a corresponding variability in the external argument position of PhV has gone widely unnoticed so far. While agent subjects are acceptable with all PhV, cf. (2a) and (3a), *eröffnen* but not *beginnen* can display a non-agentive reading with an eventuality expression in subject position as well, cf. (2b) vs. (3b).

(2) a. Der Gastgeber eröffnete   die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The host   solemnly opened the anniversary celebration.

     b. Die Laudatio   eröffnete   die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The laudatory speech solemnly opened the anniversary celebration.

(3) a. Der Gastgeber begann die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The host   began   the anniversary celebration.

     b. * Die Laudatio   begann die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The laudatory speech began   the anniversary celebration.

My first question is this: Which factors license non-agentive readings for PhV?

Moreover, changing the subject type also changes the meaning of the verb *eröffnen* itself. Whereas in (2a), an agentive subject generates a change of state interpretation for the verb, the non-agentive subject triggers a part-whole interpretation between the events encoded in the external and internal argument positions: the speech is a part of the celebration. This observation prompts the second question: What are the meaning differences and similarities of a PhV's agentive and non-agentive meaning variants?

Furthermore, the existence of a non-agentive variant of PhV correlates with the availability of a third subject variant of physical object type, acceptable with *eröffnen* but not with *beginnen*:

(4) a. Die Torte   eröffnete   die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The gateau solemnly opened the anniversary celebration.

     b. * Die Torte   begann die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The gateau began   the anniversary celebration.

Crucially, the interpretation of (4a) depends on a meaning adjustment: an event associated with the gateau has to be inferred. These data raise a third question: How exactly are the meaning adjustments restricted, and at which point during composition are they at work?

My answers to these questions are as follows: First, the essential trigger of non-agentive readings is the lack of subject control over the embedded event. Whereas *beginnen* forces its subject-NP to be the embedded predicate's subject as well, *eröffnen* has no such restriction, i.e. in (3a) – contrary to (2a) – the host himself has to take part in the celebration. This paves the way for an event subject that cannot control the embedded event.

Second, the central meaning difference between the two readings in (2) consists in an alternation of *aktionsart*. While agentive subjects trigger an eventive interpretation, non-agentive subjects come with stative interpretations. Maienborn (2005) has shown independently that only events,

but not statives allow for local modification. This diagnostics indicates that the agentive reading is eventive, cf. (5a), while the non-agentive reading is stative, cf. (5b):

(5) a. Der Gastgeber eröffnete   auf der Bühne die Jubiläumsfeier.
         The host   solemnly opened on the stage   the anniversary celebration.

    b. * Die Laudatio   eröffnete   auf der Bühne
         The laudatory speech solemnly opened on the stage
         die Jubiläumsfeier.
         the anniversary celebration.

Third, the meaning adjustment in (4a) is based on a type conflict: the verb selects for events while a physical entity is given. I will present an analysis in the Type Composition Logic-framework by Asher (2011) that allows for resolving the conflict via a lexically licensed mediation (more technically, by a polymorphic type).

My presentation thus contributes to the discussion on aktionsart alternations and suggests a unified formal account of both the presented alternation and the associated licensing of complement coercion.

References

Asher, N., 2011. Lexical Meaning in Context. A Web of Words. Cambridge University Press.

Egg, M., 2005. Flexible Semantics for Reinterpretation Phenomena. CSLI Publications, Stanford.

Maienborn, C., 2005. On the limits of the neo-davidsonian approach: The case of copula sentences. Theoretical Linguistics 31, 275—316.

Pustejovsky, J., 2011. Coercion in a general theory of argument selection. Linguistics 49 (6), 1401–1431.