

## Action sensitivity in grammar

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Over the last thirty years, linguists have observed a number of grammatical phenomena that are sensitive to the interpretation of the action as intentional vs. unintentional. The phenomena come from different domains of the grammar and affect unrelated languages. Although several proposals have been put forward to account for individual cases, no attempt has been made to construct a unified analysis for this action sensitivity. Recent advances in the philosophy and psychology of action allow us to re-conceptualize the problem in a way that makes a unified analysis of grammatical action sensitivity not only possible, but also cross-disciplinarily sound. The goal of the project is to develop such a unified account.

Below is a list of the phenomena in question, organized in a descending order from widespread to more language specific. In negative contexts, there have been found two phenomena sensitive to the interpretation of the action. The first observation is due to Szabolcsi 2004. She points out that in the configuration, such as in (1), Positive Polarity Items, like non-specific *some*, are infelicitous when the action is intentional, (1a), whereas with unintentional actions *some* is felicitous, (1b). The same contrast is found in Hebrew, Hungarian, Romance, and Slavic.

- (1) a. I don't want to call someone/eat something. (some>not/\*not>some)  
b. I don't want to offend someone/break something. (some>not/not>some)

The second phenomena is well-known across the Slavic group. In these languages, negative imperatives (and deontic modals in Eastern Slavic) are generally ill-formed with perfective verbs, (2a). However, the perfective becomes available when the action is interpreted as unintentional, (2b) (Forsyth 1970, Paducheva 2013, a.o.).

- (2) a. Ne otkryvaj / \*otkroj okno! b. Smotri, slučajno ne otkroj okno!  
not open-IMPRF / -PRF window look by.luck not open-PRF window  
'Don't open the window!' 'Careful! Don't accidentally open the window!'

In both positive and negative sentences, the interpretation of the action as intentional or accidental affects the availability of co-reference between the subjects of the main and embedded clauses. In Hungarian and Romance languages, the so-called disjoint reference effect, (3a), disappears with unintentional actions, (3b) (Ruwet 1991; Farkas 1988, Schlenker 2005, Costantini 2011, a.o.). Similarly, in Newari (Sino-Tibetan), the disjunct inflection with co-reference is possible when the action is accidental, but not intentional (Hale 1980, Wechsler 2018, Zu 2018).

- (3) a. \*Je veux que je parte. b. Je veux que je sois très amusant ce soir.  
'I want for me to leave.' 'I want for me to be quite amusing tonight.'

The action sensitivity phenomena that are more language specific concern case assignment in languages that exhibit the so-called ergativity split, like Hindi/Urdu and Georgian, or have agent/patient marking, like Central Pomo (Pomoan language spoken in Northern California) (Tuite et al. 1985; Mithun 1991, a.o.). For example, in Hindi/Urdu, the ergative case is used to mark subjects of intentional/voluntary actions, (4a), whereas the nominative marks subjects of unintentional/involuntary actions, (4b).

- (4) a. Ram=**ne** khas-a b. Ram khas-a  
Ram.ERG coughed (purposefully) Ram.NOM coughed

Finally, St'át'imcets/Lillooet (Salish language spoken in southern British Columbia) has a dedicated 'out-of-control' circumfix *ka...a* (Demirdache 1997, Davis et al. 2009, a.o.). This circumfix adds a range of nuances to the interpretation of the action, including accidentality, unexpectedness, and ability.

The closest *linguistic* concept related to the phenomena above is 'agentivity', that goes back to Dowty's work (Dowty 1985, 1991). However, many arguments have been put forward showing that 'agentivity' cannot adequately explain even a single case among those listed above (Farkas 1988; Grano 2017). Therefore, as a first step, we need to find a new concept that distinguishes intentional vs. accidental actions. Based on this new concept (that I argue can be borrowed from the recent work in the philosophy and psychology of action), we can construct a unified analysis of action sensitivity in grammar.