

Complex Predicate Puzzles

Miriam Butt

This talk focuses on several interrelated puzzles that arise with respect to complex predicates and that have (to my knowledge) not as yet been resolved. Contra Hook and Pardeshi (2001, 2006), Butt and Lahiri (2013) claim that aspectual V-V complex predicates are a diachronically stable construction in Indo-Aryan and that this observation carries over to other language families as well. That is, unlike with negation, complementizer formation or case marking, there is no evidence for a cycle of Existence-Loss-Reemergence (cf. Jespersen's cycle for negation). Butt and Lahiri claim that this has to do with the lexical semantic nature of these complex predicates and, in particular, with the type of event predication involved.

However, their claim leaves unexplained the rise in frequency of aspectual V-V complex predicates observed by Hook and Pardeshi. Furthermore, historical data suggests that the rise in frequency may be connected to the demise of verbal particles. These observations give rise to (at least) the following questions: 1) Given current conceptions/analyses of event semantics lexical semantics, how can the right predictions for the diachronic data be made? 2) Does the historical persistence observed for aspectual V-V complex predicates carry over to other types of complex predicates (i.e., permissives, causatives, N-V, Adj-V, P-V complex predicates)? If not, what accounts for this? Bowerman (2008) suggests that while Butt and Lahiri's claim holds up generally cross linguistically, different types of complex predicates must be differentiated and that some types are indeed subject to historical change.

This talk takes up Bowerman's observation and shows that even assuming the relatively strictly defined approach to complex predicates as articulated in Butt (1995, 2010), not all complex predicates are created equal and that the main difference lies in the type of event structuring and predication. While some of the differences can be represented by existing formalisms and approaches to the relationship between argument structure, event structure and aspectual properties (e.g., Ramchand 2008), capturing the synchronic and diachronic differences between different types of complex predication remains a challenge. The purpose of the talk is identify the precise areas that pose a challenge and to suggest a way forward.