

Agentivity and the external argument of event nouns

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The issue

- In this talk, we will discuss the issue of agentivity and causation by considering the agentive entailments associated with the external argument position of a set of predicates, such as *fall*, *sweat* and *sleep*, which do not easily fit in the class of causative verbs (Thalberg, 1972b).
 - some unergative verbs are non-volitional and internally/externally caused:
 - a. #*John perspired/slept on purpose*
 - b. *The drugs made him sleep/perspire*
 - some can be volitional, and yet are typically unaccusative verbs :
 - c. *sono caduto/*ho caduto*
 - d. *Mario è caduto apposta*
(Mario fell on purpose)

The issue

- Some of these predicates are expressed by verbs whose subject can be human (1a) or non-human (1b).
 - (1)
 - a Mario è caduto dalla sedia.
Mario fell from the chair
 - b Il libro è caduto dalla sedia.
The book fell from the chair
 - (2)
 - a Mario ha sudato.
Mario perspired
 - b Il salame sta sudando in questa fase di stagionatura.
The salami is sweating in this phase of its curing

The issue

- The observation from which we start more specifically is the fact that, when the verb is nominalised and becomes part of a complex predication as in (3), non-human subjects are not acceptable anymore (3b).

- (3) a Mario ha fatto una (brutta) caduta
Mario had a (bad) fall
- b #Il libro ha fatto una brutta caduta
(the book had a (bad) fall)

The issue

- An analogous constraint was observed to hold for English light verb constructions by Wierzbicka (1982), who discusses pairs such as in (4) and remarks that *having a fall*, in contrast to *falling*, implies "a potential experience".
- (4) a Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
b #The apple had a fall from the tree.

The issue

- In this talk, we will discuss in more detail the possible origin of this constraint requiring an experiencer in the case of *ata* event nouns in Italian, and we will focus in particular on Italian complex predicates such as those in (5).

- (5) a Mario ha fatto una (brutta) caduta
Mario had a (bad) fall
- b Gianni ha fatto una sudata.
Gianni has a sweat

Why focussing on these Italian examples?

- 1 We have a DERIVED noun of event as a complement of the light-verb: *ata*-noun
- 2 This noun of event has an argument structure: in particular, we argue, it carries a condition restricting a potential external argument
- 3 The argument structure of the noun combines with that of the light-verb

- (6)
- a. Il muro di Berlino è caduto
the Berlin Wall fell down
 - b. #Il muro di Berlino ha fatto una caduta.
the Berlin Wall had a fall
 - c. La caduta del muro di Berlino simboleggia il processo di riunificazione della Germania.
the fall of the Berlin wall is the symbol of Germany reunification process

⇒ we will probe the agentive properties that are responsible for the (un)felicity of (6b).

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Disclaimer

- The nominalising suffix *-ata* in Italian is highly productive.
- We focus on deverbal nominalisations.
- We consider only event nouns.

Overview

- 1 Expressing the participants in events denoted by *ata*-nouns
- 2 Constraining the arguments with the suffix
- 3 Forces as potentialities: agentivity as a disposition
- 4 Integrating semantics and syntax

ata-event nouns

- *ata*-event nouns can occur in argument position (7). In this type of use, no arguments need to be expressed.
 - (7) La sciata lo ha messo di buon'umore.
the ski descent put him in a good mood.
- They frequently occur as the eventive complement of a light verb, a construction that makes it possible to express arguments.

ATA event nouns in Italian

In light-v constructions, ATA-nouns realise two main patterns that can be teased apart using the arity of the base verb (Samek-Ludovici, 1997, 2003).

- (8) Mario ha dato una mescolata al minestrone. transitive *V* → *dare*
Mario gave a stir to the soup

- (9) Gianni ha fatto una camminata. intransitive *V* → *fare*
Gianni had a walk.

ATA event nouns in Italian

Why are *ata*-nominalisations by large the only morphologically derived event nouns to appear in complex predications in Italian?

- 1 ATA event nouns enter a light-*v* construction in order to become predications and have their arguments realised.
- 2 the lexical verb contributes information for their realisation, even if nominalisations see their external argument suppressed in syntax

ATA event nouns in Italian

- **Hypothesis:** the external argument position of *ata*-nominalisations is at least semantically active, and the event noun imposes some specific constraints on the realisation of a complex predicate
- We provide three types of evidence corroborating this hypothesis:
 - constraint on subjects
 - aspectual restrictions
 - *nomen vicis* interpretation

Evidence for the external argument: subjects

In light verb constructions with *-ata* nominalisations, the subject of the light verb is obligatorily coreferential with one of the arguments of the event noun (see also Wierbicka (1982) for English).

- (10) a. Mario ha fatto la firma di Paolo. *fare* as a full verb
 (Mario made Paolo's signature)
 b. #Mario ha fatto la nuotata di Paolo. *fare* as a light-verb
 (Mario had the swim-ATA of Paolo's)

Further evidence comes from sentences containing relational adjectives. These forms that potentially can express one of the arguments, never do so (11).

- (11) Mario ha fatto una chiacchierata *paterna* con Gianni.
 Mario had a paternal chat with Gianni.

Evidence for the external argument: aspect

Aspectual restriction (1): ATA-ns denote events of the activity type. Non-dynamic predicates, i.e. states (12) and inchoative state (13), are excluded. Dynamic telic predicates, i.e. achievements (14) and accomplishments (15), are also banned.

- (12) Mario conosce il francese/ *ha fatto una conosciuta di francese
Mario knows French
- (13) Mario si è ammalato/ *ha fatto un'ammalata
Mario got sick
- (14) Mario è arrivato/ *ha fatto un'arrivata
Mario arrived
- (15) Mario ha mangiato la torta / *ha fatto una mangiata della torta
Mario ate the cake

Evidence for the external argument: aspect

Aspectual restriction (2): we can express the restriction in (1) by saying that ATA-ns select for predicates whose only argument is the external one.

These predicates denote dynamic events, characterised by agentive arguments (Dowty, 1979).

⇒ The participant that discharges the agentive role in the nominalised verb is the only one that may act as an individual that identifies the event.

Incremental themes of the verb are no longer able to measure out the event described by the nominalisation (16).

- (16) Mario ha fatto una mangiata di torta
Mario ate some cake

Evidence for the external argument: *nomen vicis*

- Deverbal *ata*-nominals are nominals that can refer to specific occurrences of events, not to types of events.
- Gaeta (2000, 2002), who observes that ATA-ns do not support generic readings (17). Other forms of derived nouns are not subject to this constraint, cf. (18).

(17) Il nuoto/# la nuotata in piscina non è più di moda.
Swimming/the swim-*ata* in the pool has gone out of fashion

(18) Leggere/la lettura/*la letta è un'attività solitaria.
Read-INF/ the read-URA/ the read-ATA is a private activity

- Donazzan and Tovina (2015) have dubbed this reading the *nomen vicis* interpretation.

Evidence for the external argument: *nomen vicis*

- The resistance to generic readings can be seen as a side-effect of the constraints on event identification.
- The external argument of the base predicate cannot receive arbitrary interpretation, but has to be instantiated by a particularised individual.

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The suffix

In present days Italian, the *-ata* ending has specialised into a derivational suffix that contributes two pieces of information (Tovena and Donazzan, 2015).

- ① the events in the denotation of *nomina vicis* are associated with an initiator. This semantic restriction applies to the external argument which is not syntactically realised.
- ② the event has delimited duration.

The two pieces of information are expressed by two predications on the event in the entry of the suffix (19).

$$(19) \quad \lambda P \lambda e [P(e) \wedge \text{INITIATOR}(e)=x \wedge \text{DELIMIT}(e)]$$

The suffix

- The DELIMIT constraint has been studied by Tovina (2015). The suffix is taken to work like an event modifier that measures the event using contextual information, see (20).

$$(20) \quad \lambda P \lambda e [P(e) \wedge \text{INITIATOR}(e)=x \wedge \mu(\tau(e)) = d \wedge d \geq \text{Min}(\mu(\tau(e)))]$$

- The predicate of events P is instantiated by a verb base that denotes in a homogeneous domain.
- The perfective content inherited from the original inflectional use of the suffix is captured by assuming a contextually determined measure function for times μ , that applies to the temporal trace of the event and returns d as a value.
- This value d is required to be superior or equal to the minimal duration of an event of type P , expressed by $\text{Min}(\mu(\tau(e)))$.
- The initiator is viewed as controlling and justifying the measure function.

The suffix

- The remainder of this talk elaborates on the INITIATOR constraint.
- Its role is proeminent in light verb constructions and is behind the behaviour illustrated in (3).

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The Initiator role

- Our goal is to make more explicit the constraint captured by INITIATOR and to work out a way to compose it with the role required by the causative light-verbs.
- Let's take a look at different agentive entailments.

Volitionality is not a relevant feature. "Breakdown verbs" (Thalberg, 1972b), cf. (21) and non-volitional reaction verbs (22) are fine with ATA-ns.

(21) Mario ha dormito/ha fatto una dormita
Mario slept/took a nap

(22) Mario ha sudato/ ha fatto una sudata
Mario sweated/had a sweat

Sentience is also not a relevant feature in all cases. Sentience can be suspended with no effect on grammaticality (23).

(23) Mario ha fatto una sudata senza accorgersene.
Mario had a sweat without noticing

More generally, **animacy** is too broad a notion in order to cover the different constraints.

(24) Mario ha fatto una scivolata giù per la discesa.
Mario had a slide down the slope

(25) La moto ha fatto una scivolata. Google search: 8 hits
the motorbike had a slide

(26) #La bici ha fatto una scivolata. Google search: 0 hits
(the bike had a slide)

Note that with these motion verbs the contrast patterns also with unaccusativity shift in Italian, marked by the use of the auxiliary

(27) Mario ha/è scivolato giù per la discesa.
Mario is/has slided down the slope

(28) La moto ha scivolato nella via di fuga per una ventina di metri/è scivolata via.
the motorbike has slided along the escape lane for about twenty meters/is slided away

"la moto ha scivolato" Google 240 hits

(29) La bici #ha scivolato / è scivolata via.
the bike has/is slided away

"la bici ha scivolato" Google 0 hits

- What seems to be required in all the examples in (24)– (29) is that the external argument of the nominalised verb be potentially **causally responsible** of the event.
 - Intuitively, Mario can be responsible of his sweating, because he can trigger it by himself, with or without external stimuli
 - Also, a motorbike can move by itself, and as such it can be responsible of its sliding, without the need of an external input of force
- Causal responsibility has been included by Dowty (1991) in its list of entailment for proto-agent role, and causation is seen as the most fundamental agentive entailment by Primus (2006).
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Dispositions as potentialities

- Dispositions have been evoked to describe linguistic phenomena, e.g. the middle constructions (Lekakou, 2004).
- Dispositions have been viewed as potentialities by Vetter (2010), i.e. as ‘possibilities rooted in individual objects’.

(30) An object x has a disposition towards a manifestation P iff x has in itself the potential to P

- The characterisation in (30) applies to passive as well as active dispositions.
- We are concerned with its active side.

Agentive dispositions

- Agentive dispositions are the potentiality to be causally responsible of the event that expresses the manifestation P, rather than being the undergoer of P.
- In this sense, dispositions can be defined as properties that have the status of **forces** with respect to (a class of) events.
- Forces are relational entities, and dispositions are relational properties, i.e. properties that are relevant with respect to the manifestation of (a class of) events.

(31) disposition = a property that has a status of force wrt to a manifestation, i.e. wrt a characterisation of events

- An individual embodies a force with respect to an event if this individual possess a property to which we attribute the status of force with respect to the event.

Agentive dispositions

- (32) a Mario ha fatto una (brutta) caduta
Mario had a (bad) fall
b #Il libro ha fatto una (brutta) caduta
(the book had a (bad) fall)

- Looking at the properties generally associated with the proto-agentive role, Mario cannot be considered a canonical agent of a falling event.

- (33) a Mario è caduto senza volerlo [- sentience]
Mario fell unintentionally
b Mario è caduto senza accorgersene [- volitionality]
Mario fell without noticing
c Gianni lo ha spinto, e Mario è caduto [- movement.
Gianni pushed him, and Mario fell down - causation]

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Agentive dispositions

- However, to be licensed as the subject of complex event, Mario must be understood as the *direct cause* of his falling.

(34) # Gianni lo ha spinto, e Mario ha fatto una caduta.
Gianni pushed him, and Mario had a fall

- We will abstract away the relevant property responsible for the potentiality to be the direct cause of the event in (34), and say that Mario has the potentiality to be causally responsible for the event of falling, i.e. he has an agentive disposition to fall.
- Note that this disposition is independent from the existence of an event Mario *is* causally responsible of, i.e. (33c) does not invalidate the disposition of Mario to be potentially responsible of his falling.
- In this sense, light-*v* constructions as in (33) provide a nice testing case.

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Integrating semantics and syntax

- In complex predicates, the constraints of the argument structure of the event noun must be composed with those expressed by the head of the predication.
- Here we will adopt the proposal that Tovenà and Donazzan (2015) make for the cases where the nominalisation occurs in a light-*v* construction.
- The task of the light verb is understood as to bring the event denoted by the nominal—with its properties—into the main predication.
- This is done in two steps.

In the first step, the nominalisation merges with v^0 . The event variable contributed by the N is identified as the event variable described by the clause, to which the Agent function relates the referent of the subject.

Event Identification with Role Composition

$f g \rightarrow h$

$f = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{Agent}(e, x) \ \& \ \text{event}(e)]$

f contributes the possibility of an external argument via the agentive role, the Davidsonian argument, and a characterisation of the eventuality as an activity.

$g = \lambda e [\text{R}(e) \ \& \ \text{INITIATOR}(e)=x \ \& \ \text{DELIMIT}(e)]$

g contributes the Davidsonian argument, the characterisation of the event, by providing a predicate of events. It contributes to aspect via (i) constraints on the event atelicity and boundedness, and (ii) a characterisation of the eventuality as an activity via the requirement of an initiator.

$h = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{R}(e) \ \& \ \text{DELIMIT}(e) \ \& \ \text{event}(e) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, x)]$

h builds the complex predicate that can apply to the external argument. It also compose $\text{Agent}(e, x)$ with $\text{INITIATOR}(e)=x$. By virtue of there being a unique event, and of the unicity of the agent, the free individual variable in g is identified and brought into the domain of the lambda operator that binds the individual variable argument of Agent in f .

- In the second step, the expression that provides a value for the agent argument position composes with the complex predicate.
- This role composition is licensed in virtue of the fact that the role contributed by the nominalisation is (either equal or) subsumed by the role contributed by the head daughter. Thus, the weaker specification gets deleted.
- This operation is selective, because only entities with agentive dispositions can provide a value for the external argument position.

Conclusions

- In this talk, we looked at ATA-nominalisations in complex predications in order to explore the constraints imposed to the realisation of the external argument of the light-*v*.
- We choose to ascribe these constraints to the selectional requirements of the light-*v*. We assume that the light-*v* is not semantically bleached, and that the restrictions imposed on the external argument of the base predicate by the nominalisation have to combine with the selectional restrictions of *v*.
- Following Donazzan and Tovenà (to appear), we suggest to express the properties that underlie agentive entailments as *agentive dispositions*, that is, potentialities related to causal responsibility with respect to an event.

Conclusions

- It has been suggested that the observed constraints can be seen as a condition of "affectedness" of the subject. Thus, Wierzbicka (1982) suggests that the subject of English *have* light-v should be able to experience the event.
- Indeed, in some cases the use of the complex predicate construction suggest a degree of involvement of the relevant participant in the event. However, this constraint cannot be extended to all instances where the complex predication is licensed in Italian (*La moto ha fatto una scivolata*).
- We believe that the flavour of involvement can be a potential side-effect of causal responsibility, and that the notion of causal responsibility is more effective for explaining the semantics of thematic roles associated with the external argument of causative verbs.

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