## The semantics of events

Nick Riches

Newcastle University

January 29, 2020

## The semantics of events

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## Tense

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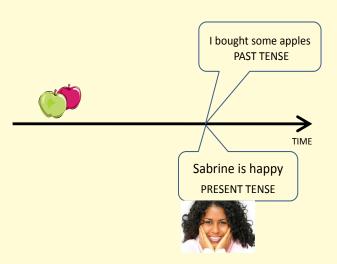
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## What is tense?

"Tense" refers to when an action took place in relation to the time of speaking, e.g.



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- I { will am going to } help you to carry that shopping.
   I think England { will are going to } win the match on Tuesday.
  - England are winning 3-nil with only five minutes of extra time. They  $\left\{\begin{array}{c} will \\ are going to \end{array}\right\}$  win.
- 4. The train \{ \begin{aligned} \line{is going to leave} \\ is leaving \\ \left| \text{leaves} \\ \left| \text{leaves} \end{aligned} \} \text{ at 6.15.}
- 5. Next year, \{ \begin{align\*} & 'm going to go \\ & 'm going \\ & will go \end{align\*} \} \text{ on holiday somewhere hot.} \end{align\*}
- 6. Tonight I \ \begin{align\*} & 'm going to have \ & 'm having \ & will have \end{align\*} & dinner with some friends.

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## PREDICTION BASED ON STRONG EVIDENCE

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### TIMETABLE FUTURE

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### TIMETABLE FUTURE

5. Next year,  $\begin{cases} \sqrt{\ 'm \ going \ to \ go} \\ \sqrt{\ 'm \ going} \\ * \ will \ go \end{cases}$  on holiday somewhere hot.

## PLAN

6. Tonight I \ \begin{align\*} & m going to have & & dinner with some friends. & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \end{align\*} & \ & & & & & & & & \ & & & & & & & & \ & & & & & & & \ & & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & & \ & & & & & \ & & & & \ & & & & & \ & & & & \ & & & & \ & & & & \ & & & & \ & & & \ & & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & & \ & & \ & & & \ & & \ & & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & & \ & \ & \ & \ & \ & \ & & \

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## PREDICTION BASED ON STRONG EVIDENCE

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6. Tonight I \{ \sqrt{m going to have} \ \sqrt{v'm having} \ \quad vill have \} \text{dinner with some friends.} \\
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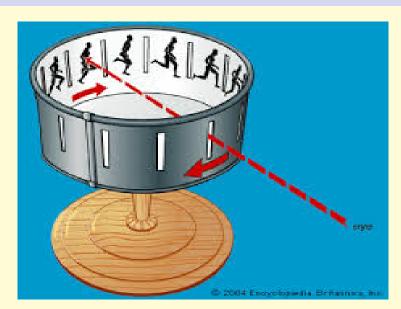
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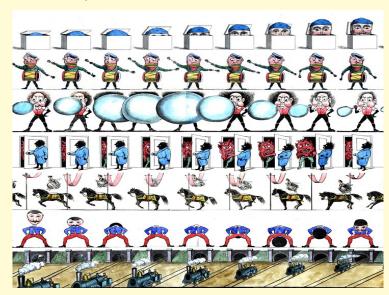
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# Which of the following verbs would make a good zoetrope?

- 1. swim
- 2. crash
- 3. laugh
- 4. dive
- 5. pop
- 6. dance
- 7. exist

## Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)













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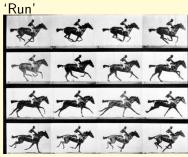
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### 'Internal structure'





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Existing verbs, be, live, exist,

Experiencer-theme verbs, e.g. like, love, hate

Mental State verbs, e.g. believe, know, hope.

### Tests...

- 1. States are difficult to define
- 2. State verbs sound odd in the progressive (-ing form), e.g. ??she is existing, ??she is liking the food, ??I am believing in fairies. This is because the progressive is used with verbs with INTERNAL STRUCTURE.
- 3. State verbs sound odd as reponses to the question what happened?, e.g. Q. What happened? ???A. She liked the food

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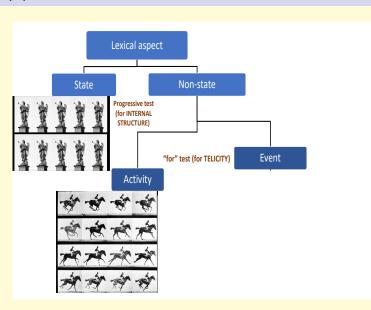
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Activities do not have a natural end point (they are "atelic").

Events have a natural end point (they are "telic").

Examples of activities are run, walk, wash, work

Examples of events are break, collapse, crash, fall

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# Tests...

Activities sound good when used with time expressions which imply an incomplete activity e.g. I've been walking for an hour (and I may continue to walk for another hour).

Events sound odd when used with such time expressions, e.g. \* It collapsed for an hour.

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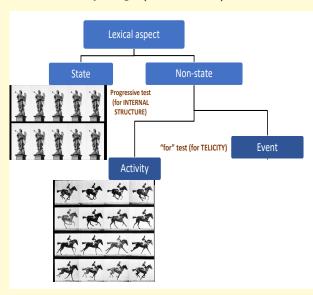
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Events sound good with time expressions which imply a complete activity, e.g. The bridge collapsed in five seconds.

Activities do not sound good with such time expressions, e.g.

\* He walked in five minutes

## Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



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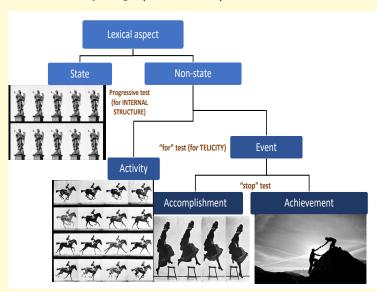
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Achievements are instantaneous (they do not exist within an identifiable time period)

The technical expression is they are 'non-durative'

- ► She reached the top.
- ► The glass smashed

Therefore we cannot use them in the progressive, e.g.

- \*She is reaching the top
- \*She is smashing the glass

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We cannot stop the event in the middle, e.g.

- \* She stopped reaching the top of the mountain
- \* The vase stopped smashing

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## Accomplishments are durative.

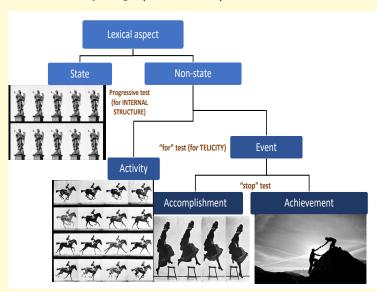
Therefore, we can use them in the progressive;

- ► She is jumping
- ► They are building

And we can stop the action in the middle;

- She jumped over the chairs ⇒ She stopped jumping over the chairs
- ► He is building a house ⇒ He stopped building the house.

## Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



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| Example verbs                      | Durativity:<br>can the event<br>last for a<br>period of<br>time? | Dynamism:<br>does the event<br>have 'internal<br>structure' | <b>Telicity:</b> is there a clear end point? | Label          |
|------------------------------------|--|---|--|----------------|
| exist, want,<br>believe            | $\overline{}$  | X   | X  | State          |
| run, dance,<br>sing, work          | $\sim$   | $\checkmark$  | X  | Activity       |
| <b>jump</b> , pour,<br>bake, write |  |   | $\checkmark$                                 | Accomplishment |
| reach, flash,<br>drop, realise     | X  | X   | $\overline{}$                                | Achievement    |

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Now what is the lexical aspect of the following verbs?

- 1. wash
- 2. cheat
- 3. flatten
- 4. paint
- 5. open
- 6. possess
- 7. deliver

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- 1. Definition test: States are relatively hard to define.
- 2. What happened test: Doesn't sound good with States
- 3. Present progressive (-ing form): States and Achievements do not sound good in the progressive
- "for" test: Activities sound good with a "for" expression, but not events.
- 5. "in" test: Events sound good with "in" but not activities
- "Stop" test: Achievements do not sound good with "stop", e.g. she stopped reaching the top of the mountain

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- 1. I **like** cheese
- 2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed "like")
- 3. I have a car
- 4. She's **having** a good time
- 5. I **love** that dress
- 6. I'm **loving** this book
- 7. Be quiet. I'm thinking
- 8. I **think** you're really rude

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- 1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
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- I have a car
- 4. She's **having** a good time
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- 1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
- She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed "like") (ACHIEVEMENT)
- 3. I have a car (STATE)
- 4. She's **having** a good time (ACTIVITY)
- 5. I **love** that dress
- 6. I'm **loving** this book
- 7. Be quiet. I'm thinking
- 8. I **think** you're really rude

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- 1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
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- I love that dress (STATE)
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- 5. I love that dress (STATE)
- 6. I'm **loving** this book (ACTIVITY???)
- 7. Be quiet. I'm **thinking** (ACTIVITY)
- 8. I **think** you're really rude (STATE)

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# 1. Each verb has two meanings (or 'senses')

2. Each verb has a primary meaning and secondary meaning

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Some verbs can 'shift' lexical aspect depending on sentence context;

- (1)She's dancing (ACTIVITY)
- (2)She danced the tango (ACHIEVEMENT)
- (3)The light is flashing (ACTIVITY, NB there is an 'iterative' interpretation)
- The light flashed (ACHIEVEMENT) (4)

However, it is often possible to identify a 'core', most frequently used lexical aspect.

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# Grammatical aspect

# Grammatical aspect

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# What is grammatical aspect?

Grammatical aspect refers to grammatical devices to signal one's perpsective on an event.



David Brent is **dancing**.

Progressive aspect shows we are still <u>inside</u> the event (it is not finished)



King Kong has **fallen Perfective aspect** shows we are 
outside the event
(it is finished)

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- 1. By this time next week, I will have eaten all of the tins of baked beans in my cupboard
- 2. She was sleeping when the earthquake happened

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# Lexical and grammatical aspect are closely 'aligned'

- ► Activity verbs + progressive grammatical aspect The horse is running
- Accomplishment/achievement verbs + perfective grammatical aspect
   He has just jumped off the roof
   She has reached the top of the mountain

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- 1. She sings every day.
- 2. He works in a call centre
- 3. He smashes things (he's clumsy or aggressive)

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- 1. She sings every day.
- 2. He works in a call centre
- 3. He smashes things (he's clumsy or aggressive)

A habitual interpretation

# (b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

1. The light is flashing 2. He's flattening boxes

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# (b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

An iterative interpretation (NB achievement becomes

1. The light is flashing 2. He's flattening boxes

accomplishment)

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Children with SLI have difficulties marking tense, e.g.

1. He went there  $\Rightarrow$  Him go there

Morphological or conceptual difficulty?

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# Young children, when acquiring tense, conflate tense and lexical aspect.

They are more likely to mark past tense on Achievement and Accomplishment verbs, because these tend to describe COMPLETED events.

e.g. Van Horne et al. 2017; Johnson & Morris, 2007.

Can we manipulate lexical aspect when teaching tense endings?

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# Johnson & Morris design

**Table 3** Imitation sentence-pair stimuli categorized by lexical aspect and phonological composition

| Phonological composition | Accomplishments                                      | Activities  |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Non-obstruent coda       | She chewed up a green She chewed a p                 |   |
|                          | He rolled a ball into the box.                       | He rolled a ball on the box.                      |
|                          | She crawled into the box.                            | She crawled around in circles.                    |
| Obstruent coda           | She skipped out the door.<br>He walked out the door. | She skipped on the rug.<br>She walked in circles. |
|                          | He jumped into a box.                                | She jumped up and down.                           |

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Van Horne et al. 2017 - found that children with DLD learnt to produce the past tense better when both aspectual and

phonological properties of a verb rendered it more difficult!!

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What is unusual about the following sentence?

"Here be dragons"

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