

Verbal roots and lexical aspect in Hittite: a cognitive linguistics approach

Guglielmo Inglese

Università degli Studi di Pavia\Università di Bergamo

Lexical aspect, also known as actionality or *Aktionsart*, is one of the most debated facets of verbal semantics (cf. Tatesov 2002, Janda 2015). Within so-called bidimensional approaches to aspect (cf. Sasse 2002), scholars distinguish between lexical aspect, conceived as the internal temporal unfolding of events, as opposed to grammatical aspect, that is, the speaker's viewpoint on the event, captured by the imperfective vs. perfective opposition. According to the received view, actionality is most relevant in the semantic description of verbal roots, as it is considered an inherent property of lexical items, and it predicts the morphosyntactic behavior of verbs. Roots can be variously classified according to their actionality, and most current classifications stem from Vendler's (1957) well-known quadripartite distinction among states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments. This approach to lexical aspect has been extensively exploited in IE linguistics (cf. Strunk 1994, Garcia Ramon 2002, Napoli 2006, Dahl 2010).

The main problem in linking lexical aspect to roots is that the actionality of individual roots may vary depending on the linguistic context in which verb forms actually occur. In order to preserve the association of lexical aspect with verbal roots, such deviant cases are treated as instantiating 'aspectual hybridism' (Bertinetto 1986).

This theoretical framework has been recently called into question by Croft (2012), who frames his analysis within Construction Grammar (CxG) and adopts a cognitive perspective to meaning. Croft assumes 'aspectual hybridism' to be a much more pervasive feature of languages and argues that every event lexicalized by a simple verb is in principle subject to different aspectual construal, i.e. actional interpretations. Starting from Vendler's classification, Croft arrives at identifying at least 11 different types of aspectual construal. In this framework, verbal roots denote the idiosyncratic facets of verbal semantics (Levin & Rappaport 2005: 71), whereas the internal temporal structure of events, i.e. aspect, results from construal imposed on the idiosyncratic semantics of roots by the constructions in which they appear. This approach to aspect is essentially unidimensional, and this follows from CxG's assumption that syntax and the lexicon constitute a *continuum*, so that it makes little sense to contrast lexical vs. grammatical aspect. As a result, actionality can no longer be defined as an inherent property of lexical roots. What linguists can investigate is which constructions trigger a specific aspectual construal and whether roots are associated with a *default* aspectual construal. Crucially, this constitutes an empirical matter, which should be addressed by investigating corpus data with quantitative methods (cf. Janda 2015).

In order to evaluate the suitability of Croft's proposal in the description of language-specific aspectual systems, I present as a case study a corpus-based classification of Old Hittite middle verbs. The issue is relevant because the distribution of the Hittite middle morphology has been claimed to be restricted to specific actional classes, such as states, activities, and spontaneous change-of-state events (cf. Neu 1968, Luraghi 2012). By exploiting Croft's more fine-grained model, we will be able to investigate with greater detail the relation between aspectual construal of verbal roots and voice selection in Hittite.

References

- Bertinetto, P. M. 1986. *Tempo, aspetto e azione nel verbo italiano: il sistema dell'indicativo*. Firenze: Accademia della Crusca.
- Beth, L. & Rappaport, M. 2005. *Argument Realization*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Croft, W. 2012. *Verbs: Aspect and Causal Structure*. Oxford: OUP.
- Dahl, E. 2010. *Time, tense and aspect in early Vedic grammar: exploring inflectional semantics in the Rigveda* [Brill's studies in Indo-European language & linguistics 5]. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

- Garcia Ramon, J. L. 2002. Zu Verbalcharakter, morphologischer Aktionsart und Aspekt in der Indogermanischen Rekonstruktion. In *Indogermanische Syntax. Fragen und Perspektiven*, H. Hettrich (ed.), 105-136. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Janda, L. A. 2015. Tense, aspect and mood. In *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, E. Dąbrowska & D. Divjal (eds.), 615 – 634. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Luraghi, S. 2012. Basic valency orientation and the middle voice in Hittite. *Studies in Language* 36 (1): 1-32.
- Napoli, M. 2006. *Aspect and Actionality in Homeric Greek. A contrastive analysis*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Neu, E. 1968. *Das hethitische Mediopassiv und seine indogermanischen Grundlagen* [Studien zu den Bogazköy-Texten 6]. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Sasse, H.-J. 2002. Recent activity in the theory of aspect: Accomplishments, achievements, or just non-progressive state?. *Linguistic Typology* 6 (2): 199-217.
- Strunk, K. 1994. Relative chronology and Indo-European verb-system. *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 22: 417-434.
- Tatevosov, S. 2002. The parameter of actionality. *Linguistic Typology* 6 (3): 317-401.
- Vendler, Z. 1957. Verbs and times. *Philosophical Review* 66, 143-60.