

snippets

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The structure of SAY verbs and temporal modification

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It has been long pointed out that in a temporal adverbial clause (TAC), *when* can relate to either the local verb or a more deeply embedded one, known as ambiguity in high/low construal (Geis 1970, 1975; Larson 1987, 1990; Haegeman 2012):

- (1) I saw Puffy in Canary Wharf *when* [she said [that she would leave]].
 - a. High construal: at the time that Puffy made the statement
 - b. Low construal: at the time of Puffy's presumed departure

If the TAC is constructed in a non-bridge verb context, e.g. *exclaim*, rather than the bridge context *say*, only the high construal is available:

- (2) I saw Puffy in Canary Wharf *when* [she exclaimed [that she would leave]].
 - a. High construal: at the time that Puffy made the exclamation
 - b. *Low construal: at the time of Puffy's presumed departure

As extraction out of a clausal complement is unacceptable in non-bridge contexts Erteschik-Shir (1973), it is attractive to explain the “disappearing” low construal via the idea that movement from the lower position is blocked by *exclaim*.

However, a new observation is that ambiguous construal reflects syntactic and semantic differences of SAY verbs. Following Grimshaw (2015), Major (2021) proposes that *say* has either the eventive use (3a) or the stative use (3b), requiring an Agent or a Source as subject respectively:

- (3) I visited the suspects in the detention centre yesterday.
 - a. **Suspect #2** *said* that he is guilty. Agent, Eventive *say*
 - b. **Suspect #2's sweating** *says* that he is guilty. Source, Stative *say*

Since their syntax and semantics are different, eventive *say* is compatible with subject-oriented/manner adverbs (4a) and the progressive aspect (4b); in contrast, stative *say* demonstrates the opposite pattern (5).

- (4) I visited the suspects in the detention centre yesterday. Eventive *say*
 - a. Suspect #2 *enthusiastically/loudly* said that he is guilty.
 - b. Suspect #2 *was saying* that he is guilty.
- (5) I visited the suspects in the detention centre yesterday. Stative *say*
 - a. *Suspect #2's sweating *enthusiastically/loudly* says that he is guilty.
 - b. *Suspect #2's sweating *is saying* that he is guilty.

The contrast between the two uses of *say* ostensibly correlates with ambiguity in high/low construal. The diagnostics from above show in (6) that an unambiguously eventive *say* leads to the high reading rather than the low one. This leads to the conclusion that the high construal is only allowed by eventive *say*, and the low construal is available only with stative *say*.

- (6) I saw Puffy in Canary Wharf
- a. when she *enthusiastically/loudly* said that she would leave. High ✓, Low ✗
 - b. when she *was saying* that she would leave. High ✓, Low ✗

A correlation between the construal and structure of SAY verbs can also account for the disappearing low construal in (2) in a different fashion: since *exclaim* is incompatible with a Source subject (7), but compatible with the eventive diagnostics (8), it only has the eventive use, with the low construal unavailable.

- (7) ***Puffy's message** *exclaimed* that she would leave at midnight. ***Source**, Eventive SAY
- (8) a. Puffy *enthusiastically/loudly* exclaimed that she would leave.
b. Puffy *was exclaiming* that she would leave.

Note that Major (2021) also discusses other distributional distinctions between the two uses of SAY verbs, which can be explored further in light of the one-on-one correlation presented here.

Finally, the observation here leads to the prediction that construals of *when* will be unambiguously high/low in TACs with verbs that are unambiguously eventive or stative. Future work can explore this prediction, and explore the details of how the syntax/semantics of eventive/stative predicates leads to the different construals noted above.

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