FINISH in American Sign Language: One or Two Lexical Entries?

One sign in American Sign Language (ASL), glossed as FINISH, lends two different readings depending on its syntactic position. When it appears at the end of the sentence as in (1), it functions like a perfective marker that triggers a bounded view of the event. Like perfective markers in other languages, it advances narrative time and is not compatible with assertions or questions about the continuation of the event.

In contrast, when FINISH appears pre-verbally, as in (2), it behaves like a perfect marker that both indicates that the event is bounded, and that the end of the event is bounded by the reference time. This is shown by the following facts: it does not advance narrative time; it lends a stative interpretation; and it is compatible with manner and frequency adverbials, among other linguistic tests that distinguish the existential perfect from the universal and resultative perfect.

This paper addresses how those two senses of FINISH are related. The two senses could be related by a single lexical entry for FINISH and derived by syntactic scope. Alternatively, the two senses could be treated as two separate lexical entries that appear in different syntactic positions. The paper shows the latter possibility to hold greater theoretical and empirical merit.

Positing a single lexical entry for FINISH is motivated by parallelism with the behavior of English adverbs in different positions. When an adjunct like 'rudely' is sentence-final as in (3), the adjunct is an evaluation of the event rather than the Agent; if it appears before the verb as in (4), the adjunct describes a property of the Agent. In Ernst's (2002) analysis, the different readings are correlated to the scopal position of the adjunct. Similarly, when a quantificational adverb like 'sometimes' appears at the end of the sentence as in (5), it quantifies over events. If it appears pre-verbally like in (6), it may also quantify over the variable introduced by the indefinite noun phrase, due to a quantificational variability effect (von Fintel 1995).

If Ernst's (2002) analysis is readapted to account for the two readings of FINISH, the account allows a single lexical entry for FINISH. Having scope over the sentence, sentence-final FINISH would contribute a reading that is about the event rather than the subject/agent. Pre-verbal FINISH, being closer to the subject, would lend a characterizing reading that attributes a property to the subject. This approach receives empirical support from negation and modals that may also appear in one of the two positions and that yield similar readings. The approach does not, however, predict that only sentence-final FINISH allows narrative advancement. Since perfective viewpoint is an aspectual category and since the perfect involves both aspect and tense, there is also little motivation for connecting them both to a single syntactic category.

An alternative approach assumes separate lexical entries for each sense, treating sentence-final FINISH as an aspectual particle that appears as the head of (head-final) Aspect Phrase and treating pre-verbal FINISH as a perfect marker that appears as the head of Tense Phrase. The two readings associated with FINISH may be then related by a grammaticization account. This approach not only predicts narrative advancement with sentence-final FINISH but also explains why FINISH as a perfective marker is pragmatically redundant with telic (bounded) events while pre-verbal FINISH is not. The one issue that remains is why the experiential perfect appears in the preverbal position, and the perfective in the sentence-final position, and not the other way around.

Since positing two lexical entries accounts for all of the core facts, and since the two senses may be related by a process of grammaticization, it seems justified that the readings associated with FINISH are not derived through scope. The analysis then clarifies that the account of adjuncts modifying Agents or events in the sense of Ernst (2002) is separate from the account of tense and aspect modifying the event structure of a sentence, even though both accounts involve modifying the verb in some way.

Examples

(1)   JOHN   CLEAN   ROOM   **FINISH**
'John cleaned the room.'

(2)   JOHN   **FINISH**   CLEAN   ROOM
'John has cleaned the room.'

(3)   She left **rudely**.
e [$_{REL}$ manifests] rudeness in Agent.

(4)   **Rudely**, she left.
e [$_{REL}$ warrants positing] rudeness in Agent.

(5)   A lawyer smokes **sometimes**.
√ 'There are some events in which a lawyer smokes.'
* 'There are some lawyers who smoke.'

(6)   A lawyer **sometimes** smokes.
√ 'There are some events in which a lawyer smokes.'
√ 'There are some lawyers who smoke.'

References

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