

**Trying our best**

Conative predicates like English *try* (TRY-verbs) tend to take infinitival or subjunctive complements for which they display a mix of extensional and intensional effects (Sharvit 2003). Syntactically, TRY-verbs are argued to have small complements ('events', Ramchand and Svenonius 2014; Wurmbrand 2019), which reflect dependence in temporal (simultaneous) and in participant structure (obligatory control, i.e. identity of matrix and embedded subject). Syntactic and semantic deviations from this pattern are subject to cross-linguistic and dialectal variation and are typically attributed to coercion (Grano 2017). Building on Grano (2017), we argue that the investigation of a richer inventory of possible complements reveals further complexities in the semantic profile of TRY-events and how they relate to the realization of different argument types in the syntax.

**Known ingredients** Grano (2017) provides a semantics for TRY-predicates that captures its selection of control-clause arguments:

- (1) a. TRY(P)(x)(e)(w) is defined only if  $\forall y \forall e' \forall w' [P(y)(e')(w') \rightarrow \text{Ag}(e', y) \text{ in } w]$ ;  
 b. where defined,  $\text{TRY}(P)(x)(e)(w) = 1$  iff  $\text{Ag}(e, x) \wedge \forall w' \in \text{INT}_{x,w} : \exists e' [e' <_{\text{init}} P(x)(e')(w)]$

*try*-ascriptions are thus true of an individual if they are the agent of an event that is carried out with the intention that it develop into an event as described by complement predicate. The requirement that an actual event (physical or mental) is instantiated in the evaluation world is the **action component** (Sharvit 2003; Nadathur 2019), that it is intended as an initial stage of a *P*-event is the **intention component**. Temporal modifications that specify *P* as having no initial stages at the time of evaluation are predicted to be infelicitous. Complements that do not semantically specify that the individual argument (subject) of *try* is the agent give rise to undefinedness. Both restrictions are avoided if a coercion operator is placed on the complement. The matrix subject is thereby guaranteed to be the agent of this enlarged complement; if CAUSE does not require temporal overlap, *P* can be specified to follow the causing event.

- (2)  $[[\text{OP}'_C]] = \lambda P_{\langle e, \langle \epsilon, st \rangle \rangle} \lambda x \lambda e \lambda w. \exists e' [\text{CAUSE}(e, e') \wedge \text{Ag}(e, x) \wedge P(x)(e')(w)]$

Whether this operator is available and how CAUSE is specified captures patterns of crosslinguistic/dialectal variation.

**Trying more data** Upon closer inspection, even in the absence of a coercion operator, agentivity of the matrix subject in the complement is neither sufficient nor necessary for felicity. (3a) meets the agentivity presupposition but is infelicitous in dialects of English that do not allow coercion; non-agentive predicates as in (3b,c) are acceptable even in non-coercion dialects:

- (3) a. Bill tried (\*for himself) to read a book. b. Bill tried not to cry. c. Try to forget it.

(1) also predicts too strong a connection with intentions. Holguin and Lederman (2023) argue convincingly that (i) unlike *intend*, *try* does not entail that the agent believes that they can bring about *P*, (4), nor (ii) does it entail that the agent wants *P*, specifically, agents can try something to demonstrate that they cannot bring it about (cf. (4b)).

- (4) a. I {try / #intend} to win the lottery.  
 b. (To demonstrate that the Cybertruck's windows cannot be broken,) Musk's assistant Franz {tried / #intended} to break the window.

The German TRY-predicate *versuchen* can take finite complement clauses that describe an eventuality that the TRY-event aims to bring about (**goal**); in this case, intention is entailed.

- (5) Wir versuchen, dass sich die Gäste wie zu Hause fühlen.  
 we try that REFL the guests like at home feel  
 'We try to make the guests feel at home.' (#But we don't want this.) from context.reverso.net

TRY can also surface with nominal arguments or as a noun:

- (6) a. Try the book! b. Try reading a book! c. Give { books /reading books} a try!

In the constructions in (6), the argument does not name a course of events the agent is instructed to realize with the intention of finding out if they can. Instead, *reading* (or some other action involving the book, (6a)) is presented as something the agent should realize to find out whether it pleases them or helps them achieve some other contextually salient goal (*means*).

**A new try** We assume that TRY-events are characterized by having an AGENT, a THEME (an event predicate often specified by the *to*-infinitival), and a GOAL that the agent wants to bring about by carrying out the TRY-event. We assume that the TRY-event itself (*extensional trace*) is either an initial event in a continuation path towards the realization of the THEME-event (Sharvit (2003); Nadathur (2019)) or an instantiation of the THEME-predicate. Table 1 shows the alignments for a few of our examples (boldfaced: the role(s) realized overtly):

	Extensional trace	THEME	GOAL	MEANS
(3a)	initial subevent of a book-reading	to read a book	Bill has read a book	
(4b)	initial subevent of a window-breaking	<b>to break the window</b>	it is demonstrated that the window cannot be broken	initial subevent of a window-breaking
(5)	treating guests nicely	for the guests to feel at home	<b>the guests feel at home</b>	treating guests nicely
(6b)	book reading event	to read a book	you gain knowledge	<b>reading a book</b>

To provide a semantics that allows for flexibility and impact of complement type, we assume that the verb is lexically associated with an event predicate that can instantiate either the THEME (denoted by the control infinitival or resolved anaphorically;  $\nu$  the type of events) or the MEANS. We follow Sharvit (2003) and Grano (2017) for the action component and assume that TRY-events themselves are events in the world of evaluation (*extensional trace*) that have an intensional connection to the THEME. To allow for (4), we avoid an entailment to intention (pace Grano) or desire (pace Sharvit) for realization of the THEME. Instead, we assume that the Agent believes that, if the THEME can be realized (circumstantial possibility  $\diamond^{circ}$ ), then it is possible that an event of the same kind as the extensional trace brings it about ( $e \approx_k e'$ ).

$$(7) \quad \llbracket \text{TRY} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle s, \langle \nu t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x \lambda e. \exists P'_{\langle s, \langle \nu t \rangle \rangle}. [\text{AGENT}(e) = x \ \& \ \text{THEME}(e) = P' \ \& \ [P(e) \vee [P = P' \ \& \ \Box^{dox(x)} [\diamond^{circ} \exists e' [P'(e')] \rightarrow \diamond^{circ} \exists e', e'' [e' \approx_k e \ \& \ e' <_{init} e'' \ \& \ P'(e'')]]]]]]$$

A finite complement clause (German *dass*-clause, Serbian non-control *da* complement clauses, Todorović and Wurmbrand 2020; Kaufmann et al. 2023) does not fill the event predicate argument slot, but can specify the desired result state (GOAL) of the TRY-event. We assume that these complements contain modal operators that are anchored to the matrix verb event (Kratzer 2006); TRY-events can serve as the anchor for a prioritizing modal and the complement clause specifies something the agent is trying to bring about. In the presence of an overt theme argument (pronominal or infinitival), the goal can only surface as a rational clause (for syntactic reasons).

**Conclusion.** The investigation of different syntactic complement types uncovers a more complex event structure of TRY-predicates as has been assumed previously. The resulting unified semantics allows also for flexible integration of the complements as advocated for in the recent literature. Further research should systematically test the alignments we suggest as well as effects of volition and intention and their correlations with different complement types.

**Sel. Ref.** Grano 2017 Control, temporal orientation, and the cross-linguistic grammar of *trying*. • Holguin & Lederman 2023 Trying without fail. • Kratzer 2006 Decomposing attitude verbs. • Nadathur 2019 Causality, aspect, and modality in actuality inferences. Sharvit 2003 Trying to be progressive: the extensionality of *try*.