

On the interaction of aspect and ability in two Hindi/Urdu constructions

Prerna Nadathur

The Ohio State University & New York University

Butt (1997) describes an unexpected **dispositional** reading for certain Hindi/Urdu complex predicates under imperfective marking: while (1) simply indicates that Yusuf habitually drives a car, (2a)—in which *calaa* ('drive') is modified by the light verb *le* ('take')—indicates that Yusuf not only can (has the ability) to drive, but also chooses regularly to exercise this ability. The dispositional reading suggests that *le* introduces modal semantics, but this is difficult to reconcile with its apparent role under perfective marking: *le* in (2b) is often described as an 'aspectual' light verb, contributing a completive interpretation (Singh 1998, a.o.).

- (1) *Yusuf gaarii calaa-taa (hai).*
Yusuf car drive-IMPF.M (be.PRS)
'Yusuf drives a car.'
- (2) a. *Yusuf gaarii calaa le-taa (hai).* b. *Yusuf-ne gaarii calaa li-yaa.*
Yusuf car drive take-IMPF.M (be.PRS) Yusuf-ERG car drive take-PFV.M.
'Yusuf will (can and does) drive a car.' 'Yusuf completed driving a/the car.'

In pursuit of a unified analysis, I compare the pattern of interpretation in (2) to another well-known case where modality is seemingly erased under perfective marking: the **actuality entailments** of ability modals (Bhatt 1999). While imperfectively-marked *sak* ('can') in (3a) describes a 'pure' (potentially-unrealized) ability, its perfective counterpart (3b) is well-paraphrased by the implicative verb *manage* (Karttunen 1971), and requires that the ability-target actually occurs.

- (3) a. *Yusuf gaarii calaa sak-taa hai (lekin us-ne gaarii nahī calaa-yii).*
Yusuf car drive can-IMPF.M be.PRS (but he-ERG car NEG drive-PFV.F).
'Yusuf can drive a car (but he did not drive a/the car).'
- b. *Yusuf gaarii calaa sak-aa (#lekin us-ne gaarii nahī calaa-yii).*
Yusuf car drive can-PFV.M (#but he-ERG car NEG drive-PFV.F).
'Yusuf managed to drive a/the car (#but he didn't drive a/the car).'

Drawing on a recent causal analysis of implicative verbs (Nadathur 2023a,b), I suggest that the semantic structure of *manage* offers a path towards unifying the dispositional reading in (2a) with the 'completed' reading in (2b), as well as accounting for the ability/actuality alternation in (3). I propose that what *manage*, *le* and *sak* share is presuppositional reference to a causal background structure in which their subjects must take action to *bring about* (causally ensure) the realization of some event or state associated with the main/embedded verb. *Manage* and *le* both require that this causing action is realized (producing habitual readings in the imperfective and episodic readings under the perfective), but differ in the relationship that the causing action has to the event structure described by the embedded verb. Ability modals differ from both *manage* and *le* in the asserted dimension, establishing only their subjects' capacity to realize the relevant causing action: this produces stative (pure ability) readings under imperfective marking, but triggers an eventivizing operation of *aspectual coercion* (de Swart 1998, Homer 2021, a.o.) when composed with the perfective, resulting in the actualized (implicative) reading in (3b). This approach points to an underlying link between the aspectual properties of event types and the structure of *causal models* (language-independent representations of contextual causal information), which supposedly 'aspectual' light verbs in Hindi/Urdu and other languages are well-positioned to probe.