Trying our best

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TRYing and others

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- Same in languages where even syntactically small complements are finite:

  (BCMS, Todorović and Wurmbrand 2015; Kaufmann et al. 2023, a.o.; Bavarian German, Lohninger 2024)

  (3) Jovan je pokušao da (#Vesna) čita knjigu
  Jovan AUX tried that (Vesna) read.3S.PRS.IMPFV book
  (#sutra).
  (tomorrow)
  'Jovan tried to read the book.' BCMS

"Small" complements

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- What are 'events'? What grammatical markings express the dependence in participant and event structure?
- Is the dependence in participant and event structure encoded directly in TRY and the complement separately?

⇒ What is the semantics of TRY and what is the contribution of various complements?

Outline

Tryings are doings with an attitude

- TRY: agentive events with an **action component** and an **intention component** Sharvit 2003; Grano 2017; Nadathur 2019

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- Grano's (2017) *try*:

(4) TRY(P)(x)(e)(w) is defined only if
$\forall y \forall e' \forall w' [P(y)(e')(w') \rightarrow \text{Ag}(e', y) \text{ in } w]$;
where defined,
TRY(P)(x)(e)(w) = 1 iff
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  - presupposed: P is agentive for its individual coordinate
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  - P-event description cannot be temporally specified independent of the trying event e as the latter is its initial temporal part.

Coercion severing ties

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Orzak US English: Henry 1992

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Lit: 'Today, Juan tried for Pedro to open the door tomorrow.'

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- Grano (2017) derives crosslinguistic differences from (i) whether a **coercion operator** is available, and (ii) how exactly it is specified.

Grano's coercion operator

- Enabling non-control complements (and possibly temporal modification):

(7) a. [John tried [OP'$_C$ [for Bill to leave]]]

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

- Ingredients:
  - introduces new event layer (describing a causing event e) on top of embedded predicate
  - thus modified embedded property is guaranteed to be agentive
  - if CAUSE does not require temporal overlap/adjacency (lexical parameter of causation predicates), P can be specified as in the future

Outline

Problem 1: TRY-restriction regards control, not agentivity

- In English without coercion, *for*-infinitivals remain bad when matrix and embedded subject are identical:

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- Non-agentive complements are fine even in dialects that don't accept coercion:

  (9) a. Bill tried not to cry.
  b. Bill tried to forget what had happened.

Problem 2: Intention is not always the attitude

Holguín and Lederman 2024

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- TRY does not entail INTEND or WANT:
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  (11) (To demonstrate that the Cybertruck's windows cannot be broken,)
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⇒ Attitude component needs rethinking

Problem 3: The coercion pattern undergenerates

- Unexpected pattern: Standard English tends to allow temporal but not person severing: Same: German infinitivals

(12) I am trying to arrive tomorrow.
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- TRY-verbs can take complements other than *to*-infinitivals:
  - still TRY-events (same action component and attitude component)
  - but complements can add different information about this event (MEANS, GOALS)
  - fits recent trend to put more information into embedded clauses (Kratzer 2006; Moulton 2009; Elliott 2020; Bondarenko 2022, a.o.)

Tasks

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  - TRY does not entail WANT — *pace* Sharvit (2003)
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- How are different complement types integrated and what meanings do they contribute?

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- *for*-PPs

  (18) Try for promotion. GOAL

Finite complement clauses as GOALS

- German and BCMS TRY (*versuchen*,*pokušati*) can take finite complement clauses (non-controlled):

(19) 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.' from context.reverso.net

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- The finite complement clause describes a **goal** the agent of the TRY-event wants to bring about.

Taking apart TRY-events

	Action component	THEME	GOAL	MEANS
Bill tried to read a book	initial subevent of a book-reading	**to read a book**	Bill has read a book	
Franz tried to break the window	throw rock at window	**to break the window**	it is demonstrated that the window cannot be broken	throw rock
Wir versuchen,' dass. . .'	treating guests nicely	for the guests to feel at home	**the guests feel at home**	treating guests nicely
try reading a book	(part of) book reading event	to read a book	you gain knowledge	**reading a book**

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(20) a. He didn't bother to tell us.
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- Difference with *try*:

(21) a. Try to read the book. 'endeavor'
b. Try reading the book. 'test the effectiveness of'

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- Finding: for MEANS, gerunds are preferred, but *to*-infinitivals aren't excluded.

Testing for MEANS: Door Buttons

Context: *Imagine a game where one wins if they manage to open a door, and the door is opened if one presses an active button. There are four buttons, a blue one, a red one, a white one, and a green one, and the owner makes a different set of buttons active for every round. The player first tries to press each button to see if they can reach them, and then the connection to the door is switched on. Now, the machine will open the door when one of the activated buttons is pressed, but it won't do anything when none or one of the inactive buttons is pressed. Only one button can be pressed in a single round of the game.*

It is A's turn to play the game. A tries if they can press all four buttons. It turns out that A can easily press the red, green, and white one, but A cannot reach high enough to press the blue one.

The owner announces that exactly two of the buttons are set to active. Pressing either of them will open the door. A gets only one chance to press a button.

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It is A's turn to play the game. A tries if they can press all four buttons. It turns out that A can easily press the red, green, and white one, but A cannot reach high enough to press the blue one.

The owner announces that exactly two of the buttons are set to active. Pressing either of them will open the door. A gets only one chance to press a button.

A's coach: Ok, so there are three buttons you can press, and at least one of them opens the door. Well, let's take our chances:

i. Try pressing the green one.
ii. Try to press the green one.

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i. Try pressing the green one. — preferred

ii. Try to press the green one. — not excluded, 'same reading'

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(22) It's too hot in here.

a. I tried opening the window, but it's locked.
b. I tried opening the window, but that didn't help at all. Outside it's just as hot.

Outline

TRY stab 1: Valid Strategy

- Complement *P*: THEME — ignoring MEANS reading

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  - What does it mean to be the (event-)THEME of the action component e?

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- THEME P is of **epistemic interest**:

(extending from Jones 1983)

  - 'Typical TRYs': AGENT wants to (i) realize P, or (ii) know if they can realize P
  - AGENT wants to establish that they cannot realize P

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- TRY by Epistemic Interest:

(24) a. $\text{EpInt}(y, ?p) :=$ y wants to know if p

b. $\text{Can}(x, P) :=$ x can realize P

$$\Diamond^{circ} \exists e, e' [^{\vee} P(e) \wedge \textsc{Cause}(e', e) \wedge \textsc{Agent}(e') = x]$$

c. $[\![\textsc{Try}]\!] = \lambda P_{\langle s, \langle \epsilon t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x : \exists y [\text{Epint}(y, ?\text{Can}(x, P))].$

$$\lambda e.[\textsc{Agent}(e) = x \wedge \Box^{bul(x)} [\Box^{dox(y)} ?\text{Can}(x, P)]]$$

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  - AGENT wants to establish that they cannot realize P

- TRY by Epistemic Interest:

(24) a. $\text{EpInt}(y, ?p) :=$ y wants to know if p

b. $\text{Can}(x, P) :=$ x can realize P

$$\Diamond^{circ} \exists e, e' [^{\vee} P(e) \wedge \textsc{Cause}(e', e) \wedge \textsc{Agent}(e') = x]$$

c. $[\![\textsc{Try}]\!] = \lambda P_{\langle s, \langle \epsilon t \rangle \rangle} \lambda x : \exists y [\text{Epint}(y, ?\text{Can}(x, P))].$

$$\lambda e.[\textsc{Agent}(e) = x \wedge \Box^{bul(x)} [\Box^{dox(y)} ?\text{Can}(x, P)]]$$

  - $\Box^{\text{bul}}$ as **effective preferences** (consistent and action guiding, Condoravdi and Lauer 2012), $\Rightarrow$ **valid strategy**.

TRY stab 2: Epistemic interest

- TRY-events have an event predicate as their THEME
- THEME P is of **epistemic interest**:

(extending from Jones 1983)

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  - $\Box^{\text{bul}}$ as **effective preferences** (consistent and action guiding, Condoravdi and Lauer 2012), $\Rightarrow$ **valid strategy**.
  - EpInt: similarly antecedents of German *falls*-conditionals (Kaufmann et al. t.a.)

Integrating other MEANS and GOALS

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- To be worked out MEANS, nominal complements,...

Outline

Trying vs. trying one's best

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- TRY does not entail TRY ONE'S BEST
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- When does an event count as trying?

(26) a. Try harder.
b. You did not even try.

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- If $\theta-$roles are unique per event, then if the epistemic interest of a TRY-event is its THEME, this looks problematic: "convince Mary" $\neq$ "Mary".
- By our assumptions, TRY-events are complex (containing the action component plus an attitude component (epistemic interest; valid strategy). The THEME of the complex event is the event predicate.

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