

Verb phrase semantics: Varieties of event reference and event description

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Description: The literature on the semantics of verb phrases (including, of course, verbs themselves) has yielded important insights into how we structure events through language, how languages express the relations between events and their participants, and how verb and verb phrase semantics vary typology, among other questions. However, challenges remain, including how to handle verbal polysemy, especially “figurative” and idiomatic uses of verbs, and how best to capture certain sorts of cross-linguistic variation in verb and verb phrase semantics. In this course we will take a fresh look at some of these challenges, from a semantic perspective that distinguishes the analysis of event reference from that of event description. The goal is to provide a richer range of theoretical tools with which to analyze verb and verb phrase semantics, and to inspire rigorous investigation into lesser studied empirical phenomena, particularly those where linguistic creativity is highly salient.

Objectives:

1. Provide background on the classic problems in the analysis of the syntax/semantics interface of event reference and description, with a focus on verbs.
2. Introduce the main theoretical concepts and tools used in the literature on this interface.
3. Heighten awareness of systematic cross-linguistic similarities and differences in verb syntax and semantics and offer methodological tools for exploring these.
4. Provide examples of the application of relevant concepts and tools to specific case studies, especially in relation to linguistic creativity.

Topics and schedule:

Day 1 (17/8). Foundations. Key problems in the analysis of verb phrase semantics. “Event reference” and “event description”. Theoretical concepts and tools for analyzing event reference/description: Logico-semantic representations, aspectual classes of verbs/VPs and decomposition into semantic primitives, event (part) structures (mereology and mereotopology).

Day 2 (18/8). Verb (phrase) semantic decomposition via primitives vs. event part structures (McNally 2024).

Day 3 (19/8). Crosslinguistic variation in event reference and description (I): Spanish reflexive psychological verbs vs. their English counterparts (Marín & McNally 2011).

Day 4 (20/8). Crosslinguistic variation in event reference and description (II) / The interaction between descriptive content, event reference, and grammar (I): Crosslinguistic variation in figurative uses of verbs and grammar (McNally & Spalek 2022, Spalek & McNally 2026).

Day 5 (21/8). The interaction between descriptive content, event reference, and grammar (II): Idioms and the syntax/semantics interface of descriptive content vs. reference (Gehrke & McNally 2019).

Key readings:

- Gehrke, Berit, and Louise McNally. 2019. Idioms and the syntax/semantics interface of descriptive content vs. reference. *Linguistics* 57(4), 769-814.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2019-0016>
- Marín, Rafael, and Louise McNally. 2011. Inchoativity, change of state, and telicity: Evidence from Spanish reflexive psychological verbs. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 29(2), 467-502. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-011-9127-3>
- McNally, Louise. 2024. Two approaches to the semantic decomposition of change of state verbs, how they differ, and why it matters. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.9948>

McNally, Louise and Alexandra Spalek. 2022. Grammatically relevant aspects of meaning and verbal polysemy. *Linguistics* 60(6), 1943-1987. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2020-0167>

Spalek, Alexandra and Louise McNally. 2026. The anatomy of a verb: *tear*, *rasgar*, and lexical equivalence. *Languages in Contrast* 26(1), 85-108.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/lic.00059.spa>

Other Bibliography: The bibliography on event reference and description in linguistics is enormous; students are strongly encouraged to consult the bibliography in Williams 2015 and the handbooks/collections, listed below, and McNally 2024, listed above.

- Beavers, John, and Andrew Koontz-Garboden. 2020. *The roots of verbal meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198855781.001.0001>
- Carlson, Gregory N. 2003. Weak indefinites. In Martine Coene and Yves D'hulst (eds.), *From NP to DP*, 195-210. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/la.55.09car>
- Dowty, David R. 1979. *Word meaning and Montague Grammar*. Springer (reissued).
<https://doi.org/10.1075/la.55.09car10.1007/978-94-009-9473-7>
 [Classic work on event semantics, even though Dowty did not use that term. Eventually I have decided I do not agree with Dowty's approach, but it's still one of the most amazing books I have ever read, foreshadowing a lot of work in a lot of areas of semantics that came later. It's worth reading the *entire* book, including Chapter 8.]
- Filip, Hana. 2011. Aspectual class and Aktionsart. In Maienborn, et al. (eds), 1186-1217. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110589443-009>
- Gutzmann, Daniel, Lisa Matthewson, Cécile Meier, Hotze Rullmann and Thomas Ede Zimmermann (eds.). 2021. *The Wiley Blackwell companion to semantics*.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118788516>
- Krifka, Manfred. 1989. Nominal reference, temporal constitution and quantification in event semantics. In Bartsch, Renate, Johan van Benthem and Peter van Emde Boas (eds.), *Semantics and contextual expression*, 75-116. Dordrecht: Foris.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110877335-005>
- Maienborn, Claudia, Klaus von Stechow and Paul Portner (eds.). 2011-2013. *Semantics. An international handbook of natural language meaning* (3 volumes). Berlin: De Gruyter. [Redistributed 2019 in 7 volumes in the Mouton Reader series.]
- McNally, Louise, and Zoltán Gendler Szabó. *A Reader's Guide to Classic Papers in Formal Semantics - Volume 100 of Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy*. Cham: Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85308-2>
- Parsons, Terence. 1990. *Events in the semantics of English: A study in subatomic semantics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Piñón, Christopher. 1997. Achievements in an event semantics. In Lawson, Aaron (ed.), *Proceedings of SALT 7*, 276-293. <https://doi.org/10.3765/salt.v7i0.2781>
- Pustejovsky, James. 1991. The syntax of event structure. *Cognition* 41. 47-81.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277\(91\)90032-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(91)90032-Y)
- Rappaport Hovav, Malka, and Beth Levin. 2001. An event structure account of English resultatives. *Language* 77, 766-797. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2001.0221>
- Rothstein, Susan. 2004. Structuring events: A study in the semantics of lexical aspect. Oxford: Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470759127>
- Truswell, Robert (ed.). 2019. *The Oxford Handbook of Event Structure*. Oxford: OUP.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199685318.001.0001>
- Williams, Alexander. 2015. *Arguments in syntax and semantics*. Cambridge: CUP.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139042864>
 [This is an excellent textbook – a bit compressed sometimes, but extremely complete, broad-minded, and very intelligently written, with lots of references. The discussion of causation and resultatives is a bit challenging to read, but very interesting.]

Questionnaire link: <https://forms.gle/LNMA3H3TGsqYJ5Ea7>