

A model of TAM-semantics

Theoretical linguistics (with some comparative notes)

In my talk, I would like to focus on the semantic connection between T(ense), A(spect) and M(odality). All of these categories have been associated with the feature [+/-]‘being claimed’. For example, Palmer captures the contrast between realis and irrealis in terms of the contrast ‘being claimed’ vs. ‘not being claimed’ (Palmer 2001:3-4); similarly, Wolfgang Klein defines tense and aspect as relations to the particular time for which a claim is made, i.e. to the Topic Time (Klein 1994). In my view, these traditions call for being combined in a unified model of TAM-semantics, which, however, differs in some crucial respects from its predecessors (e.g. in the definition of modality):

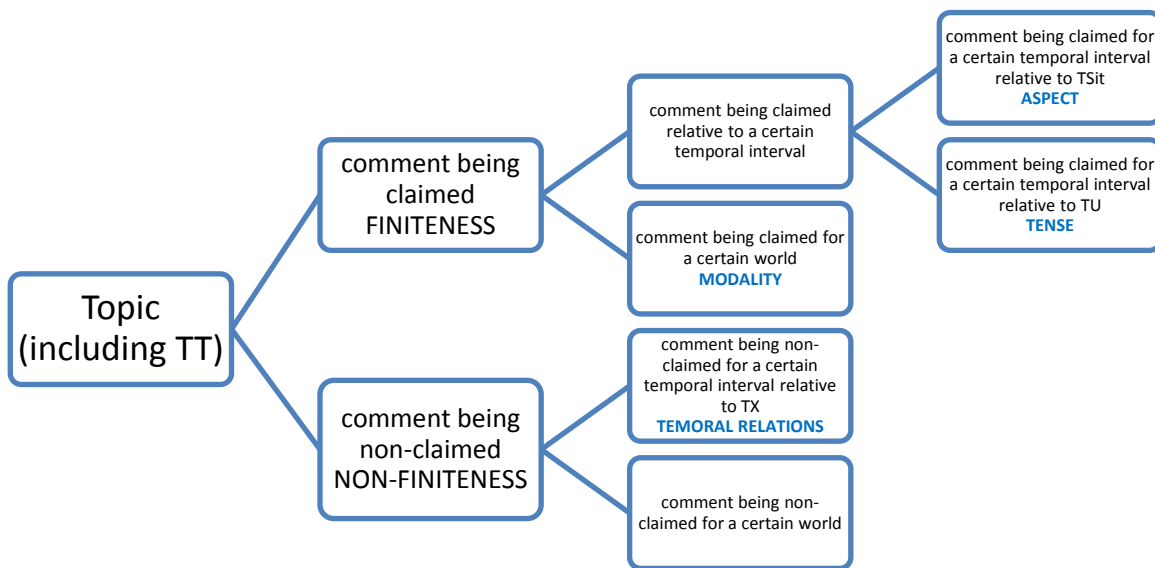


Figure 1: proposed model of TAM-semantics; further divisions are possible (for abbreviations see the abbreviations section)

I will present the model in more detail, discuss its strengths as well as its weaknesses and point to its relevance for some current debates. For example, in recent articles by Bohnemeyer and Klein the question is at issue if the notion of temporal relations is a necessary one (Bohnemeyer 2014) or if it might be replaced by aspectual notions, at least in some contexts (Klein 1994:131, Klein 2014:960). Using the definitions above, the case is clear: temporal relations on the one hand and aspect on the other hand are fundamentally different categories, among other things differing in the value of the feature ‘being claimed’. In particular, the notion of TX comes in useful when a second verb with its own temporal anchoring is involved, e.g. the matrix verb. So my hypothesis would be that an embedded verb (semantically) belongs to the non-finite branch in the model, expressing its temporal relation to the matrix verb, whereas aspect is a property of a single verb.

Another relevant question is the placement of infinitives in the model. If they are placed on the non-finiteness branch (which seems natural) then their well-known variability in POS-membership becomes plausible: like nouns they do not claim anything; still they are like verbs in denoting situations. In addition, the model provides for some seemingly exotic categories like conditional infinitives so that the issue is raised if these categories exist in the languages of the world. Also in comparative studies more generally the model might be of some use, as it offers a purely semantic

definition of (non-)finiteness that is cross-linguistically applicable.

Regarding the model as a whole, interestingly, a similar suggestion has been made with respect to sentential negation: it appears not to negate the proposition per se but the relation between topic and comment (Spencer 2013:227-228). Thus, in sum, it seems that putting features of information structure on centre stage is a promising approach, especially regarding TAM.

I will close on a short note about E(videntiality), arguing that in a purely semantic model of TAM, evidentiality is included in the category of modality, whichever separate expressions it might receive in the languages of the world.

References

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Abbreviations

A	aspect
M	mood/modality
POS	part(s) of speech
T	tense
TSit	Time of Situation (Klein 1994)
TU	Time of Utterance (Klein 1994)
TX	some specific time