CARL BACHE. The Study of Aspect, Tense and Action. Towards a Theory of the Semantics of Grammatical Categories. Frankfurt am Main / Berlin / New York / Paris / Wien: Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1995. ISBN 3-631-49510-2; US-ISBN 0-8204-2969-4. Pp. 342. Price: US $ 63.95.

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In this very ambitious book, the general emphasis is on 'certain fundamental methodological and terminological issues' (p. 9). The author's intention is to explore 'the problems of establishing tense, aspect and action [in the sense of 'Aktionsart'] as universal categories and [to devise] an adequate general metalanguage for their description in individual languages' (p. 14, my additions; cf. also p. 60). In particular, the author stresses the importance of action as 'a central category of major linguistic information units' and as 'one of the primary semantic categories to be investigated in a theory of language' (p. 12).

One may, however, perceive a certain equivocation, not to say discrepancy, between the author's universalist programme and the empirical data on which the exposition is based. The author is himself an Anglicist, and both the material and conceptual framework reflect this linguistic background. The vast majority of the examples are English, with a sprinkling of Russian ones in between. The theoretical orientation is eclectic. The author professes sympathy with modern functionalism (Halliday, Dik), philosophical tenets associated with generativism (mentalism, innatism, creativity), cognitive semantics (Jackendoff, Lakoff), but he is most basically indebted to various branches of classical structuralism, such as the Prague school, American structuralist phonology (cf. in particular p. 163), and Hjelmslevian glossematics (though his concept of 'form' is different from that of Hjelmslev; cf. e.g. pp. 92 ff.). He takes a paradigmatic ('vertical') view of grammatical categories (Chapter 5); markedness theory (privative and equipollent oppositions) is basic to the framework. This is combined with a prototype view of meaning as not dependent on further feature analysis (p. 19). (On p. 182, 'prototype' is identified with 'Gesamtbedeutung'.) Truth conditional semantics is in principle only granted a heuristic status (but the enlightening discussion of substitution types on pp. 125 ff. is crucially dependent on a truth conditional analysis; cf. also e.g. pp.

156 f., 250). This eclecticism is not to be construed as a piecing together of fragments from different theories; it rather reflects the author's ambition to provide the pretheoretical foundations for a comprehensive integrated study of tense, aspect and action. The concepts 'metalanguage' and 'metacategory' figure prominently in the discussion (Chapters 4, 6, 7).

Chapter '2 Some Methodological Problems' contains a plea for a universalist stand and a combined notional and formal network approach to grammatical categorization, as well as a discussion of logical problems connected with the form-meaning relation in universal grammar conceived of as an abstract metagrammar. This leads the author to 'a kind of dialectic interaction between the language-specific level and universal grammar' (p. 36), combining the form-to-meaning and the meaning-to-form approach (pp. 43 ff.), both as a way out of a methodological dilemma and as a basis for explaining the diversity of existing linguistic analyses. The methodological discussion is taken further in Chapters '3 A Possible Framework for a New Approach' (parts of which may be read as a brief introduction to cognitive semantics), '4 Source-language versus General Metalanguage', '5 On the Nature of Choice in Language' and '6 Categories and Form-Meaning Relationships'. The latter two chapters deal with tense, aspect and action categories and provide the basis for the discussion in the two last chapters '7 The Metacategories of Action, Tense and Aspect' and '8 Overview: Towards a Theory of Action, Tense and Aspect', which are devoted to a systematic description of the categories in question.

The author makes a fair number of conceptual and terminological distinctions, but at times this is done with a cost to overall clarity. Not self-evidently, the term 'metalanguage' is used in a number of different senses comprising terminology, notation, diagram, or plain English (which according to the author is the metalanguage to be recommended universally on the basis of 'the principle of optimal interscholarly communication', p. 103). Another instance of terminological equivocation is the concept of 'specific level', which is paraphrased both as "grammar' in the sense of interaction between data and description' and 'object-language grammar' in adjacent clauses (p. 72). There is a lengthy discussion (pp. 60 ff.) of the difference between 'general metalanguage' as the 'form of expression' (p. 61) of universal grammar and as individual metalanguages 'intended to be more or less independent of universal

grammar' (loc. cit.), and of their interrelationships with 'object-' and 'source-language'. The discussion is highly illustrative of the author's 'pretheoretical' concerns but contributes less to an analysis of the linguistic data at hand.

The author emphasizes the importance of adopting a 'set of humanly conceivable notions' (p. 85) as the basis of his cognitive approach and concludes that the principles specified in universal grammar have psychological reality. He goes on to assume a 'principle of semantic determination' (p. 104) according to which 'there is a semantic rationale for the distribution of the members of a category' (p. 104; cf. also p. 86). On the other hand, he describes arbitrariness in the sense of lack of semantic motivation (e. g. gender assignment in German and Danish) as being 'not clearly rule-governed' distribution (p. 87) and adds that, in such cases, 'the psychological reality of the category is restricted to an awareness, at some level of consciousness, of the formal existence of the category, and the native speaker's ability to select the appropriate form in any given context must be attributed to learning by rote' (loc. cit.). This seems to be merely a rather roundabout way of saying that there are both semantically motivated as well as semantically unmotivated rules and that there can be no doubt that both kinds have some sort of 'psychological reality' – if not, they could not by definition be part of any kind of operative internalized grammar.

One of the most risky terms to use in linguistic description is probably 'form'. In this work it turns up with several meanings, first as morphological (and/or lexical) manifestation, but also in a more abstract sense as 'form type', 'abstract form' or even 'metaform' (pp. 93 f.; cf. also p. 142: '*metalinguistic form* as something highly abstract and completely independent of language-specific form, something which in a general way represents any mode of expression in any particular language'; author's italics). The author goes to great lengths to justify these terms but it is still hard to see that they bring more precision to linguistic theory than does the term 'formal category' (pp. 94 ff.).

The linguistic universalism advocated in this book appears to be more methodological than ontological in nature. The author stresses the quest for the semantic motivation of grammatical categories and rules as an apt research strategy (pp. 89 f.) and considers universal grammar to be 'a dynamic theoretical construct which facilitates linguistic research', a mere 'research strategy rather than necessarily a

real property in natural languages' (p. 89). But universal grammar is also based on 'psychologically real, prototypical categories' (p. 92) and the author emphasizes the importance of the principle of 'organizational isomorphism' (pp. 82 ff., 103) between the universal metalanguage and descriptions of individual source and object languages. However, in my view, this semiotic principle calls for a fuller discussion of the relationship between linguistic theory (including heuristics) and ontology than is provided in the present work. In the chapters that follow, the heuristic aspects of theory formation predominate.

In Chapter 6 the author returns to the question of 'meta-linguistic forms', here viewed as 'idealized cognitive models' in the sense of Lakoff (1987) and 'abstract prototypes' (p. 143). It is, however, hard to see how the 'convenient' assumption of an 'ad hoc one-to-one relationship between form and meaning in the metalanguage' (loc. cit.) in any way approaches empirical interest as long as the concept of 'metalinguistic form' in itself is highly debatable and no exhaustive list of such metalinguistic forms is given. (The fact that a natural language like English also falls under the concept of 'metalanguage' does not add to the descriptive aptness of the proposal.) The term 'metacategory' is introduced to denote 'a generally applicable, cross-linguistic supercategory of an abstract, idealized nature which comprises an index of specific meanings of a potentially universal, linguistically relevant concept and coreresponding form terms' (p. 144). The outcome of the terminological discussion is less exotic – and more in the spirit of Hjelmslevian glossematics – than the extended reasoning might indicate. In 'metacategories', 'meaning' comes close to Hjelmslev's 'content', but 'form' is, presumably, more 'abstract' form than most interpretations of Hjelmslev would allow for (pp. 144 ff.). Thus, 'aspect' is a metacategory, whose internal structure is given in the following diagram (pp. 145, 190):

Meaning   Form term
──
                   ┌─ perfectivity ──   perfective
+ASPECTUALITY ──┤
                   └─ imperfectivity ──   imperfective

-ASPECTUALITY ───────────────────────   unmarked

This is a fairly straightforward pattern of analysis, given common assumptions about languages with a binary aspect system, and, on the theoretical level, a Prague notion of privative oppositions. (In later diagrams, the minus (unmarked) value is left out and form and meaning switch sides; cf. pp. 150 ff.). Linguists of a more realist persuasion may feel somewhat disturbed by the following statement:

> With metacategories, the function of the category concept as a common denominator of the individual members, or conversely, their function as specific realization of the category concept is part of the idealization, the convenient fiction (p. 145).

Again, the basic understanding of metacategories is heuristic; they are 'theoretical constructs created for a specific purpose: that of describing real categories in real languages' (p. 146). Thus, proto-typicality appears to be primarily associated with the construct, not with natural language reality. The author uses prototypicality and privative oppositions more specifically with regard to the semantic analysis of verb forms (pp. 152 ff.) in his attempt to accommodate the 'one form – one meaning' principle. It should, however, be noted that this principle is only considered valid with metacategories, which in this sense are functionally 'monadic' in the author's parlance (pp. 169 f.). Language-specific manifestations of grammatical categories may, however, well be 'non-monadic' in the sense that 'members of different metacategories may merge into one language-specific grammatical form' (p. 170), resulting in 'a one-to-many relationship between form and meaning' (loc. cit.).

In Chapter 6, the author also refines his substitution procedure by limiting it to cases which are distinct in one meaning dimension only. Thus, *knew/know* is a heuristically acceptable minimal pair since there is no action or aspect difference to be assumed, whereas *talk/talked* is not, under the analysis that there is not only a tense difference but also an actional difference between habituality (*talk*) and semelfactive homogeneity (*talked*) (p. 179). On the other hand, morphosyntactically simple forms and composite, periphrastic forms are freely contrasted (p. 171). Concerning the categories themselves, it seems that 'categorial interplay' (pp. 173 ff.; e.g. non-combinability of present and perfectivity, as in Russian) is considered both a metacategorial and a language-specific phenomenon. (Cf. also pp. 202 ff. for rules of categorial interplay where both levels are

involved). In the former case, categorial interplay pertains to the 'definitional' level and in the latter to the 'functional' level (p. 182). Given this basic distinction, the further assumption that 'both the definition level and the function level are established in the metalanguage on the basis of language-specific data from substitution tests' (p. 189) rather detracts from clarity. Presupposing an empirical 'substance' beyond the limitless 'number of ways in which the metalinguistic facts [sic] can be represented' (p. 191) clearly implies a strong ontological commitment on the part of the metalanguage (cf. again 'the metalinguistic facts') which is at least partly at odds with the heuristic assumptions made elsewhere in the book (cf. p. 146). The last part of this chapter is devoted to (in)compatibility relations between aspectual and temporal categories with a view to markedness relations (pp. 194 ff.).

Chapter '7 The Metacategories of Action, Tense and Aspect' (pp. 207 ff.) provides fuller definitions of these categories and presents an analysis of their English manifestations. The chapter is an example of the well-known 'take any natural language, for instance English' strategy, yielding in this case the 'general category concepts' TEMPORALITY, ACTIONALITY and ASPECTUALITY, the last of which covers 'the more specific meanings pertaining to the focus with which the locutionary agent presents situations' (p. 217). When the author states that these category names are 'strictly arbitrary' and that 'completely different terms could have been used' (loc. cit.), one is tempted to ask what these other possible terms might be. The author also raises the question of the universal or language-specific ordering (or ranking) of the categories in question (pp. 218 ff.) and opts for 'action > tense > aspect' (p. 219) as the natural order on the basis of functional, 'propositional' (p. 220) criteria. Formal, morphosyntactic criteria for TMA categories of the kind studied by Bybee (1985) are on the whole disregarded. The concentration on English has the effect of excluding mood (and modality) from the overall picture.

Concerning the individual values of ACTION such as durativity, habituality and punctuality, the author points out that the actional value (or rather 'potential', p. 231) primarily associated with lexicalization may be overridden by discourse factors (cf. *Stefan fell on the bridge* [punctual] vs. *Stefan often fell on the bridge in winter* [habitual], pp. 228 f.). This is only natural in view of the fact that ACTION is, according to the author, basically a situation type

category in some 'projected world' (pp. 227 ff.; cf. Jackendoff 1983); 'there is no simple one-to-one relationship between lexical verb and actional value' (p. 230); 'Actionality is what we get when a lexical verb is placed in a propositional framework, ...' (p. 231); 'Action represents a first step away from lexicalization toward grammaticalization of situational referents' (loc. cit.). Still, a number of questions have to be asked concerning the category of ACTION. First, the statement that 'the basic distinction between +ACTIONAL and −ACTIONAL parallels the traditional distinction between *dynamic* and *stative*' (p. 238, author's italics) calls for further clarification, given the understanding of minus values as 'unmarked' (cf., e.g., pp. 190, 324). One is also entitled to ask how ACTION(ALITY) can be the most 'central' category when it is not even assumed to exist as a general independent category; cf. 'actional meanings cannot be isolated pure and simple from tense and aspect meanings' (p. 239; cf. also p. 341). It is at least terminologically confusing to learn that a situation which may be positively characterized as, e.g., habitual is still −ACTIONAL (p. 240). The equivocation is carried on to the next page where it is also said that 'there are no subdistinctions between the various types of −ACTIONAL situation (i.e. ACTIONALITY is not subdivided into, for example, habits, states and characterizations), though this is obviously a possibility' (p. 241). The subsequent hierarchical and binary classification of the values of +ACTIONALITY as 'complex /simplex', 'punctual/durative', 'telic/atelic', 'directed/selfcontained' (pp. 245 ff.) holds more promise of theoretical interest.

The author assumes three 'primary members of the universal tense category' or 'metalinguistic tenses': present, past, future (p. 255); but allowance is, of course, made for further 'secondary' or 'derived' tenses. The category TEMPORALITY is basically defined in deictic terms (pp. 255, 260 ff.). The seemingly non-deictic (−TEM-PORAL, p. 262) uses of the present discussed on pp. 261 f. should in my view rather be considered different, but all the same natural, extensions of the deictic use of the present.

With regard to the metacategory of ASPECT, the author seeks to refine Comrie's well-known definition (Comrie 1976:4), by looking upon a situation from the outside (perfective) or inside (imperfective), in terms of focus of locutionary agent (p. 269), yielding an opposition between 'perfective' as '(holistic) completeness' vs. 'imperfective' as 'progression'.

The category value –ASPECTUAL appears to be even more problematic than –TENSE and –ACTION (p. 274), but then, meta-categorial unmarkedness is allowed to be interfered with by markedness relations in specific languages (pp. 278 ff., cf. also, e.g., p. 309). The reader's understanding of these matters is not exactly facilitated by the fact that the author appears to be uncertain whether he does in this connection operate on the definition level or on the function level (pp. 276, 281).

The rest of chapter 7 is devoted to giving rules for 'categorial interplay at the function level' (pp. 283 ff.). First of all it has to be said that the conclusions concerning definition-level relationships would not have been possible without taking into consideration function-level data, and this is somewhat obliquely admitted by the author (p. 283). The subchapter on function-level combinatorial rules and constraints makes for rather hard reading and is not in all respects convincing. For instance, the very first rule states that '–ACTIONALITY is incompatible with +ASPECTUALITY' (p. 283). If we are to take the author's previous discussions seriously, this would seem to imply, for instance, that stative may not be considered a realization of imperfective (cf. p. 238). It's a fair guess that quite a few linguists would find this a curious conclusion from both an empirical and terminological point of view. Cf. also the author's own comment, which appears to render the rule in question empirically vacuous as a descriptive tool on the function level: 'It is important to note that in specific languages, perfective or imperfective *forms* may express –ACTIONAL situations' (p. 283; author's italics; cf. also the English examples given in connection with this statement on p. 284). The later rule which states that 'a truly present situation cannot be expressed by a truly perfective predicator' (p. 288), apart from being fairly vague, seems to fly in the face of any sensible description one can give of statal passives in cases like *the work is done*. But again, the rule in question is a definition-level rule which need not accommodate all kinds of function-level, language-specific phenomena.

The rest of the chapter (pp. 293 ff.) is devoted to questions of functional interplay between action and aspect, tense and aspect, and action and tense on the function level, primarily in English. It is not evident that the generic use of the Russian present perfective (whose unmarked use is that of a future tense) is to be explained by the assumption of –ACTIONAL (p. 307) which is elsewhere considered equivalent to the traditional term 'stative' (p. 238), and this is definitely not what the Russian simple perfective future is about.

The last chapter '8 Overview: Towards a Theory of Action, Tense and Aspect' (pp. 311 ff.) provides a convenient summing up of the main contents of the book as a presentation of 'an absolute, image-based prototype model' (p. 311). The capacity for generating undue generalizations is considered a heuristic asset of the model; cf. the remarks on the past tense on pp. 311 f. and the following statement: 'in the quest for greater knowledge, a *useful* model is rated as more important in the initial stages than a *truthful* model' (p. 338, author's italics). The most important definitions and rules concerning action, tense and aspect are repeated (pp. 313 ff.), with subsequent remarks on the notational and analytic utility of the model as a means of assigning features to predicators (predicates) (pp. 319 ff.). The problem of assigning positive characteristics to unmarked minus categories turns up again in connection with the analysis of *played* as [–ACTIONAL, past, –ASPECTUAL] which is meant to be interpretable as 'habitual' (p. 321). The following principle is proposed as possibly bridging the gap, basic to the whole model, between universal, definition-level metacategories and language-specific, definition-level rules: 'the language-specific description must incorporate *privative* markedness relations on the basis of the basically *equipollent* specifications of the universal categories' (p. 322, author's italics). This is followed by a discussion of markedness relations, often referred to in the preceding chapters, but only dealt with in a more systematic fashion, fairly briefly, at the very end of the book (pp. 322 ff.). Questions concerning the influence of sentence-internal and sentence-external factors on the interpretation of action, tense and aspect are raised in the subchapter 'Concord Relations and Context' (pp. 326 ff.), which deals with such diverse co- and contextual phenomena as the combinability of adverbials with certain verb forms, plural subjects, absence/presence or indefiniteness/definiteness of an object, and extrasentential relations.

This book makes for rather difficult reading. It is rich in insights, ideas and perceptive analyses, but its many (meta)theoretical distinctions are often hard to follow and not always convincing. In my opinion, it shows that basing a research programme with universalist pretensions on data from (mostly) one language is an endeavour beset with a number of fundamental problems. One can be fairly sure that widely occurring categories will be missing (in casu

e.g. mood), and there is also the risk that the relative paucity of the data may engender more abstract reasoning than is empirically warranted.

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