
Serbo-Croatian verbal theme vowels and the composition of aspect and argument structure

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Whether grammatically relevant information is limited to the functional material (Borer 2005, or Marantz 1995) or is also specified on roots (Rappaport Hovav 2017, 2021, Beavers & Koontz-Garboden 2020) is a matter of ongoing debate. We tackle the status of theme vowels (TVs).

Our corpus based research on Serbo-Croatian (SC) (on Arsenijević et al. 2021), testing the hypothesis that the two most productive TVs in SC, *i:i* and *a:a* have different grammatical effects, shows that: (1) in minimal pairs of verbs sharing the same root (e.g. *voz-i-ti* vs. *voz-a-ti* ‘to drive’, directed vs. undirected motion), *i:i* verbs tend to be directed/scalar/telic, unlike *a:a* verbs, which are unrestricted in this respect; (2) with roots denoting properties or sets of individuals, *i:i* verbs receive the incremental interpretation (*become (more) [[root]]-like*), while *a:a* verbs are relational (*act/be in a way associated with [[root]]*); (3) event-denoting root nouns, which correlate with resultativity and/or telicity (Svenonius 2004), are more likely to pair up with *i:i* verbs than with *a:a* verbs; (4) all prefixless *a:a* verbs are either imperfective or biaspectual, while *i:i* verbs constitute 64% of all prefixless perfectives.

We discuss two analyses of the attested effects: 1) TVs carry functional features (e.g. [scale] on *i:i*), and 2) pragmatics maps marked TVs with marked interpretations along a salient dimension (incrementality, aspect, aktionsart, directedness). The variation of effects depending on the (type of) competition and their tendential nature favor the latter.

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