

Distinguishing *obligatory* and *non-obligatory* grammatical categories with regard to ‘thinking for speaking’

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Background: According to Slobin (1996; 2003; 2008), the presence of a grammatically encoded category directs the focus of speakers in the ‘thinking for speaking’ process. Slobin adduces evidence for this claim based on experiments with children in which he focuses on the expression of progressive aspect in various languages, e.g. the present and past continuous in English (*is/was running*) as compared to other languages which lack such a category. However, Slobin does not distinguish between *obligatory* and *non-obligatory* categories: while both are encoded form-meaning pairings in a language’s grammar (cf. Levinson 2000, Belligh & Willems 2021), only the former *must* be used in speech in specific contexts.

Dutch has a dedicated construction that encodes the progressive aspect, viz. the prepositional periphrastic construction *aan het* + infinitive (ANS, 2012; Van Pottelberge, 2004). However, unlike the present and past continuous in English, the ‘*aan het* construction’ in Dutch is non-obligatory. Speakers can choose between this construction (1) or a semantically underspecified verbal form that does not encode the progressive aspect, e.g. (2):

- (1) *De kinderen zijn aan het spelen.*
the children are at the play-INF
‘The children are playing.’
- (2) *De kinderen spelen.*
the children play-PRES.3pl
‘The children play/are playing.’

It is important to note that the Dutch ‘*aan het* construction’ is less grammaticalized than the English progressive. It “has not reached the level of abstraction found for the English progressive”, according to Behrens et al. (2013: 128). However, I focus on the use of the ‘*aan het* construction’ when referring to an ongoing activity and this is the most appropriate means of expression according to Flecken (2011) and Behrens et al. (2013).

Objectives and research questions: This paper explores whether the influence of a grammatically encoded category with regard to ‘thinking for speaking’ depends on being obligatory or non-obligatory. The research question is twofold. On the one hand, the study aims to determine whether six-year-old Dutch-speaking children spontaneously express progressive aspect despite the fact that progressive aspect is a non-obligatory grammatical category in Dutch. On the other hand, the study aims to determine whether there is evidence that speakers use a non-obligatory construction that grammatically encodes progressive aspect in Dutch in a way similar to the use of an obligatory category that grammatically encodes progressive aspect such as the present and past continuous in English.

Methodology: An elicitation task was conducted with 34 six-year-old Flemish participants. The children were asked to describe what activities they see on two pairs of drawings that were each presented to them consecutively under two different conditions: first a spontaneous condition and subsequently an elicited condition where the children were specifically prompted to use the ‘*aan het* construction’ by drawing their attention to ongoing activities represented in the drawings. The elicitation was carried out by pointing out that the first activity seen in the drawings is ongoing; this was done without using the construction in the prompt. If the child did not use the ‘*aan het* construction’ after elicitation in either condition, then the child’s knowledge of the construction and its ability of using it in a control condition were assessed. In the control condition the ‘*aan het* construction’ was used in the researcher’s question (priming).

Results: We observe that most children initially **do not** express the progressive aspect by means of a dedicated construction when asked to describe the ongoing activities represented in the

drawings. With regard to the first pair of drawings, 27% of the children expressed the progressive aspect spontaneously by means of a dedicated construction.¹ This number increased to 32% with regard to the second pair of drawings. This finding is at variance with what the ‘thinking for speaking’ claim predicts, given that the ‘*aan het* construction’ encodes the progressive aspect as a form-meaning pairing “enshrined” (Slobin, 1996) in the grammar of Dutch. However, when appropriately prompted, the majority of the participants does use the ‘*aan het* construction’. After elicitation with regard to the first pair of drawings, 69% of the children use the ‘*aan het* construction’. Similarly, with regard to the second pair of drawings, 61% of the children use the ‘*aan het* construction’. This shows that ‘thinking for speaking’ is facilitated when children are prompted to attend to a grammatical category that is readily available in the grammar, even though Dutch does not require speakers to express the progressive aspect by means of a dedicated construction. Optional encoded categories can thus also be shown to have a bearing on ‘thinking for speaking’ **under specific conditions**. These findings call for an adjustment of Slobin’s (1996; 2003; 2008) account: being a grammatically encoded category is a necessary but no sufficient condition for ‘thinking for speaking’, as the encoded category must also be obligatory, yet non-obligatory encoded categories may make the difference in ‘thinking for speaking’ under more specific conditions.

In conclusion, encoded grammatical categories that are non-obligatory direct the speakers attention to certain aspects of an event to a considerably lesser degree compared to obligatory encoded categories.

References

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¹ One child used the posture verb construction ‘*zitten + te + infinitive*’. Like the ‘*aan het* construction’, the posture verb construction is a dedicated but optional construction to refer to an ongoing activity in Dutch.