Two Syntactic Positions for English Aspectual Verbs

English aspectual verbs have been argued to be ambiguous between control and raising (Perlmutter 1970). Given the common assumption that the distinction derives from selectional restrictions imposed by lexical items, the null hypothesis for the ambiguity would be that it is lexical. However, recent studies have shown that aspectual verbs occur in two different positions in languages such as German (Wurmbrand 2001), Romance languages (Cinque 2003), Basque (Arregi and Molina-Azaola 2004), and Japanese (Fukuda 2006). Strikingly, in all four languages, the two positions that aspectual verbs are argued to occupy are below and above vP or VoiceP, the projection that introduces an external argument. We take this cross-linguistic pattern to suggest that the control/raising ambiguity is actually a structural ambiguity, due to the different scope relations between the higher and lower positions of aspectual verbs and the external argument in [Spec, vP] (1). In this paper, we extend the structural ambiguity analysis of aspectual verbs to English. We argue that English aspectual verbs occupy two different positions: either above vP (H(igh)-Asp) or below vP (L(ow)-Asp), and a complement of H-Asp (vP) is realized as infinitive while that of L-Asp (VP) is realized as gerundive (2). We show that the proposed analysis captures the apparent control/raising ambiguity and its relation to the two complement types, infinitive and gerundive, as well as differences in distribution and interpretation of the two complement types. We also present syntactic evidence from adverb positions and passivization.

First, the proposed analysis makes clear predictions with respect to the control/raising ambiguity: the usual diagnostics for control/raising distinction should only identify an aspectual verb with a gerundive complement as control. Indeed, only with an infinitive complement, the active-passive synonymy obtains (3) and the idiomatic meaning of idiom chunks is preserved (4). Likewise, imperative is felicitous only with gerundive (5). The analysis also captures differences in distribution and interpretation of the two complement types under an aspectual verb. As is well known, some aspectual verbs take either of the two complement types, while others can only take gerundive. In the proposed analysis, this optionality is captured by analyzing that some aspectual verbs occur either as L- or H-Asp, while others are restricted to be L-Asp. This analysis correctly predicts that infinitive can embed gerundive, but not vice versa (6). In contrast, simply assuming that the aspectual verbs optionally take either of the two complement types fails to account for (6). There is also a difference in possible interpretations of the two complement types (Freed 1979). While infinitive can have either a single or multiple event reading (7a), gerundive is restricted to the former (7b). Under the proposed analysis, H-Asp is predicated of vP; it can create an interpretation in which an entire event is repeated. In contrast, L-Asp is predicated of VP, which is only part of an event. Thus, L-Asp is confined to a single event reading. There is also syntactic evidence supporting the proposed analysis. Unambiguous speaker-oriented adverbs such as probably can be embedded under an aspectual verb only with infinitive ((8) and (9)), suggesting that only infinitive has a large enough structure to host the type of adverbs. Examples in (10) are naturally occurring data of apparent long passive, or passivization of an embedded object with the passive morpheme only on the embedding verb, involving finish. Assuming that long passive is the hallmark for lack of structural case provided by v in a complement (Wurmbrand 2001), (10) strongly supports the proposed analysis, according to which finish, which can only be L-Asp, has a VP complement. The proposed analysis, therefore, accounts for the differences among English aspectual verbs and between the two complement types. It is also a step forward to adding English as evidence for the cross-linguistic generalization for aspectual verbs: that they occur in two different positions in a clause.
(1) a. \([\text{ASP}]_{vP} \text{ external argument } [v, v]_{[vP, V]} \) (interpreted as raising)
   b. \([\ldots vP \text{ external argument } v, v]_{[vP, V]} \) (interpreted as control)

(2) 

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{H-AspP} \\
\text{H-Asp} \\
\text{vP} \\
\text{v'} \\
\text{v} \\
\text{vL-AspP} \\
\text{L-Asp} \\
\text{VP}
\end{array}
\]  

infinitive  (begin, start, continue)

gerundive  (begin, start, continue, keep (on), stop, finish)

(3) a. Bill began \textit{to interview} the inmates. ≈ The inmates began \textit{to be interviewed} by Bill.
   b. Bill began \textit{interviewing} the inmates. ≠ The inmates began \textit{being interviewed} by Bill.

(4) a. The shit began \textit{to hit} the fun.  (the idiomatic meaning preserved)
   b. The shit began \textit{hitting} the fun.  (only the literal meaning available)

(5) Context: After giving directions to students who are about to write an essay, a proctor says:
   a. Now, start \textit{writing}!
   b. *Now, start \textit{to write}!

(6) a. People began \textit{to continue eating} fastfood/*\textit{continuing to eat} fastfood.
   b. People started \textit{to continue eating} fastfood/*\textit{continuing to eat} fastfood.

(7) a. That student continued \textit{to fall asleep} during my class. (multiple event reading available)
   b. *That student continued \textit{falling asleep} during my class. (single event reading forced)

(8) a. Only in the final phase of Neolithic the situation \textit{began probably} to change, and....
   b. The "microconglomeratic clays" \textit{began probably} to settle during the stability phase...

(9) a.? Only in the final phase of Neolithic the situation \textit{began probably} changing, and....
   b.? The "microconglomeratic clays" \textit{began probably} settling during the stability phase...

(10) a. When the pies and cakes were finished baking, it was about mid afternoon....
   b. Defendant waited until the sheets were finished washing and then put them in...
   c. In 1.0, you couldn’t move the scroll bar until all the images were finished loading.
   d. before six o’clock all Mr. Burke’s hay and rye were finished cutting.