

A note on the term ‘conative’

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The term ‘conative’ is employed in a number of more or less distinct senses:

I. It labels one of the six functions of language as described by Roman Jakobson, specifically the function in which speakers use language to appeal to and engage with others. This sense does not refer directly to aspects of linguistic structure – rather the grammatical categories relevant for this function are vocatives, interrogatives and imperatives.¹ It thus operates at a different level from the other uses of the term reviewed below, which are more immediately descriptive of linguistic form and content. Henning Andersen reports that in lectures Jakobson also used the term ‘quisitive’ for this function of language.

II. In line with its etymology (from Latin *conari* ‘to try’), the term is used to refer to verbal periphrases or inflections that express an attempt to do something, generally without successful completion. Indeed, the implicature that the attempt fails seems to be common to (almost?) all the conative constructions that have been mentioned and distinguishes them from control constructions with verbs meaning ‘try’, which are for the most part neutral as to the success of the outcome.

Languages which have been reported as having constructions of this kind include: Burmese (Tibeto-Burman; Vittrant), Macuxi (Cariban), Mauwake (Trans-New Guinea; Berghäll 2010), Mongsen Ao (Tibeto-Burman; Coupe 2007), Plains Cree (Algonquian; Dahlstrom 1991, Wolvengrey 2011), Syrian Arabic (Cowell 2005). Thus, for Macuxi we have (Abbott 1991: 120, ex (500); cf also Gildea 1992: 205):

- (1) yei ya'tî-yonpa-'pî-i-ya
 wood cut-CONAT-PAST-3-ERG
 ‘he tried to cut the wood’²

Andrej Malchukov offers the following example from Even (North Tungusic) and notes that structures of this kind are widespread within this family:

- (2) höre-sči-n

¹ Interestingly, the Danish verb *prøve* ‘try’ is also used as a mitigator of imperative force:

- (i) Prøv at læse denne artikel
 try.IMP COMP read.INF this article
 ‘Here, read this article’ [≠ ‘Try and read this article’]

² NB: I have reworded the gloss here to avoid equivocation. Abbott glosses this example as ‘he tried cutting the wood’ but in my English at least this means he did cut the wood (e.g. as a way of making it fit the space available) whereas she explicitly notes that, in keeping with the general tendency noted above, this construction ‘expresses the fact that the action is attempted but without successful completion’.

leave-CON-NONFUT.3SG
's/he tried to leave'

Reported discourse constructions are another context in which connotations of frustrated attempt may occur. Such patterns are discussed for some Bantu and Trans-New-Guinea languages in Güldemann (2008).

A range of other terms have been used to identify meanings close to, and perhaps even equivalent to, conative in this sense, including 'frustrative' (Coupe), 'experimentative' (Vittrant for Burmese) and 'irresultative' (Berghäll for Mauwake, Aikenvald for Tariana). For instance, Aikenvald (2003: 454-5) says of the complex predicates which she calls 'irresultative' that they 'describe actions or states which do not quite amount to what they ought to'. Her examples do not seem to have any necessary implication of trying, but she does observe that 'the irresultative complex predicate is semantically close to frustrative'. Cinque (1999: 105) includes a functional head signalling conative aspect in his hierarchical or 'cartographic' model of clause structure, and notes the close connection with other markers such as the 'préfixe d'éloignement' or 'distantive'. He also cites Spokane (Salishan), which has a verbal morpheme which indicates 'that an accomplishment takes place or succeeds only through extra effort' (Carlson 1996: 59), and notes the parallel with a marker in Mongo (Bantu) labelled by Larochette (1980: 34) as 'capacitatif'.

Of these semantically adjacent terms, the one that has been subjected to most systematic cross-linguistic investigation is 'action narrowly averted' (Kuteva 1998) or 'avertive' (Hagège 2010). There is however a significant gap between this meaning, which focuses on the fact that the event almost but did not actually take place, and the notion of attempting to make something come about. Other links that have been suggested — such as volitives, desideratives and expressions of intention and more or less immediate futurity — are also best kept distinct, although they clearly share with conatives the fact that they identify types of mental or emotional precursor to action.

III. There are instances in Sanskrit, Ancient Greek and Latin where an imperfect, or less commonly a simple present, may be interpreted as implying an attempt rather than a completed action. Panhuis (2006: §214) calls this 'conative aspect', or in more traditional terminology the *imperfectum de conatu*, and cites:

- (3) captābat plūmās (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.198)
catch.IMP.3SG feather.ACCPL
'he constantly tried to catch the feathers'

The link with imperfective is also evidenced in Slavic grammar where the term 'conative' is used to describe the force of the imperfective forms of some achievement verbs (Forsyth 1970; see also examples (53a,b) in Kiparsky 1998):

- (4) a. On reshil zadachu
he solve.PERF task.ACC
'He solved the problem'
- b. On reshāl zadachu
he solve.IMPF task.ACC
'He worked on the problem', 'he tried to solve the problem', etc.

IV. The difference between perfective and imperfective with achievement and activity verbs also has implications for the status of the verb's internal argument, a fact reflected in English in a range of prepositional uses as in *on the problem* in the translation of (4b) or in contrasts such as *Bill shouted to/at Fred* and *Bill shot the bear vs Bill shot at the bear*. In languages with morphological case the same type of contrast shows up in case alternations, as in the Warlpiri examples in (5):

- (5) a. ngarrka-ngku ka marlu luwa-rni
 man-ERG PRES kangaroo shoot-NONPAST
 'The man is shooting the kangaroo'
- b. ngarrka-ngku ka-rla-jinta marlu-ku luwa-rni
 man-ERG PRES-rla-jinta kangaroo-DAT shoot-NONPAST
 'The man is shooting at the kangaroo'

In the Australianist literature this phenomenon has been referred to as 'conative case' (Hale 1982, Laughren 1988, Simpson 1991), though it should be noted that this does not refer to a separate case form but to one of the functions of the dative case.³

Kiparsky (1998) treats the Warlpiri pattern as akin to the alternations between accusative and partitive cases in Finnish traditionally identified as resultative (expressed by the accusative, (6a)) vs irresultative (expressed by the partitive, (6b)):

- (6) a. Ammu-i-n karhu-n / kaksi karhu-a / karhut
 shoot-PAST-1SG bear-ACC/ two-ACC bear-PART/ bear-ACC.PL
 'I shot a/the bear, (the) two bears, (the) bears'
- b. Ammu-i-n karhu-a / kah-ta karhu-a / karhu-j-a
 shoot-PAST-1SG bear-PART/ two-PART bear-PART/ bear-PL-PART
 'I shot at a/the bear, at (the) two bears, at (the) bears'

It is striking that with complements of certain verbs, including verbs of trying, the choice between the two cases is optional (Kiparsky 1998: ex (44)):

- (7) Matti koett-i tappa-a karhu-n/karhu-a
 Matti.NOM try-PST.3SG kill-INF bear-ACC/PART
 'Matti tried to kill a/the bear'

While we are dealing with Finnish, Johanna Laakso reports that in dialectal but not standard Finnish frequentative verbal derivatives may involve a sense of trying reminiscent of the *de conatu* implicature described above:⁴

³ The dative in (6b) has been seen by some as the effect of antipassive, but the analysis is controversial and Kiparsky for one is sceptical.

⁴ She adds: 'this is mentioned in the literature mainly with reference to E. N. Setälä's theory (from 1887) that the Finnic suffixes of irrealis (conditional, potential) moods go back to frequentative derivational suffixes which, as Setälä supposes, also had a conative function. In the journal *Virittäjä* in 1983, Tapani Lehtinen points out that Setälä was inspired by Delbrück's ideas of the conative origin of the Indo-European subjunctive.'

- (8) mies ost-el-i hevos-ta
 man buy-FREQU-PAST.3SG horse-PART
 ‘The man wanted/tried/would have wanted to buy a horse’

Looking for patterns in all this and putting sense I to one side, there are two points that are worth noting:

- a) There is a distinction to be drawn between constructions in various languages which have an overt marker of conativity (in the sense of II above) and contexts in which either verbal semantics (Jenny 2005) or some other property of the construction such as imperfective aspect yields the conative meaning.
- b) There is a contrast between the narrower sense of trying implicit in the items discussed under II and III, and the wider sense of unbounded or incomplete activity seen in IV.

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