

# Conative

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## *Abstract*

*This article seeks in the first instance to identify and exemplify the various senses in which the term “conative” has been used in the descriptive and theoretical literature. It then goes on to elucidate, where possible, the connections between these uses, and to examine the history of the term. The study concludes with some reflections on the status of linguistic terminology and the issues that may arise when technical vocabulary is subject to some of the same processes of semantic shift that affect words in everyday usage.*

*Keywords:* argument structure, aspect, conative, imperative, imperfective, metonymy, mood, morphology, semantic map, syntax, terminology, verb classes

## **1. Introduction**

The term “conative” has been employed in the linguistic literature over the years in a number of ways. While the uses within different strands of that literature are by and large coherent and consistent, the connections between them are not always evident. In addition, some of these uses stray far from the etymological origin of the term in the Latin verb *conari* ‘to try’. Such divergences depend in part on choice of theoretical framework and in part on the languages or language families that are under investigation. It therefore seems worthwhile to identify the senses, show how each has been used by various practitioners, and attempt to map out the links, intersections, and discrepancies that exist. This exercise will in turn raise some interesting and important questions about the relation between pre-theory and theory within our field.

## 2. The conative function of language

Although not the earliest attestation of the term within linguistics, we start with Roman Jakobson's use of "conative" to label one of the six functions of language,<sup>1</sup> specifically the function in which speakers use language to appeal to and engage with others, a property which in an earlier typology Karl Bühler had called the *Appell* function. This sense does not refer directly to aspects of linguistic structure – rather: "[o]rientation towards the addressee, the conative function, finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and the imperative" (Jakobson 1960: 355), categories to which the interrogative is sometimes added. Indeed, Henning Andersen (personal communication) reports that in lectures Jakobson also used the term "quisitive" for this function. Here then the term operates at a different level from the other uses reviewed below, which are more immediately descriptive of language form and content. This usage can be traced back through an intellectual tradition which is philosophical rather than linguistic (for further details see "conative" and "conation" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – <http://plato.stanford.edu/> – and references there). Thus, in its entry for the word the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the following passage from the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher Sir William Hamilton (1865: 129), who in turn references Immanuel Kant:

This division of the phenomena of mind into the three great classes of the Cognitive faculties – the Feelings, or capacities of Pleasure and Pain, – and the Exertive or Conative Powers.

That said, it is worth noting that verbs with the meaning 'try' can over time develop into imperative markers. Thus, in the Danish example in (1) the imperative of the verb *prøve* 'try' mitigates the directive force of the expression but does not literally instruct the hearer to try to do something:

- (1) *Prøv at læse denne artikel.*  
 try.IMP COMP read.INF this article  
 'Here, read this article.'

Imperatives will also figure in places in what follows, but we will not seek to develop further the connection between "conative" in this sense and the other uses that we will review. For a more wide-ranging survey of the origins of imperative markers, see Aikhenvald (2010: 339–369); for the addition of interjections to the class of grammatical categories that can mediate the conative function, see Ameka (1992); and for an extension of the idea to the domain of intonation, see Masny (1972).

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1. The other functions are: referential, emotive, phatic, poetic, and metalingual (Jakobson 1960, Isačenko 1964).

### 3. Conative and imperfective

By contrast, an expression which is well rooted in the Western grammatical and philological tradition and which is closer in meaning to the term's etymological origin is the *imperfectum de conatu*, literally 'imperfect of trying'. This refers to contexts 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: 109) calls this "conative aspect" and cites:

- (2) *captābat plūmās*  
 catch.IMPF.3SG feather.ACC.PL  
 'he constantly tried to catch the feathers' (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.198)

As the grammars note, this usage is restricted not only to imperfectives but also to certain verb classes and hence raises the question of which is the crucial factor in determining the interpretation in instances such as (2). For example, Kühner & Stegmann (1912 [1962: 120–122]) write:

Der Name *Praesens* und *Imperfectum conatus* ist daher nicht passend, da diese Bedeutung nicht diesen beiden Zeitformen, sondern vielmehr dem Begriffe der so gebrauchten Verben eigentümlich ist.

[The label *Praesens* and *Imperfectum conatus* is in this case not appropriate, since this meaning is not inherent in these two tense forms, but rather in the senses of the verbs when they are used in this way.]

Compare Bennett (1910: 37), who comes to the same conclusion and refers to the "conative use" and "conative force" of the verbs in question. Schwyzer (1950: 259) articulates a similar view with respect to Ancient Greek. The same effect is found in Sanskrit, though with the desiderative rather than the imperfect (Heenen 2006).

The link with imperfective is also evidenced in the Slavic grammatical tradition, where "conative" is used to describe the implicature of the imperfective forms of some achievement verbs, as in the Russian examples in (3):

- (3) a. *On rešil zadaču.*  
 he solve.PRFV task.ACC  
 'He solved the problem.'  
 b. *On rešal zadaču.*  
 he solve.IMPFV task.ACC  
 'He worked on the problem; he tried to solve the problem; etc.'

Forsyth (1970: 71) talks of the "expression of conation" in this context and provides many more examples of such perfective/imperfective verb pairings. Later in the same work (Forsyth 1970: 204) he identifies "a conative nuance"

in the imperative of the imperfective verbs, but like the grammarians of Latin cited above, attributes it to the larger semantic and pragmatic context rather than seeing it as an inherent feature of the verb form in question.

The link between aspectual values and the *imperfectum de conatu* has been explored in considerable detail for Tibetan languages as well as in more general terms by Bettina Zeisler, who observes: “Conative situations are situations of mere attempt, that means, a telic, and, in most cases, non-durative controlled action is presented in the preparatory stage and the achievement is explicitly or implicitly negated” (Zeisler 2004: 205), as in the Ladakh example (4):<sup>2</sup>

- (4) ... *mdzags pa ma: bkags po soṅ ste ma thar*  
 climb.PTCPL very difficult get.CLCH get out.NEG.PAST  
 ‘... when he climbed (= tried to climb) it, it was too difficult and he could not get out’ (Zeisler 2004: 756)

Particularly striking are a series of examples which Zeisler (2004: 408–412) adduces from Classical Tibetan texts, in which demi-gods seek to obtain the magic power or *siddhi* from the deities Brahma and Mahadeba over hundreds of years but without success. The narrative proceeds with simple verb forms such as *bsgrub ste*, *bsgrub so* ‘obtained’, but the meaning can only be ‘tried to obtain’. In this connection she cites similar observations made by Ruipérez (1954 [1982: 101]) in relation to *de conatu* uses of the imperfect in Ancient Greek; in both instances it is once again the semantic class of the verb which is crucial in deciding the availability or otherwise of the conative interpretation.

Where Zeisler notes the effect of negating the intended consequence of the activity, Malink (2008) focuses instead on what happens if the main verb itself is negated. He observes that in certain circumstances this too can lead to an implication of conativity. Thus an achievement predicate such as *win the race* involves an intended endpoint (what Malink calls a “right boundary”), and he argues that the negation of this predicate in a sentence such as *Bradley did not win the race* commonly implies that there was nonetheless an attempt to win the race on Bradley’s part. He adduces evidence to support his case from German, Czech, and Ancient Greek, and provides a formal account couched within event semantics. A similar use of formal semantics to model the presuppositions of certain predicates informs the work of Fabienne Martin, once again drawing out the conative implications of certain verbs and uses. For example, she writes (Martin 2006: 342):

Une autre différence entre les propriétés agentives de ces deux verbes est que *persuader* implique *essayer de persuader*, alors que *convaincre* n’implique pas

2. I am grateful to Bettina Zeisler for discussion of these examples and suggestions as to how to render her specialist categorial glossings into more generally applicable terms.

*essayer de convaincre*. Autrement dit, seul *persuader* reçoit par défaut une lecture conative.

[Another difference between the agentive properties of these two verbs is that *persuader* ‘persuade’ implies ‘try to persuade’, while *convaincre* ‘convince’ does not imply ‘try to convince’. In other words, only *persuader* receives by default a conative reading.]

#### 4. Conative and argument alternations

The difference between perfective and imperfective with achievement and activity verbs in addition has implications for the status of the verb’s internal argument, a fact reflected in English in a range of prepositional uses such as *on the problem* in the translation of (3b) 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 Finnish and Warlpiri examples in (5) and (6):

- (5) a. *Ammu-i-n karhu-n / kaksi karhu-a /*  
 shoot-PST-1SG bear-ACC / two.ACC bear-PART /  
*karhu-t.*  
 bear-ACC.PL  
 ‘I shot a/the bear, (the) two bears, (the) bears.’
- b. *Ammu-i-n karhu-a / kah-ta karhu-a /*  
 shoot-PST-1SG bear-PART / two-PART bear-PART /  
*karhu-j-a.*  
 bear-PL-PART  
 ‘I shot at a/the bear, at (the) two bears, at (the) bears.’
- (6) a. *ngarrka-ngku ka marlu luwa-rni.*  
 man-ERG PRES kangaroo shoot-NONPST  
 ‘The man is shooting the kangaroo.’
- b. *ngarrka-ngku ka-rla-jinta marlu-ku*  
 man-ERG PRES-3.DAT-3.DAT kangaroo-DAT  
*luwa-rni*  
 shoot-NONPST  
 ‘The man is shooting at the kangaroo.’

The traditional terms for the contrast in Finnish between the completed event expressed through the accusative case in (5a) and the incomplete activity in (5b) with the argument in the partitive case are respectively “resultative” and “irresultative”. Notice that here, as in the English examples, there is no direct indication of trying, although it is a reasonable inference that someone who is shooting at a bear does so in an attempt to kill it or scare it off. However,

Johanna Laakso reports that in dialectal Finnish, but not in the standard language, frequentative verbal derivatives may involve an explicit sense of trying reminiscent of the *de conatu* implicature described above, as in her example (7):<sup>3</sup>

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

And interestingly, Kiparsky (1998) notes that with complements of certain verbs, including verbs of trying, the choice between the two cases is optional, as in (8):

- (8) *Matti koett-i tappa-a karhu-n/karhu-a.*  
 Matti.NOM try-PST.3SG kill-INF bear-ACC/bear-PART  
 ‘Matti tried to kill a/the bear.’ (Kiparsky 1998: 287)

Here, the accusative identifies *karhu* ‘bear’ as the direct object within the predicate *tappaa karhun* ‘to kill the bear’ while the partitive signals the potentially irresultative outcome of the predicate *koetti tappaa karhua* ‘tried to kill the bear’.

In the Australianist literature, this phenomenon has come to be known as “conative case” (Hale 1982, Laughren 1988, Simpson 1991), though this expression does not refer to a separate case form but to one of the functions of the dative case. According to Simpson (1991: 329), the Warlpiri pattern was at first called “unachieved intention” in Hale (1982), and, according to Swartz (1982: 84), the use of the dative in (6b) means that “the action of the verb has been frustrated in some way and that the intent of the action has been unfulfilled”. The parallel between Finnish and Warlpiri had already been noted by Simpson (1991: 329, Footnote 15), who points out, *contra* Hale and Swartz, that in Warlpiri the subject can be inanimate and therefore there is not always a presupposition of intention or attempt:

- (9) *watiya wanti-ja ngaju-ku-ju-rla ramparl-luwa-rnu*  
 tree fall-PST I-DAT-1.SO-3.DAT miss-hit.with.missile-PST  
 ‘The tree fell but missed me.’

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3. She adds (personal communication): “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.”

The same holds for Finnish, where the accusative/partitive alternation is independent of the animacy and agentivity of the subject, thus:<sup>4</sup>

- (10) a. *Ville / tuuli työns-i venee-n ranta-an*  
 Bill / wind push-PST.3SG boat-GEN(ACC) shore-ILL  
 ‘Bill/The wind pushed the boat (all the way) to the shore.’
- b. *Ville / tuuli työns-i venet-tä ranta-a kohti*  
 Bill / wind push-PST.3SG boat-PART shore-PART towards  
 ‘Bill/The wind pushed the boat towards the shore.’

When Hale and his co-workers conducted the crosslinguistic survey that is reported in Guerssel et al. (1985), they adopted the label “conative” for this kind of case alternation, inspired by the use that this term had been put to in work on the Athapaskan languages (Simpson 1991: 329). And this label seems to have stuck – see, for example, the more recent analysis of some of the Warlpiri data in Legate (2002: 137, note 12) or the comparison of the Warlpiri and Finnish data in Kiparsky (1998: 294–297).<sup>5</sup>

One of the authors of Guerssel et al. (1985) was Beth Levin, and it is her by now classic work on English lexical classes (Levin 1993) which seems to have enshrined the term “conative alternation” as a label for the dataset consisting of English pairs of the type exemplified by *shoot* vs. *shoot at*, *push* vs. *push on/at/against*, *nibble* vs. *nibble at/on*, and the like. She observes that “the use of the verb in the intransitive variant describes an ‘attempted’ action without specifying whether the action was actually carried out” (Levin 1993: 42, scare quotes in the original), where by “carried out” she must mean “completed” since certainly in shooting at a bear, for example, the agent carries out some shooting; we just do not know to what effect. Levin’s account has become a point of departure for much subsequent work seeking to analyse these alternations within a variety of frameworks, which we will not discuss in detail here. Suffice it to mention the compositional semantic analyses offered by van der Leek (1996) and Beavers & Francez (2006), and Adele Goldberg’s recruitment of this pattern as a prototypical example of a construction in the technical sense of Construction Grammar, a construction whose semantics “can be represented roughly as ‘X DIRECTS ACTIONS AT Y’ ” (Goldberg 1995: 63). The merits of a Construction Grammar account of this data are further debated in Broccias (2001) and Perek & Lemmens (2010). Other work in this vein includes

4. Once again I am grateful to Johanna Laakso for guidance on this point and for supplying the relevant examples.

5. This is not to say that the term has become standard across all traditions. For instance, the recent volume by Tamm (2012), although it deals with similar case alternations in Estonian, a close relative of Finnish, and makes ample reference to the work of Kiparsky and Levin, adheres to the traditional labels “resultative” and “irresultative” without once citing “conative” even in the discussion of “terminological choices” in Chapter 2.

Lee (2003), Acevedo (2009) on Old English, Acevedo (2011) on Spanish, and Kim (2009) on English, Korean, and Japanese. What these later works have in common is a detailed focus on the argument alternations at the expense of any consideration of the notion of trying. “Conative” thus becomes a label for a pattern of argument marking, from which it is but a short step to other mechanisms whereby an item can change its argument status, most notably antipassive (see for example Guerrero Medina 2011 and references there). Not everyone, however, has been convinced by this direction of travel. Kiparsky (1998: 295, Footnote 24) is particularly sceptical noting that the Warlpiri pattern exemplified in (6b) obeys tests for transitivity despite the change to the dative case while antipassive constructions are by definition intransitive since they involve demotion of an object. In the *World atlas of language structures*, the English conative alternation in Levin’s sense is treated in the chapter on antipassives authored by Maria Polinsky (2011), although she is careful to say that the English construction is comparable in its semantic effect to an antipassive rather than that it should be analysed as such. For a survey which embeds this pattern of argument alternation in the wider context of links between case and aspect, see Richardson (2012).

### 5. Conative and semantically adjacent notions

Levin’s definition quoted above clearly links the notion of incompleteness of action to an attempt, albeit in scare quotes, something which both justifies the term “conative” in its etymological sense and which is faithful to the Athapaskanist tradition from which Hale is reported to have adopted the term. Thus, the definition proposed in Rice (2000: 260) covers both senses: “A further sub-situation aspectual type is the conative, meaning that an event was attempted or directed at a target”.<sup>6</sup> Slave examples cited by Rice (2000: 262) are:

- (11) a. *O h-ú-n-í-h-k'é*  
 O h-CONAT-ACH-PRFV-VAL-shoot  
 ‘S/he shot at O.’  
 b. *O ú-n-í-’ah*  
 O CONAT-ACH-PRFV-throw.clothlike.object  
 ‘S/he threw a clothlike object at O.’

The difference here is that, in line with the broader typology of these languages, the effect is achieved through head marking within the verbal complex rather than via the dependent marking evident in Finnish and Warlpiri (see Cook &

6. Sometimes too the definition encompasses verbal plurality as in Dressler (1968: 65) or in the following definition from Cusic (1981: 83): “repetitive action [which] falls short of producing some desired result”.



Rice 1989 for further discussion and exemplification from other Athapaskan languages).

Elsewhere in her discussion, Rice (2000: 334) says that “the conative implies lack of completion”. The element *-ú-* in the examples in (11) is in this respect parallel to the marker *-astg-* identified in Barker (1964: 161) for Klamath, also a Native American language but not belonging to the Athapaskan family, and glossed by him as ‘tried to do, planned to do but failed’, as in /yeqoːstga/ ‘tried to break an obj[ect] with the foot’, where the verb root is *-qewi-* ‘break’ and the prefix *y-* indicates an action involving the foot. Interestingly, Barker does not use the term “conative” to describe this item, which suggests the terminology may have been more current among Athapaskanists, where it had been in use at least since the time of Sapir and Hoijer’s work on Navajo, although even within Native America the phenomenon thus labelled goes well beyond that family.

There are many other languages which have a verbal periphrasis or inflection that expresses 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.<sup>7</sup> In addition to Slave, Navajo (Young 2000) and other Athapaskan languages and Klamath, languages which have been reported as having constructions of this kind include: Burmese (Tibeto-Burman; Vittrant 2004), Mongsen Ao (Tibeto-Burman; Coupe 2007), Macuxi (Cariban), Mauwake (Trans-New Guinea; Berghäll 2010) and many other Papuan languages (Foley 1986), Plains Cree (Algonquian; Dahlstrom 1991, Wolvengrey 2011), and Syrian Arabic (Cowell 2005). Thus, for Macuxi we have (12); see also Gildea (1992: 205).

- (12) *yei ya'ti-yonpa-pi-i-ya*  
 wood cut-CONAT-PST-3-ERG  
 ‘He tried to cut the wood.’<sup>8</sup> (Abbott 1991: 120)

Andrej Malchukov offers the following example from Even (North Tungusic):

7. Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) notes that all the examples cited are in the past tense and raises the possibility that the implicature of non-completion lies in the tense rather than the conative morpheme itself. Of necessity an expression of future attempt is more open since the outcome is still unknown.

8. I have reworded the gloss here to avoid equivocation. Abbott glosses this example as ‘he tried cutting the wood’ but in my (British) 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”.

- (13) *höre-sči-n*  
 leave-CONAT-NONFUT.3SG  
 ‘S/he tried to leave.’ (Andrej Malchukov, personal communication)

Foley (1986: 152) states that “the conative modality (the actor *tries* to perform the action) is almost universally signalled in Papuan languages with a serial verb construction involving the verb stem ‘see’” and he adduces examples from Yimas, Asmat, Hua, and Barai. Even so, other possibilities exist. Berghäll (2010: 331) reports that in Mauwake the conative is expressed by a combination of the verb *on-* ‘do’ plus the desiderative, which in turn is made up of the verb *na-* ‘say’ plus the imperative, thus:

- (14) [*mukuna umuk-u na-ep on-a-mik*]=*na me*  
 fire extinguish-IMP.1DU say-SS.SEQ do-PST-1/3-TP not  
*pepek*  
 enough  
 ‘We tried to extinguish the fire but were not able to.’ (Berghäll 2010: 332)

Moreover, she notes: “when this structure is used it is implied that somehow or other the effort fails”. In similar vein, Dik (1997: 224) defines “conative” as a form which indicates that “the SoA (state of affairs) is attempted but not finished”.

The use of reported discourse constructions to express connotations of frustrated attempt is discussed more widely for Trans-New-Guinea languages and for some Bantu languages in Güldemann (2008). Berghäll, however, notes that in Mauwake if the attempt is successful or is more in the way of an experiment, then a different verb *akim-* is used, which combines with a nominalised verbal complement in what appears to be an orthodox control construction. The contrast here is reminiscent of that which exists in English between *try* plus the infinitive, which expresses an attempt (whether successful or not), and *try* plus the gerund, which implies either success or at least completion of the attempt. Compare (15a) and (15b):

- (15) a. *She tried to ring him (but her phone wouldn’t work).*  
 b. *She tried ringing him (but he didn’t answer).*

Similarly, (16a) is an exhortation while (16b) is a recommendation based on the speaker’s prior experience of what is likely to work:

- (16) a. *Try to speak more slowly.*  
 b. *Try speaking more slowly.*

Vittrant (2004) notes something similar for Burmese, for which she coins the term “experimentative”, and she comments (2004: 208, emphasis in original):

L'aspect EXPÉRIMENTATIF [essai] est une invitation à faire l'expérience d'une action. Il est exprimé en birman par le morphème / *Cí*/. Celui-ci, quoique souvent traduit par «essayer de faire V», ne correspond pas à un aspect CONATIF quelle que soit la définition que l'on adopte de ce terme. En effet, il marque les valeurs de tentative ET de réussite, sans faire référence à un effort.

[The EXPERIMENTATIVE aspect [attempt] is an invitation to experience the action. It is expressed in Burmese by the morpheme / *Cí*/. The latter, although often translated as 'try to do V', does not correspond to a CONATIVE aspect whatever definition of that term one adopts. Rather, it conveys the meanings of attempt AND success, without reference to the effort involved.]

Her example (3.82) is reproduced here as (17):<sup>9</sup>

- (17) *wəthu-kə`le ba-kə`le `ye `Ci Pa-`la*  
 novel-small PR:QST-small write AUX.try PV:POL-PP:QST  
 'Why not try writing a little story or something?' (Vittrant 2004: 208)

She explicitly contrasts the experimentative aspect with the conative, which is expressed by what in her terminology is called a “verbe versatile” glossed as ‘s’efforcer de’ and which seems to correspond to what in English has come to be called a “light verb”. The connection between conative and imperative is also to be seen in the East Greenlandic marker *-niaq-* analysed in Tersis (2010). She cites the following uses of this item (her examples (38)–(40) with her glosses and translations):

- (18) a. *miikkattaq-niaq-pu-q*  
 ringed.seal-hunt-IND-3SG  
 ‘He hunts ringed seal.’  
 b. *suutti-i-niaq-pu-q*  
 first-be-try-IND-3SG  
 ‘He is trying to be first.’  
 c. *nii-niaq-ta*  
 eat-INJUNCT-2PL  
 ‘Let’s eat!’

Of these, she observes that “the semantic denominator common to these different uses is that of intention/conation”. It is interesting that in proposing a unified analysis for these uses she includes the incorporating verb in (18a) which she translates as ‘hunt’ and which bears a striking semantic affinity with the ‘shoot at’ type of meaning associated with the Finnish and Warlpiri examples in (5) and (6) above.

9. In (17) I have put into English the lexical items Vittrant uses in the gloss but have kept her abbreviations. The English translation of the example is Vittrant’s own.

Cinque (1999: 105) includes a functional head signalling conative aspect in his hierarchical or “cartographic” model of clause structure. He also notes the potential contrast between successful and unsuccessful attempts, citing Spokane (Salishan), which has a verbal morpheme which indicates “that an accomplishment takes place or succeeds only through extra effort” (Carlson 1996: 59),<sup>10</sup> and Mongo (Bantu), which has an affix labelled by Larochette (1980: 34) as “capacitatif”. This same contrast can also exist at the lexical level as witness the difference in English between *he tried to do it* and *he managed to do it*. There is a third possibility in (British?) English, a construction which seems to have gone largely unnoticed in the literature and which involves *go* plus the infinitive as in:

- (19) a. *If he goes to open a new bank account, they will see his name and deny him.*<sup>11</sup>  
 b. *I pulled into our lot this morning and went to stop my car and it just kept sliding.*<sup>12</sup>

The sense here is clearly of an attempt that fails or is frustrated in some way. For a detailed analysis of this construction, see Dalrymple & Vincent (in preparation). The effort involved may also be signalled by appropriate lexical choices. Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) points out in this connection the difference between Italian *provare* which simply means to make an attempt even if little or no effort is required and *cercare* which implies some degree of effort. In extreme cases they could therefore be combined as in his example (20), though the opposite order of combination – *\*cerca di provare a fermarlo* – would not be grammatical:

- (20) *Prova a cercare di fermarlo e vedrai*  
 try.IMP COMP try.INF COMP stop.INF.him and see.FUT.2SG  
*cosa ti succede.*  
 what you.DAT.SG happen.PRES.3SG  
 ‘Try to attempt to stop him and you’ll see what happens to you.’

There is a noteworthy parallel both in structure and lexis between this example and the Danish in (1), which suggests that more detailed crosslinguistic study

10. Markers of this kind occur more widely within Salishan languages where, as in the title of Carlson’s article, they are commonly referred to as expressing “control”. Note however that “control” here is used in the ordinary language sense of being in charge or on top of a situation, and not in the technical sense in which *try*, *persuade*, etc. are identified as control verbs. I am grateful to Sally Thomason for her advice on the Salishan data and terminology.

11. See <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100302000435AAUdBTv> (accessed 28 May 2013).

12. See <http://forums.audioworld.com/showthread.php?t=2446616> (accessed 28 May 2013).

of verbs in the semantic field of ‘try’ – think of English *strive*, *seek*, or the French *essayer* vs *s’efforcer* contrast mentioned in relation to example (17) – and their potential to grammaticalise would be valuable.

In addition to those already noted, a number of other terms have been used to identify meanings close to, and perhaps even equivalent to, conative in this sense, including “frustrative” (Coupe for Mongsen Ao), “attemptive” (Strauss 2002 for Japanese and Korean), and “irresultative” (Berghäll for Mauwake, Aikhenvald for Tariana). For instance, Aikhenvald (2003: 454–455) 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”. A semantic map of conjunctions in this same domain is proposed by Malchukov (2004), who also notes the link with the frustrative meaning (2004: 194), and cites the two Pirahã affixes *-ābagai* ‘frustrated initiation’ and *-ābai* ‘frustrated termination’ (Everett 1986: 300) as well as the Orok (Southern Tungusic) con-verb in *-ngejd’i*.

Of these semantically adjacent terms, the one that has been subject to most systematic crosslinguistic 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 clearly distinct, although they share with conatives the fact that they identify types of mental or emotional precursor to action, and, as we have seen, sometimes overlap in their morphosyntactic realization with conatives.

A natural next stage in research, therefore, would be to seek to develop a semantic map by means of which such concepts can be defined and located relative to each other.<sup>13</sup> One thing is already clear: such a map would have to range over both sides of the ill-defined border between lexical and grammatical meaning, since we have seen that the label “conative” can be used both to classify dimensions of verbal semantics and pragmatics and as a way of identifying the content and function of a variety of morphosyntactically discrete markers. It seems clear too that different languages or language families police this border in different ways. Thus, the principal question that Rice (2000) poses for herself throughout her study is whether the affixes she examines within the complex Athapaskan verb system fall under the heading of inflection (standardly defined as part of grammar) or derivation (standardly defined as a means of

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13. Here and in what follows we put aside the Jakobsonian sense of “conative”.

providing new lexical resource). By contrast, for Matthias Jenny, working on more isolating languages like Mon and Thai, the matter appears to relate in the main to lexical semantics (Jenny 2005: 156–157):<sup>14</sup>

As in other Southeast Asian languages, most verbs can have conative reading in an appropriate context, i.e. the simple unmarked verb may express the attempt to do something rather than the actual performing of the activity itself.

And yet it cannot be simply a matter of language type. We have seen in the examples in (18) how in the famously polysynthetic East Greenlandic, Tersis (2010) groups together a lexical meaning ('hunt'), a derivational meaning ('try to'), and an inflectional meaning ('imperative') for the single morpheme *-niaq-*.

A further issue concerns which map to place "conative" on. Jenny (2005: 156) calls it "a subcategory of the atelic aktionsart", and the widespread use of terms like "activity" and "achievement" in the literature surveyed here suggests that for many researchers conativity falls within the domain of lexical and/or grammatical aspect. Yet Tersis (2010) refers to "conative verbal modality", as does Foley (1986: 152), and the connections that other scholars have made with intention and volition are also more reminiscent of modality than of aspect. Compare in this regard Bybee et al. (1994: 264–265), who cite from Fortescue (1984) the West Greenlandic affix *-niar*, cognate with the one discussed by Tersis, as an example of "other agent-oriented modalities", although neither they nor Fortescue use the term "conative". They suggest that the link between the meanings is a diachronic one and propose the grammaticalization path in (21) (Bybee et al. 1994: 265):

(21) ATTEMPT > INTENTION > FUTURE

Part of the answer here no doubt lies in the fact that domains such as tense, mood, and aspect are much more closely linked than traditional terminology would lead one to believe. Another possibility is that the similar endpoints are the result of different paths of historical change in the way that Malchukov (2004) suggests for the variety of crosslinguistic expressions of adversative meaning. Such a historical enterprise might start from the etymologies of conative markers. For instance, Gildea (1992) reports that in the languages he is concerned with the conative morphology can be traced back to independent lexemes meaning 'taste',<sup>15</sup> whereas we have seen that the most common origin in the Papuan languages is in verbs which express instead visual perception.

14. On the wider issue of so-called semi-perfectivity and incompleteness effects in Thai, see Koenig & Muansuan (2000), and for similar patterns in other languages Koenig & Chief (2008). I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for these references.

15. Guglielmo Cinque (personal communication) points to the connection between 'try' and 'taste' in the Italian verb *provare* mentioned above: *prova questa pasta* 'try/taste this pasta'.

No doubt there are several other likely sources to be brought into the full picture. Even so, there is still one large question in relation to the use of the term “conative” that even the most detailed semantic map may not resolve, namely: how do we connect the use of the term in the sense of an attempt with its use to mark a case alternation?

### 6. The status of linguistic terminology

It is instructive to compare here the debate over the term “mirative” which occupies most of the pages of *Linguistic Typology* 16(3) 2012. There the concern is less about the definition of the concept, on which the discussants by and large agree, and more about whether we need the concept at all, or whether our armoury of grammatical and semantic categories is not already sufficiently well stocked to be able to deal with the phenomena that have been labelled as “mirative”. And second, if we do decide we need to add “mirative” to our analytical resources, how do we define it vis-à-vis evidentiality and the like, an issue which brings us back to the need for more detailed semantic maps. What does not arise in that discussion is the question of whether there are two distinct notions being grouped together under the same term. Put another way, with “mirativity” the issue of terminological homonymy does not arise in the way that it has done for “conativity”.

The reason for this difference in status, I suggest, is an interesting one, namely that the history of the term “conative” reveals a piece of technical terminology that, within the professional linguistic community, has undergone a process of semantic change akin to the way ordinary language vocabulary can change its meaning over the course of time. The mechanism at work in the conceptual leap from the expression of attempt to a pattern of argument alternation is reminiscent of what happens in those semantic changes traditionally called metonymy or metonymisation,<sup>16</sup> in which an item comes over time to refer primarily to what was a secondary association of the original meaning. To take a classic example, the original meaning of the English word *litter* is ‘bed’, deriving from Old French *litière* ‘portable bed’ and ultimately connected back to Latin *lectus* ‘bed, couch’ and the Proto-Indo-European root *\*legh-* ‘lie’. The principal modern use of the word to mean ‘discarded, untidy material’ comes about because beds were often made of straw, which in due course became soiled and was then thrown away and new material laid down. The original meaning of the term still survives in the rather specialised use to refer to a

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As the translation shows, the same is true of English; in this context Italian *prova* could not be substituted by *cerca* ‘try, make the effort to’ just as in English one could not say *\*attempt this pasta*.

16. For discussion of the history and definition of metonymy and metonymisation, see Traugott & Dasher (2002: 11–81).

portable bed on which an emperor or other notable was carried.<sup>17</sup> As long as the two concepts of ‘bed’ and ‘rubbish’ are connected (or connectible) we can speak of polysemy but if they become entirely separate, as arguably they have in the modern language, we have rather a case of homonymy (on the distinction between polysemy and homonymy and the genesis of one from the other, see Traugott & Dasher (2002: 11–16) and references cited there).

The same scenario plays out with “conative”. Originally, and in line with its etymology, it identifies morphemes or constructions in which there is a sense of trying. Since speakers commonly, perhaps most commonly as we have seen, refer to the attempt when it was unsuccessful, there is a frequent association of trying with non-completion, and non-completion changes the status of the verb’s arguments and, in some languages, the way these arguments are marked. The metonymic leap is then to use the same term for the argument marking even when the sense of attempt is absent. Assuming that this is what in fact happened, the possibility of metonymic change in linguistic terminology – or indeed in any specialised or technical vocabulary – raises a number of intriguing issues, which we sketch but cannot hope fully to resolve in the concluding paragraphs of this article.

The first issue is a purely practical one. If the same term gets used in different senses, there is a potential for confusion. One might with reason think that the point of having a separate technical metalanguage is that its items should be shorn of ambiguities and vaguenesses, and protected from the vagaries of semantic change that can affect everyday items. The risks otherwise are obvious. One only has to think of the terminological flip of the label “ergative” induced by its use in Burzio (1986: 27) to refer to verbs such as Italian *cadere* ‘fall’, *arrivare* ‘arrive’, and the like, precisely those verbs which would not have an argument in the ergative case in so-called ergative languages.<sup>18</sup> At the time the new usage was relatively harmless since the generative community operated largely in isolation from other parts of the discipline, and the grammar of ergativity in the traditional sense did not much figure on its agenda. Over time this unfortunate choice seems to have fallen out of use even within the generative linguistic community – perhaps as a consequence of the greater intellectual permeability between different parts of the discipline – and to have been replaced by the more theory-neutral label “unaccusative”. The two senses of “conative” are less directly opposed than the two meanings that for a while

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17. The idea of discardable waste is still discernible in the expression *cat litter*, while a *litter of pigs* is another metonymic outcome since the sow gave birth on a bed of straw.

18. Compare in this connection Cinque (1990: 1, Footnote 1), who adopts Burzio’s usage in explicit preference to “unaccusative” while at the same time referring to Seely’s (1977) discussion of the history of the term “ergative”. Such deliberate flying in the face of traditional usage is not however what lies behind the more covert shift in usage that has affected “conative”.



“ergative” came to have, but there is nonetheless room for confusion or unclarity or, perhaps worst of all, isolation. Thus, recent work in the formal semantics tradition on argument structure has tended to treat the conative case alternation independently of any account of the meaning of verbs of trying (see, for example, Beavers & Francez 2006).

Whether we should be concerned about the possibility of semantic change affecting our professional terminology depends on the status we accord to such items. On one view, which we might dub instrumentalist, a term is as good as the uses it gets put to. Thus for example: “The mirative has proven itself to be useful in the description of a wide range of languages, and descriptive utility is the only validity there is” (DeLancey 2012: 559). If all we are seeking to do is describe languages, and as long as we can read each other’s descriptions, maybe there is not much to worry about after all.

If, however, we aim to build explanatory theories about language structure and change on the back of our descriptions, then there is more reason to be concerned. One way to ward off such concern is to recognise a distinction between the pre-theoretical vocabulary or metalanguage of linguistic description in the sense of Lyons (1977: 25–31) and the theoretical constructs by means of which the results of description are analysed and ultimately, one hopes, explained. This strategy still has much to recommend it despite the legitimate doubts raised by Dryer (2006a, b). The challenge would then be to see whether the link between attempting an action and the altered status of the arguments of the verb expressing the action can be reconstructed within the theory. The semantics of *try* developed by Grano (2011) suggests that this might not be an unreasonable hope (see also Dalrymple & Vincent (in preparation) for further discussion). To achieve such a re-unification of the concept would be to demonstrate that the type of metonymy involved in the development of the two senses was conceptual rather than accidental (Traugott & Dasher 2002: 29).

If, following Dryer (2006a), we prefer to think of our handling terminology as something more than a convenient pre-theoretical tool and rather as the ingredients of a theory, namely Basic Linguistic Theory, it is less easy to be relaxed about terminological overlaps and shifts and more important to achieve consistency and coherence in our usage. That said, whatever stance we adopt, the terms and concepts we will use are the ones that most adequately allow us to capture the phenomena and the connections that we can observe in the data. And in that sense the anxieties expressed by Haspelmath (2007) about “pre-existing categories” are misplaced. The issue is not whether the categories pre-exist or not but whether they serve their purpose and what that purpose is taken to be. These are big issues and ones which we must leave for further discussion on other occasions, whether in the pages of this journal or elsewhere.

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*Abbreviations:* 1/2/3 1st/2nd/3rd person; ACC accusative; ACH achievement situation aspect; AUX auxiliary; CLCH clause chaining marker; COMP complementizer; CONAT conative; DAT dative; DU dual; ERG ergative; FREQU frequentative; FUT future; GEN genitive; ILL illative; IMP imperative; IMPF imperfect; IMPFV imperfective; IND indicative; INF infinitive; INJUNCT injunctive; NEG negative; NOM nominative; NONFUT non-future; NONPST non-past; PART partitive; PL plural; POL politeness; PP sentence-final particle; PR particle; PRES present; PRFV perfective; PST past; PTCPL participle; PV verb particle; QST question; SEQ sequential; SG singular; SO singular object; SS same subject; TP topic; VAL valence.

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