Auxiliary choice with Dutch motion verbs

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As Dutch manner of motion verbs can occur with both hebben ‘have’ and zijn ‘be’, they are often quoted in the literature on unaccusativity. The general consensus is that these verbs are normally unergative and accordingly take hebben, but that they are unaccusative if an endpoint is added, in which case they take zijn (e.g. Hoekstra 1984, 1999, Zaenen 1993, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995, van Hout 1996, Lieber and Baayen 1997, Sorace 2000, Alexiadou et al. 2004, Zubizarreta and Oh 2007).

Auxiliary choice with these verbs is assumed to correlate with both telicity and the syntactic status of PPs (Hoekstra 1984, 1999, Hoekstra and Mulder 1990, van Hout 1996, Helmantel 2002). (1), for instance, has been analyzed as follows.

(1)  *dat Jan in de sloot gesprongen is/heet* (Hoekstra and Mulder 1990: 9)
    that Jan in the ditch jumped is/has

With zijn, the example is telic and the PP *in de sloot* ‘in the ditch’ is analyzed as a complement, which is interpreted as the endpoint of the motion (‘that Jan jumped into the ditch’). With hebben, the example is atelic and *in de sloot* is analyzed as a modifier (or ‘adjunct’), which is understood as the location of the motion (‘that Jan has been jumping in the ditch’).

Attested data show, however, that this analysis is wanting in several respects. One problem concerns the syntactic and semantic analysis of the PPs involved. While *naar Deventer* ‘to Deventer’ in (2a), with zijn, could indeed be interpreted as an ‘endpoint’, it does not seem correct to analyze *naar boven* ‘up’ in (2b), with hebben, as a ‘location’. Instead, it seems to convey a path.

(2)  a.  *Ik ben in 1997 in zes dagen tijd van Parijs naar Deventer gelopen* (Google)
    *I am in 1997 in six days time from Paris to Deventer walked*
    ‘In 1997 I walked from Paris to Deventer in six days’ time’

    b.  *We ... hebben 2 uur naar boven gelopen in de regen* (Google)
    *we have 2 hour to above walked in the rain*
    ‘We walked up in the rain for two hours’

Even more problematic are examples such as those in (3), because they take the opposite auxiliary from what the analysis predicts. (3a) is telic, witness the modifier *in vier maanden tijd* ‘in four months’ time’, yet takes heeft. (3b), conversely, is atelic, note the use of *2 uur* ‘for two hours’; yet takes zijn.

(3)  a.  *Onze kameel Ned blijkt een kameel die ... in vier maanden tijd*
    *our camel Ned turns-out a camel that ... in four months time*
    *van het midden van Australië (Alice Springs) naar Broome gelopen heeft* (Google)
    *from the middle of Australia (Alice Springs) to Broome walked has*
    ‘Our camel Ned turns out to be a camel that walked from the middle of Australia (Alice Springs) to Broome in four months’ time’

    b.  *Op deze manier zijn we 2 uur naar boven gelopen* (Google)
    *in this way are we 2 hour to above walked*
    ‘We walked up in this way for two hours’

This presentation argues that auxiliary choice, telicity and the syntactic status of PPs are in fact independent issues, requiring their own explanations. Using Cognitive Grammar as its theoretical background (Langacker 1987, 1991, 2008), the presentation first examines the role of PPs in these constructions, analyzing their syntactic status as well as their contribution to telicity. Then auxiliary choice is accounted for in terms of a distinction familiar from more traditional grammars of Dutch: zijn is used when the focus is on the motion event as a ‘change of location’, while hebben is used when the motion event is understood a ‘type of act’ (Haeseryn et al. 1997).
References


