Uncovering the Rules of Language: What the Case of the Word 'Glimpse' Can Teach Us

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Research Question: Are Semelfactives Dynamic?
Can semelfactive verbs occur with a dynamic adverb?

Background
Verbs can be divided into aspectual classes based on how they behave. What class a verb belongs to can be determined by tests. Verbs grouped as semelfactives seem to sometimes pass and sometimes fail one of these tests.

Test: Can the verb occur with a dynamic adverb?
Dynamic adverbs are adverbs that indicate motion.

Van Valin’s examples:
Passes the test: *She sneezed once violently.
Fails the test: *He glimpsed the intruder strongly.

(Van Valin, 2006)

Experiment 1 – Isolating the Problematic Verb
Different predicates were tested for compatibility with dynamic adverbs.

Speaker 1 (Male, from New York)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Structure</th>
<th>Speaker 1</th>
<th>Speaker 2</th>
<th>Speaker 3</th>
<th>Speaker 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He glimpsed at the side-view mirror</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He peeled at the date on the carton of milk</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He sneezed once violently</td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He caught a glimpse of the view mirror</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiment 2: Testing the Problematic Verb glimpsed

• The verb glimpsed was tested with various objects.
• Results from both experiments were compared.

Study Design
• Participants: four adult native speakers of English
  - Speaker 1: Male, from New York
  - Speaker 2: Male, from New York
  - Speaker 3: Female, from New York
  - Speaker 4: Female, from Colorado
• Participants were asked if different dynamic adverbs sounded natural in sentences with semelfactives.

Results
All semelfactives except for glimpsed could take at least one dynamic adverb in all of the tests.

Conclusion: Data Points Towards a Separate Rule at Work
• What appears to be an exception to the systematic classification of semelfactives could be the result of another rule.
• This rule would prevent animate objects from occurring with the word glimpsed when a dynamic adverb is present.
• Dialectal differences may also be involved. Non-participants from other areas have commented that He glimpsed the intruder is grammatical for them, while all of the speakers in the study deemed it ungrammatical.

Implications
• For the study of aspectual classes: This provides more evidence that Van Valin’s classification and tests are more consistent and effective than previously thought.
• For our understanding of language: Evidence that what can appear to be an exception to a rule in a language may in fact be a separate rule.

References