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Nibbling is not many bitings in Italian and French: A Morphosemantic Analysis of Event Internal Plurality

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1. Introduction

By the term 'pluractionality', one generally refers to the explicit indication that the event denoted by some verb occurs or occurred or will occur not once, but several times within a certain time span. Event plurality is overtly marked in many languages through various devices of verbal morphology and with various semantic effects (see, e.g. Cusic, 1981; Mithun, 1988; Haji-Abdolhosseini et al., 2002). Here, we will examine verbs expressing event internal plurality in Italian and French, in order to find out how they are formed and what they mean precisely. Typical examples of such verbs are It *mordicchiare* and Fr *mordiller*, both meaning 'nibble'. These verbs, just like their English counterpart, denote sequences of sorts of subevents of a given event, sequences of biting sort-of-events in the present case, each of which is somewhat less (in intensity, duration, accomplishment, and so forth) than the singular event denoted by the simple verbs *mordere* and *mordre* 'bite'. They are numerous, although their number cannot be extended at will (see below), and many of them (not the examples just given) belong to a colloquial, emotionally coloured register.

Traditional grammars have analysed these verbs as instances of an evaluative group and formed by a morphological process of affixation of a diminutive suffix. This type of analysis has been taken up in current morphological studies, that focus primarily on the facet of meaning of diminution, see e.g. (Grandi, 1998; Bertinetto, 2004), and (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994) on the diminutive suffix in general. On the contrary, our study focusses on the multiplication effect, hence the relabelling of the group as pluractional. In section 2, we look at data and the morphological side of these verbs and claim that they do not result from a derivational process despite appearances. In section 3 we look at semantic properties of the phenomenon, and in section 4 we try to account for the conjunction of repetition and diminution that is a regular component of the meaning of these pluractional verbs. We wish to establish that internal repeated phases only have a dependent existence

with respect to the event that contains them. Because of this, they are not accessible to properties of tense-aspect affixes, adverbs, etc., which only modify at event level. Phase multiplication within an unextended event is what produces, we suggest, the diminution effect through a compensation process. Considering both sides from a morphosemantic perspective, the reason why plurality applies to phases rather than to the event may well be that event internal pluractionality in Italian, French and English is expressed by words, simple words like English *nibble, flutter*, etc., or possibly more complex words like *mordicchiare* and *mordiller*. This suggests that, at least in these languages, pluractionality expressed in the word only accesses the level of the phase, whereas phenomena taking place at levels higher than words access the two higher levels identified by Cusic (1981), events and occasions (see below), and possibly phases as well.

2. The Morphology side

2.1. Data and Morphological Properties

As mentioned, French and Italian include a sizable number of verbs characterized by special pluractional-diminutive meanings as well as by specific endings. Many, like It *mordicchiare* and Fr *mordiller* are paired with simplexes, here *mordere* and *mordre*, having the same meaning but for the pluractional-diminutive nuance. Other examples are It *canticchiare* 'hum' vs. *cantare* 'sing', *dormicchiare* 'slumber' vs. *dormire* 'sleep', etc. Many verbs of this class, however, showing the same meaning and the same endings, stand on their own, either because the simplex counterpart does not exist or because it cannot be semantically related. Examples of the former state of affairs are It *balbettare* 'stammer' and Fr *boursicoter* 'play the Stock Exchange in a petty way', as neither *balbare nor *bourser are actual words. In the case of It *volteggiare* 'fly about' and Fr *barbouiller* 'daub', on the other hand, there are the simplexes *voltare* and *barber*, but they mean 'turn about' and 'bore' respectively.

No matter whether they are paired or not, all these verbs consist in a stem and a particular ending. Both languages make use of several of these phonological strings. A preliminary survey enabled us to extract the following fourteen endings for Italian and nine for French.

Table 1 Phonological strings used in pluractional verbs

phonological string	Italian example	phonological string	French example
/akkj/	*fumacchiare*	/aj/	*tirailler*
/ač/	*sprimacciare*	/as/	*rêvasser*
/dzol/	*penzolare*	/et/	*voleter*
/edž/	*sorseggiare*	/ij/	*mordiller*
/ekkj/	*punzecchiare*	/ikot/	*tournicoter*
/ell/	*saltellare*	/niš/	*pleurnicher*
/ett/	*fischiettare*	/on/	*chantonner*
/ikkj/	*canticchiare*	/ot/	*vivoter*
/iñ/	*tocchignare*	/uj/	*mâchouiller*
/ukol/	*piagnucolare*		
/ol/	*tremolare*		
/ondzol/	*gironzolare*		
/ukkj/	*leggiucchiare*		
/uts/	*tagliuzzare*		

Data like It *mordicchiare, fumacchirare* look as cases of staightforward deverbal derivation by means of suffixes analogous to, say, Latin inchoative /sk/ in *florescit* 'it begins to blossom' next to *floret* 'it blossoms'. Several facts militate against this conclusion, however. We shall present them according to their increasing weight. First there is the fact that most endings listed in Table 1 are unproductive. In Italian productivity mostly concerns the four endings in [kkj]. In French only /aj/, /-ot/, and /uj/ seem to be moderately productive (see Corbin, 1987; Roché, 2002, to appear). True, it is a rather common situation for derivational suffixes to be no longer productive in the present state of a language, even though they still can be analysed and recognized as such: cf. English -th in *depth, width,* etc. next to *deep, wide,* etc. Yet, given the specificity of the meaning attached to them, their often colloquial character, and their easy segmentation from the stem, we would expect more productivity for these endings than is actually observed. Secondly, the fact that some verbs appear with two different endings without any meaning difference (e.g., Fr *mâchouiller* and *mâchonner*, both more or less meaning 'chew') isn't unheard of in derivational morphology (cf. Fr *nettoyage* and *nettoiement*, both meaning 'cleaning'). However, the usual state of affairs is for one form to 'block' all other possible forms, as with English *arrival* blocking *arrivation (see Aronoff, 1994) or for the two forms to specialize their meanings. Alternate endings are rare in our class of verbs, but they are not exceptional, at least in French.

A third reason for doubt, probably the most serious, is the massive presence of verbs like It *sorseggiare* or Fr *barbouiller*, which include the particular endings and the pluractional meaning, but cannot be paired with simple verbs lacking the endings and sharing the same basic meanings. Isolated pseudo-derivations exist, for instance, *sloth* does not relate to *slow* any longer, and there isn't any English verb at the source of *tuition*. But the usual and reasonable conclusion is precisely

that *sloth* and *tuition* are not derived words similar to *depth* and *intuition* in Modern English despite their ending in something that looks exactly like the suffixes -th and -ion of the latter forms. In other words, in *sloth* and *tuition* the final segments belong to the root as they do in *moth* and *carrion*. One could extend this reasoning to *sorseggiare* and *barbouiller*, considering them simple verbs like, say, *specchiare* 'reflect in a mirror' and *mouiller* 'wet'. But then, it would follow that /(e)kkj/ and /uj/ are viewed as parts of the root in *sorseggiare* or *barbouiller*, but as derivational suffixes in *canticchiare* and *mâchouiller*—which can be paired with *cantare* and *mâcher*—despite the fact that all these verbs share a common and specific shade of meaning clearly related to the ending's presence. The number of verbs that belong to the unpaired case disfavours this hypothesis.

We are thus facing a dilemma: on the one hand, the point that *sorseggiare* and *barbouiller* are not deverbal derived verbs is consistent with our other reasons for rejecting a derivational analysis across the board, so that *canticchiare* and *mâchouiller* shouldn't be viewed as derivations either despite appearances. On the other hand, although we accept that /-uj/, /-(V)kkj/, etc. are not derivational suffixes under any circumstances, we feel very reluctant to regard them as mere segments of the roots—in paired as well as unpaired items—given the obvious part they play in the interpretation of the verbs. The dilemma is a real one and we shall have to find a way to resolve it.

That said, some of the unpaired verbs could still be considered to be derived, only not from verbs, but from nouns: Fr *boursicoter* from *bourse* 'purse, stock exchange', *grappiller* from *grappe* 'bunch', *pianoter* from *piano*, *sorseggiare* from *sorso* 'sip', etc. This is not the general case, however: no noun—or none with the relevant meaning in the present-day language—can be associated to, e.g., Fr *barbouiller* (*barbe* means 'beard'), *marmonner, tripoter* (*tripot* means 'low-life gambling place, dive'), etc., or It *pencolare, sprimacciare*, etc. All these verbs share involved, usually obscure histories. For instance, *barbouiller*, attested as soon as the 15th century, is said to be possibly related to *barboter* 'dabble, splash about' with a change of ending, *tripoter* (1482) may have to do with an old, now quite forgotten sense of *tripot*, namely 'wiles, trickery', *gribouiller* perhaps comes from Dutch *kriebelen*, the ending of which was assimilated to native /-uj/.

Even when the relationship to a noun is fairly clear, the actual path between the two items is always intricate. In *pianoter*, for instance, the /o/ is probably the final vowel of *piano*, while /t/ represents the usual epenthetic consonant in French, so *pianoter* is indeed historically a denominal verb similar to, say, Fr *marteller* and It *martellare* 'hammer' next to *marteau* and *martello* 'hammer'. Yet its meaning, apparently constant since the first attestation in 1841, indicates that the /ot/ ending immediately caused it to be assimilated into the pluractional-diminutive group. Likewise, *boursicoter* (1580) was formed on the now extinct diminutive form *boursicot* of *bourse* in the special sense of 'stock exchange'. All this, anecdotic as it may be, goes towards the assumption that the endings that identify our verbs never

were verbal suffixes, but are semantically active by virtue of their form.

Before spelling out the conclusion we wish to draw from this, we point out a few more facts that also support our assumption. One is the very formal exuberance of the class as compared with the relative semantic uniformity of its members. Not only are the endings numerous, but no synchronic explanation can be found for the presence of one rather than the other in a given verb. It is not clear why we have It *canticchiare* (not *cantellare) next to *saltellare* (not *salticchiare), Fr *mâchouiller* (not *machiller) next to *sautiller* (not *sautouiller). In contrast, alternative derivational suffixes with the same meaning are never so numerous, and the presence of this or that one, say -th in *depth* as compared with -ity in *rapidity*, can generally be accounted for historically.

Next, all these verbs belong to the 1st conjugation class, whereas paired simplexes (when they exist) appear in all classes. Such an uniformity is surprising, because conjugation class in Italian and French is a property of the simple stem. Finally, a weaker, but still significant reason is that, were they derivational formatives, these endings would realize the only suffixal, verb-to-verb derivation in the Romance languages generally, where deverbal verbs are eminently prefixal, cf. It *fraintendere* 'misapprehend' vs. *intendere* 'apprehend', Fr *dénouer* 'untie' vs. *nouer* 'tie', to take examples where there is a clear meaning relation between simple and derived verbs.

2.2. An Alternative Morphological Analysis

Being neither suffixes, i.e. morphemes in their own right, nor undistinguished parts of the root, the endings of the verbs under consideration must be submorphs, i.e. phonological strings without a meaning, but inducing meaning effects related to their phonic substance through what is traditionally called 'sound symbolism' (see Dressler, 1990). Perhaps the best-known examples of such elements are the /sl/ and /gl/ clusters in English *slip, slide, slither, slobber,* etc., or *glimmer, glint, glitter, glow,* etc. Our claim, then, is that /uj/, /ot/, /ekkj/, /ell/, etc. are similar to /sl/ and /gl/ insofar as their very sound draws native speakers of Italian and French to assign a certain interpretation to the items that include them, even if they don't know the exact meaning of the item: you may be unsure as to what precise event is described by *tournicoter*, but by just hearing it you can't be in any doubt about the type of event it is. This type is that of an event the internal structure of which is characterised by a multiplicity of micro-events having the same nature and distinct from the whole event. Pluractionality is thus a feature of the whole form, flagged by the phonetic form of the ending. This agrees with the semantic nature of internal pluractionality, not an added specification, but an inherent modification of the structure of the event denoted by the verb without the submorph, if any. It also accounts for why there need not be a verb without the submorph, cf. *grouiller* 'swarm' also including a submorph, compare *swell, swelter, swill, swirl*.

Analysing the endings as submorphs allows us to resolve the dilemma pointed

to above: they are parts of the root, but their phonetics makes them distinguished parts of the root. Given this, such verb forms as It *canticchia* 'she hums, sings to herself' may be morphologically represented as composed of a root/stem /kantikkj/ plus /a/ which is the realisation of the set of inflectional features including conjugation class (1st), tense (Present), mood (Indicative), and the agreement features 3rd person singular. The same applies to Fr (elle) *chantonne*, mutatis mutandis.

3. Semantic Properties

3.1. General Semantic Properties

As said in the introduction, pluractional verbs are understood to denote pluralities of events. In his seminal contribution, Cusic (1981) has supposed that verbal plurality concerns several conceptual levels and has proposed a hierarchical arrangement of bounded units in three levels of structure: occasions, events, and phases. Pluralisation is possible at each level, indicating more than one isomorphic bounded unit of that level (Cusic, 1981, p.69). Every event is composed of at least one phase and every phase belongs to at most one event. Similarly, every occasion is composed of at least one event and every event belongs to at most one occasion (see his event ratio parameter 1). The different forms of event plurality can combine.

Depending on the level that is pluralized, one is led to distinguish two types of plurality. First, there is event external plurality when the event itself is pluralized and viewed as 'repeated' action cases, which is the case in occasions and events repetition. The source of the multitude of occurrences of one event type is identified by Cusic (1981) as i) a plural participant giving rise to a distributive effect (his distribution parameter 4), and ii) the assumption of an interval long enough to be a closure over a relevant set of intervals/occurrences, e.g. frequentative and habitual readings, according to our understanding of his connectedness parameter 3. Second, there is event internal plurality when pluralisation occurs at the level of phases, being interpreted as phase repetition within the boundaries of one event. Phase is a term often used with a different meaning in the literature on aspect and to avoid confusion, we will rename the relevant notion as C-phase (for Cusic's phase) in the following. C-phases are isomorphic event internal units, and no structure internal to them is visible. Our claim is that C-phases are dependent units and their emergence in linguistic terms is the manifestation that the threshold of resolution for perception that allows a grouping has been crossed. The threshold corresponds to the point from where the type of the description is no longer valid. Therefore, we see no reason to maintain that single events are constituted of one C-phase and we will be led to abandon strict structural identity of pluralities at all levels.

Finally, a peculiarity of the phenomenon is the fact of allowing variation in the relative measure of one dimension of the events, i.e. Cusic's relative measure parameter 2.

3.2. Specific Semantic Properties

Event plurality does not find its source in argument plurality in Italian and French. For instance, the subject is strictly unmodified by event plurality as such in the group of verbs under examination, i.e. all the C-phases have the same agent. The action described by a verb of this type does not have a duration that differs from that of the 'simple' verb. No order, be it temporal or spatial, is associated with C-phases, as shown by (1) where more holes can be punched at the same time or place.

(1) Il colpo di fucile ha bucherellato l'otre 'The gunshot riddled the waterskin with holes'

Intuitively, the change in the structure of the event between *bucare* 'make a hole' and *bucherellare* 'riddle with small holes' is an effect of redistribution of resources over a larger number of C-phases coupled by what looks like a compensatory operation that ensures that the event remains maximally connected. The holes are increased in number and decreased in size and are viewed against the same spatiotemporal backdrop, where the holes need not be evenly distributed.

4. Semantic Analysis

4.1. Discussion

Lasersohn (1995) offers a formalisation of Cusic's analysis of pluractional markers. In particular, he endorses the idea that the plural forming operation is the same at all levels and posits the same structure for the resulting internal and external event pluralities. For a given verb V, the meaning of a pluractional form which is a combination of the verb with a pluractional marker (PA) is as in (2), (Lasersohn, 1995, p.256). The set of events with property V is a collection whose elements are events with property P and whose cardinality is pragmatically set to a value that can vary but is necessarily no less than 2.

(2) $\text{V-PA(X)} \Leftrightarrow \forall\, e \in X[P(e)]\ \&\ \text{card(X)} \geq n$

The price to pay for this uniformity between events and C-phases is that the insight expressed by the hierarchical structure is lost, at best it comes down to the unexplained quirky constraint on the property of events P, which is equated to V for event external pluractionals but is defined case by case in the lexical entries of the verbs in event internal pluractionals.

The instances of an event type that make up the collection are differentiated along the three temporal, spatio-temporal or participant dimensions. Disjunction along one of them warrants boundedness, which provides a semblance of discretude sufficient for plurality. Thus, Lasersohn adds to (2) a clause requiring non overlap in either time, space or participants, that determines whether the distributivity is temporal, spatio-temporal or participant based. This constraint is problematic for event internal plurality, since it says that the C-phases of an event, like full events, can always be all singled out along one dimension. However, distinction i) can

be barred for C-phases in a dimension open to events, namely participants, and ii) gives an inaccessible output in all cases.

Let us consider the first problem. Like internally complex single events, internally plural events require argument identity across C-phases. Lasersohn's solution consists of allowing thematic relations θ to hold between groups of events X and their participants g, see (3) (Lasersohn, 1995, p.257).

(3) $\theta(X)(g) \Leftrightarrow g = \{x \in U | \exists e \in X\ \theta(e)(x)\}$

However, this does not help in explaining why constraints on thematic relations differ for pluralities of events and C-phases. In internal plurality, thematic relations must hold between groups of C-phases and the same atomic participants. Example (4a) means that Daniel ate each biscuit in little-bitings. The sentence cannot describe felicitously the situation where half of them were swallowed in big gulps. He may not eat a few biscuits, but the rest must be eaten little by little. Daniel also does not have to eat any biscuit in total. Similarly, in (4b), one or two cuts per apple won't do even if there are many apples, hence many cuts in total.

(4) a. Daniele ha mangiucchiato i biscotti 'Daniel nibbled the biscuits'

b. Luisa ha tagliuzzato le mele 'Louise chopped the apples'

As for the second problem, the inaccessibility of C-phases shows in the fact that C-phases cannot be ordered in time, nor is it possible to check that the intervals they occur in are disjoint, because they do not occur as such and the running time of C-phases is not specified individually. Running time is defined at the level of the event and provides the interval within which C-phases take place with no a priori positioning. The little-bitings making up a nibbling take place one after the other only for pragmatic reasons, because each of them is done by the same mouth, not because there is an external constraint that prevents their running times to overlap. But the temporal trace function that Lasersohn uses for preventing overlap among events making up a plurality is meant to ban overlaps for events and C-phases alike. A clear counterexample is provided by (1), where many holes can be punched at the same time and many at the same place. Furthermore, little-bitings cannot be too wide apart and yet constitute one and the same nibbling event, instead they require a temporal proximity which is not accounted by the proposal.

Further evidence that C-phases do not occur individually is provided by the fact that C-phases cannot be counted. Example (5) means only that there were two events of nibbling, not two little-bitings making up one nibbling. Similarly, adverbs never quantify on C-phases and (5) show that the ban is not just on numerical quantification, as for Chechen according to Yu (2001).

(5) Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita due volte 'Daniel nibbled the pencil two times'

(6) a. Ha mordicchiato molte volte la matita 'S/he nibbled the pencil many times'

b. Ha mordicchiato spesso la matita 'S/he often nibbled the pencil'

The impossibility of counting C-phases follows from the lack of information that single them out. Duration of events can be compared, not duration or number of C-phases, see (7) and (5).

(7) Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita più di Maria 'Daniel nibbled the pencil more (=longer) than Mary'

At this point, a natural question to ask is whether we can still claim that there is a plurality of C-phases. The two tests for pluractionality proposed in the literature (Filip and Carlson, 2001; Laca, 2007) concern the incompatibility with adverbs negating the existence of disjoint V-intervals, like *simultaneously*, and the incompatibility with adverbs asserting the complete temporal overlap of V-subevents, like *all at once*. When we apply them to our verbs we get the results in (8). But since these tests fail for activities (atelic) and states (homogeneous), as shown in (9), it is not clear what we test in (8). Furthermore, we have argued that temporal disjunction cannot be enforced on C-phases.

(8) a. *Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita simultaneamente 'Daniel nibbled the pencil simultaneously'

b. # Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita tutto in un colpo 'Daniel nibbled the pencil all at once'

(9) a. *Ha corso simultaneamente 'He run simultaneously'

b. *Ha corso tutto in un colpo 'S/he run all at once'

c. *E' contento tutto in un colpo 'S/he is happy all at once'

We propose a new criterion based on the observation that for several of the paired verbs, the simplexes have semelfactive readings that are systematically blocked for the pluractional verbs, see (10).

(10) a. # Daniele ha tossicchiato (un colpo di tosse) 'Daniel coughed (a single cough)'

b. # Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita (un singolo morso) 'Daniel nibbled the pencil (a unique bite)'

c. # Ha tocchignato l'avocado (una sola toccata) 'S/he touched the avocado (a single touching)'

4.2. Treating C-phases

As pointed out above, some aspects of Cusic's proposal are difficult to reconcile. One must give up either the event/C-phase distinction, or the notion of a unique plural formation operation at all levels. In a way, Lasersohn gives up the former; In this paper we explore the hypothesis of partially giving up the latter, while keeping Cusic's claim that event-internal plurality produces single events.

The data discussed in the previous section provide evidence that in an internally plural event, C-phases are independent from any plurality expressed in an argument position. C-phases are units that depend on the event they belong to. Their dependent status manifests itself primarily in the fact that thematic relations are defined at the level of the event, and then the participants in the event are related with the entities involved in the event's C-phases. These pluractional verbs meet the unique participant constraint for each thematic role. We assume that event internal plural verbs are basic predicates, in the sense that they are predicates with a thematic commitment so that, whatever properties are associated with a thematic role, the object that fills that role in that predication has those properties at the event level. In a sentence like (11), the subject Daniel fills the thematic role of agent of the verb and the pencil is the patient.

(11) Daniele ha mordicchiato la matita 'Daniel nibbled the pencil'

We think that the key to explain the thematic constraint noticed above lies in the fact that the collection of C-phases really makes a single event and that events are the basic level in the ontology; As an aside, note that this explains the connectedness fact. Thus, we have to define the type of the event and fill the thematic roles first. Only then, we can equate the event with the groupification of a plurality whose elements are C-phases. This form of nesting makes C-phases no longer accessible at discourse level. We can use the star operator (Link, 1983; Landman, 2000), thus the plural formation remains the same at all levels. However, Landman shows that when a plural role of a predicate *P is filled with an atom, say a, the statement $\exists$ e (*P(e)$\wedge$ *Ag(e,a)) reduces to singular predication. The atomicity of the range of a function plural role warrants plurality of events, a distributive reading; But for a single atom, plurality requires grinding, so that the atom can be partitioned into parts over which to distribute. Grinding usually applies to the explicit or implicit patient/theme of these verbs. The predicate used at C-phase level is a 'partial' version of the event predicate. Its roles are plural roles except for the grinded argument. For this argument, we borrow from Landman the definition of a mass cover role, which is a role that takes an atom as argument and requires the application of the corresponding plural role to the cells of its cover. Putting it all together gives the entry in (12) for *mordicchiare*.

(12) $\lambda x \lambda y \lambda e[(\text{MORDICCHIARE}(e)\ \&\ \text{Ag}(e,y)\ \&\ \text{Pat}(e,x)) \Leftrightarrow$
$\exists e'(*\text{MORDICCHIAREPart}(e')\ \&\ e =\uparrow e'\ \&\ *\text{Ag}(e',y)\ \&\ {}^{\text{M}}\text{Pat}(e',x))]$

As it is, definition (12) accounts for the diminution effect, but not yet fully for multiplication. We still have to add that the cover applied in event internal plurality is necessarily weaker than the cover that has the atom as its unique cell. Notice also that this case of plurality falls outside the system devised by Landman inasmuch as the parts are not atoms. It should be clear why we do not want them to be atoms—the parts of the pencil in (11) are never taken as individuals, but how to fix it must be left as future work.

5. Conclusions

Event internal pluractional verbs in Italian and French are not the result of a morphological derivation process combining two actual morphemes. Submorphemic status captures the fact that /ikkj/ or /ij/ in *mordicchiare, mordiller* and like verbs point to two specific operations of semantic decomposition. The event is decomposed into a plurality of C-phases and at least one participant is decomposed into parts, and the C-phases are subevents affecting the parts of the participant demoted to a sum. The constant function of the submorphs is to flag a phenomenon, i.e. the crossing of a threshold for perception of a type of event internal structure. C-phases are the manifestation of a change of resolution in looking at an event that requires a new V-type of description. The constraint P≠V that Lasersohn had to stipulate falls out of the logic of our treatment. Finally, this view of event internal pluractionality casts some light on why pluractionality resembles aspectual modification at times.

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