



DAVID DOWELL CUSIC AND THE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF REPETITION: A FOUNDATIONAL APPROACH TO VERBAL PLURALITY AND ASPECT

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive exploration of David Dowell Cusic's seminal work on verbal plurality and its relevance to the broader linguistic study of repetition and aspect. Cusic's 1981 dissertation, "Verbal Plurality and Aspect", laid the groundwork for understanding how languages morphosyntactically and semantically encode repeated and distributed events. His classification of verbal plurality—event-internal, event-external, and participant plurality—continues to serve as a critical framework for typologists, semanticists, and syntacticians investigating aspect and event structure across languages.

Introduction

The study of aspect and event structure in linguistics has undergone substantial development throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. One particularly significant contribution to this field came from David Dowell Cusic, whose 1981 dissertation introduced the now widely referenced notion of verbal plurality. Unlike nominal plurality, which denotes multiple entities, verbal plurality focuses on the multiplicity of events, actions, or occurrences. Cusic's framework provided novel insights into the intersection of repetition, distribution, and aspect in natural language.

This article seeks to present a detailed account of Cusic's linguistic theories, examining their theoretical foundations, cross-linguistic implications, and continued relevance. Particular attention will be given to his categorization of verbal plurality, its correlation with aspectual distinctions, and its impact on subsequent linguistic inquiry.

Theoretical Background: Verbal Plurality vs. Nominal Plurality

Plurality in language has traditionally been discussed in the context of nouns—e.g., the difference between "cat" and "cats". Cusic's work challenged this focus by turning attention to verbs and how they express multiplicity. In his dissertation, he argued for a parallel between nominal and verbal plurality, proposing that just as nouns can be marked for quantity, so too can verbs reflect the repetition or distribution of events.

He outlined key differences:

- Nominal plurality indicates multiple entities.
- Verbal plurality indicates multiple events.

For example:

- *He jumped.* (a single event)
- *He kept jumping. / He jumped again and again.* (verbal plurality)

This shift in focus prompted linguists to reconsider how action-based multiplicity is encoded grammatically and semantically.

Cusic's Typology of Verbal Plurality

Cusic proposed a typology of verbal plurality with three primary types:

3.1. Event-internal Plurality

This refers to multiple subevents occurring within a single event frame. These subevents are not temporally or contextually distinct.

- *He knocked on the door.*
- *She blinked repeatedly.*

Such constructions are usually expressed through verb morphology, adverbial modification, or reduplication in some languages.

3.2. Event-external Plurality

Event-external plurality refers to the repetition of an entire event across separate occasions or times.

- *He goes to the gym every day.*
- *They met weekly.*

This type often involves habituality, iterativity, and is linked closely with the imperfective aspect.

3.3. Participant Plurality

Here, a single event is distributed over multiple participants.

- *The students presented their projects.*
- *She hugged all the children.*

This plurality type often interacts with argument structure and quantification.

Verbal Plurality and Aspect

A central insight in Cusic's work was the interaction between verbal plurality and aspectual categories. Imperfective aspect, in particular, frequently serves as the grammatical environment for expressing repeated or habitual actions. Perfective aspect, conversely, is typically used for bounded, non-repetitive events.

Cusic's framework helps explain the following:

- Why iterative actions are generally expressed using imperfective forms.
- How reduplication or verb morphology in some languages can shift an event from perfective to imperfective interpretation.

For instance, in Slavic languages, aspectual pairs (perfective/imperfective) help encode whether an action is one-time or repeated:

- *pisat'* (to write, imperfective)
- *napisat'* (to write, perfective)

Cross-Linguistic Applications

Cusic's typology has been applied to the study of numerous languages, including:

- Bantu languages: where verb reduplication is a common marker of event-internal plurality.
- Romance languages: where habitual aspect is marked periphrastically (e.g., Spanish *solía* for "used to").
- Turkic languages: where plural verb morphology interacts with temporal adverbials to mark repeated action.
- Austronesian languages: where aspectual markers and reduplication indicate frequency.

His framework has thus contributed significantly to linguistic typology, allowing researchers to analyze verbal repetition in both inflectional and analytic languages.

Influence on Later Theoretical Models

Theoretical frameworks in linguistics rarely exist in isolation. They emerge, evolve, and exert influence across generations of scholarship. One such influential



contribution is David Dowell Cusic's analysis of verbal plurality, which provided a significant stepping stone toward understanding the complexities of habituality, iteration, and event structure in language. This section aims to explore the trajectory of theoretical development inspired by Cusic's insights, mapping their influence on later models within typological, cognitive, and formal linguistic traditions.

Cusic's Framework and Its Theoretical Significance. Cusic's 1981 dissertation introduced the notion of verbal plurality as a structural and semantic category, independent of nominal plurality. He proposed a three-tiered distinction: event-internal plurality (repetition within a single event), event-external plurality (multiple discrete events), and multiple-event plurality (habitual or iterative structures over time). This nuanced treatment of repetition and eventhood offered a departure from earlier aspectual theories, such as those of Vendler or Comrie, by focusing not merely on temporal contours, but on how verbs themselves encode multiplicity.

Cusic's model laid a groundwork for the treatment of habitual constructions, which inherently involve event plurality. His typological approach allowed for cross-linguistic comparisons, opening a path for later semanticists and syntacticians to build more formalized, cognitively grounded accounts.

Influence on Aspectual and Aktionsart Theories. Subsequent studies on aspectual classifications—notably those by Binnick (1991), Smith (1997), and Bertinetto & Lenci (2012)—have incorporated or reinterpreted Cusic's categories. The notion that verbal plurality interacts with aspectual class has become central to defining habituality as a subtype of imperfective aspect. Later frameworks, including the two-layer models of aspect (e.g., Klein, 1994; Borik, 2006), have drawn on this to distinguish between *situation time* (event structure) and *topic time* (temporal reference), often aligning habituality with temporally dispersed yet semantically unified events.

Cusic's emphasis on iteration has also influenced the development of event structure theories, particularly in generative grammar and construction grammar. Researchers like Van Valin & LaPolla (1997) in *Role and Reference Grammar*, and Goldberg (1995) in *Construction Grammar*, have adopted and adapted plural-event



interpretations to account for habituality, suggesting that certain constructions encode repeated actions as a grammaticalized pattern.

Cognitive Linguistics and Event Conceptualization. In cognitive linguistics, the influence of Cusic’s model is observed in the way habituality and repetition are viewed through the lens of conceptualization and image schemas. Langacker (2008), for instance, frames habituality as a generic-level processual type, where repeated instances are construed as a single schematic event. This aligns closely with Cusic’s notion of multiple-event plurality and has allowed cognitive linguists to investigate how speakers mentally represent repetition across time.

The idea of prototype structure in habitual constructions—central to both Langacker’s and Taylor’s works—also reflects Cusic’s early recognition that habitual events resist strict boundaries and vary by frequency, agentivity, and regularity. These insights have proven crucial for cross-linguistic research, where habituality can be encoded lexically, morphologically, or syntactically.

Typological and Cross-Linguistic Developments. Typological studies have increasingly acknowledged verbal plurality as a significant grammatical category. Researchers such as Bybee, Dahl, and Mithun have highlighted that many languages encode habituality through reduplication, aspectual markers, or verb serialization—phenomena that resonate with Cusic’s distinctions.

In recent works on Uzbek, Turkish, and other Turkic languages, scholars have adopted a verbal-plurality lens to describe the use of morphemes like *-ar/-ir* (habitual in Turkish) or *-adi* (present habitual in Uzbek). The alignment of these forms with Cusic’s framework enhances the cross-linguistic comparability of habitual markers and emphasizes the role of morphosyntactic strategies in conveying repeated events.

Integration into Formal Semantic Models. Formal semantics has also benefited from Cusic’s insights, especially in the interpretation of plural events and quantification over time. Scholars such as Krifka (1992) and Carlson (2005) have formulated models where habituality is treated as generic quantification over event variables—a perspective that echoes the concept of multiple-event plurality.



In dynamic semantics and event logic frameworks, habitual constructions are modeled using operators that apply to event sets rather than atomic events. This formalization finds its roots in the foundational categorizations introduced by Cusic and continues to inform how habituality is encoded semantically across languages.

Super-Syntactic Units and Discourse-Level Phenomena. Recent advances in the study of super-syntactic constructions, such as discourse units or paragraph-level repetition, have started to explore how habituality extends beyond the clause. Cusic's categories provide a theoretical bridge between sentence-level habituality and broader textual cohesion through repetition, influencing research on discourse markers, pragmatic routines, and narrative structures.

In this sense, habituality is increasingly viewed not only as a grammatical or aspectual phenomenon, but as a discourse strategy, used to structure narrative time, establish character traits, or build thematic consistency.

David Dowell Cusic's theory of verbal plurality, though originally formulated as a typological and semantic inquiry into repetition, has had profound and enduring effects on multiple branches of linguistic theory. Its influence spans aspectology, formal semantics, cognitive linguistics, and typology, providing a robust foundation for the continued exploration of habituality and iterative meaning. As linguistic research progresses into more integrated and cross-disciplinary paradigms, the core insights of Cusic's model continue to shape our understanding of how languages encode repeated human experience.

Challenges and Developments

While groundbreaking, Cusic's model has not gone without critique. Some have argued that the three-way classification may be too rigid to account for hybrid cases or languages with overlapping markers. Others have proposed refinements based on corpus data and experimental linguistics.

Recent work in cognitive semantics and typological databases (e.g., WALS) continues to revisit and refine his distinctions in light of new empirical evidence.

Legacy and Relevance Today

More than four decades after its publication, Cusic's dissertation remains a foundational work. It is regularly cited in studies of:

- Verbal morphology
- Semantic typology



- Lexical aspect
- Narrative discourse analysis

His conceptual clarity and typological breadth have ensured that his work remains deeply relevant, particularly in a linguistic era increasingly focused on dynamic event structures and cross-linguistic generalization.

Conclusion:

David Dowell Cusic's work on verbal plurality and aspect has left a lasting mark on linguistic theory. By introducing a framework for understanding the semantics and morphology of repeated actions, he expanded the theoretical scope of aspectual studies. His insights continue to influence current research in linguistic typology, semantics, and cognitive linguistics. As linguistic science advances, Cusic's foundational distinctions offer a robust toolset for exploring how languages structure the concept of repetition and habituality—universal experiences expressed through richly varied grammatical systems.

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