

Extra notes for Chapter 8 – Non-progressive vs progressive aspect

Introduction

Aspect is the grammatical form used by a speaker in taking a particular view of a situation that includes time schemas. English has two aspects: the **non-progressive**, or *simple*, aspect, and the **progressive** aspect. The **perfect** is, strictly speaking, a combination of aspect and tense, rather than a way of expressing “pure” aspect.

But aspect is not just a grammatical choice: it is also inherent in the meaning of verbs, i.e. in the *lexical semantics* of verbs. Chapter 8 focuses on grammatical and lexical aspect, and how the two can be combined to express the time schema of any given situation.

Lexical aspect (*Aktionsart*)

The most important distinguishing feature within *Aktionsart* is **telicity** (vs. atelicity). A **telic verb** denotes a situation which has a **beginning**, a **duration** (of any length), and an **end**. It is therefore *bounded* in time (rather like the way that countable nouns are bounded in space).

Aspect can therefore also be applied to the semantic features of verbs – or, more specifically, of verbs *and their predicates*. Why is it important to include the verb’s predicates (direct object or complement)? Because the meaning of a verb changes when used transitively or intransitively. As Rothstein (2004) tells us: “... a classification [of situation types] into **states**, **activities**, **achievements** and **accomplishments** is very useful in terms of *predicting the linguistic behavior of verbal predicates*” (2004: 3, my emphasis). We can add another category to this list: **acts**.

Notice that there is a difference between *intransitive* and *transitive* uses of the same verb, because the inclusion of the direct object both delimits the scope of the action and specifies its target or purpose. Rothstein continues: “lexical aspectual classes are not generalizations over verb meanings, but sets of constraints on how the grammar allows us to individuate events. Telicity and atelicity are properties of verb phrases, and the status of the [verb phrase] with respect to telicity will depend on the interaction of the meaning of the [verb] with other elements in the [verb phrase].” (ibid.: 4)

The direct object of the transitive verb can range from the vague to the specific: compare “I need to read *something about Aktionsart*” with “I’m going to read *this book*”. When the “something” is a bounded object like a book, the act of reading it also has to be bounded (the action and its predicate are inter-related). In this way, telic events can be considered as types of THINGS (bounded, heterogeneous, countable) while, on the other hand, atelic events are much more like STUFF (unbounded, homogeneous, uncountable)

e.g. **read [a book]**.

[START] You open the book and *start reading* it (normally on the first page).

[DURATION] You *continue reading* page-by-page, gradually progressing through the book. This may be an uninterrupted process or involve starts and stops

[END] Eventually you reach the end of the book, at which point you are forced to *stop reading*.

Notice how the boundedness of the book makes the transitive verb’s duration also delimitable. This is a form of *semantic coercion* (Pustejovsky 2004), i.e. words forcing their neighbouring words to assume modified meanings.

e.g. **read** (intransitive)

[START] You start reading.

With *intransitive read*, what you are reading is not mentioned and remains *undefined*. The focus is entirely on the action of reading, not on the purpose of the action.

- The reading matter nature cannot be determined (it is undifferentiated and thus is seen as being *homogeneous*)
- Its quantity (size/shape, etc.) is unknown (it is unbounded in space and time)

[DURATION] You *continue reading* an indefinite quantity of text for an undefined amount of time.

[END] At some point you decide you have read enough.

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This decision is not determined by external factors (i.e. boundedness, as is the case in *finishing a book*) but by personal considerations, e.g. “I have read as much as I feel I need to”; “I have no time left to continue reading”, “I want to do something else”, etc.

Notice also when interpreting the meaning of a situation, there is (virtually always) a “strict sense” and a “loose sense” from which to choose. The “strict sense” of **read a book** is to open the book, start reading, and not interrupt reading until the entire book has been read. The “loose sense” of **read a book** is to start reading at some point in time, continue reading at intervals, and eventually complete it. In both cases there is a start, a duration and an end; in the second case, however, we can talk of *sub-events* in the reading process. In other words, the reading is not done in a continuous stream, but in a series of episodes, each of which involves a start, a duration, and an end. Most reading of books is done episodically, so this is the default interpretation. If you (like me!) sometimes read a whole book without taking a break, you would emphasize that information by adding an adjunct of time or manner:

- I read it in one go/ in one sitting
- I read it without even stopping to eat
- I stayed up all night to finish it

From this extended example of “read”, we can notice one further feature. If I use read in the present simple, this tense provides a “default interpretation” for habit and states, so “I read [rɪːd] a lot of fantasy fiction” tells you that in general I spend my time reading this genre, while in order to focus on reading as an action or process, I am obliged to use the progressive “I’m reading *Fool’s Assassin*”. Neither of these present tenses implies the *completion* of reading books: that can only be communicated by using the perfective, specifically the present perfect “I have read a lot of fantasy fiction”= I have completed reading many books in this genre; “I have(just) read *Fool’s Assassin*” =I have (recently) completed reading this book. However, if I shift my focus into the past, something interesting happens: because the past simple is strongly associated with completed actions, the “default interpretation” of “I read [red] a lot of fantasy fiction” emphasises *not* that I have completed lots of these books but that I *no longer read* this genre. This default option can be suppressed by adding adjuncts of time or manner to the phrase.

Summary

Telic verbs have a start and an end. The duration may be *in focus* or *defocused*.

Some situations have a clear start, duration and end, and we will call these **Accomplishments**. Typical accomplishments involve a series of sub-events in their duration phase, i.e. the accomplishment is completed after a series of smaller actions have been performed.

However, not all situations are accomplishments. Some do not have a clear beginning: their action is focused on their end-point. These are often known as “resultatives”, but in Cognitive Grammar we call them **Achievements**.

Alternatively, some situations have no duration as such, but start and end at the same time: we will call these (**punctual**) **Acts**.

Atelic verbs only have duration, i.e. the start and end are totally defocused.

There are two types of atelic verbs, which will be familiar to you from the general distinction made in English grammar between state verbs and action verbs. We have just seen that telic actions can be classed as one of Accomplishments, Achievements or Acts.

Atelic actions focus on the durational phase only, which consists of one, continuous action. In Cognitive Grammar, these are called **Activities**.

States are also atelic (they come into being, and may end sometime, but the focus is on their existence/permanence).

States may be **everlasting** (always true), **habitual**, or **indefinitely lasting**.

An indefinitely-lasting state can be converted into a **temporary** state by using the progressive aspect and/or time adjuncts.

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TASK

Decide whether these situations (verb phrases) are **telic** or **atelic**, by considering whether they have a clear beginning, duration, and end. Mark as *defocused* any of these phases that may be implicit but are not relevant to the meaning being expressed.

	START		DURATION		END		Action/State Type
	clear	defocused	clear	defocused	clear	defocused	
Research [a topic]							
Develop [an argument]							
Repeat [a word]							
Teach [a lesson]							
Teach [a subject]							
Keep fit							
Work out							
Race							
Run [a race]							
Finish [a race]							
Win [a race]							
Cook							
Bake [a cake]							
Season [a dish]							
Stir [a sauce]							
Flip [a pancake]							
Cut [a slice of bread]							
Spread [some Nutella on your bread]							