

LIN241

Introduction to Semantics

Lecture 10

Describing States and Events

States and Events

- In English, verbs and adjectives describe states and events.
- Predicates that describe states:
 - The kitchen was *empty*.
 - Susan *knows Russian*.
 - Liudmila will be *happy*.

States and Events

- In English, verbs and adjectives describe states and events.
- Predicates that describe events:
 - Karim *woke up*.
 - Bella is *fixing the engine*.
 - Otello will *complain*.

States

- Stative predicates are non-dynamic and homogenous.
 - The subject is presented as having a property or a quality throughout a temporal interval.
 - Non-dynamic: the possession of the quality or property does not involve any change in time.
 - Homogeneous: if the subject is in a state throughout an interval, it is in this state at all parts of this interval.

Events

- By contrast, events are dynamic:
 - Event predicates describe processes that unfold in time, or punctual changes in the world.

Events

- Event predicates differ based on the type of change they describe:
 - are punctual or have a duration,
 - **arrive at the station** [punctual, non-durative]
 - **walk in the park** [durative]
 - have an expected terminal point, known as a *telos*.
 - **eat an apple** [telic]
 - **eat apples** [atelic]

Parameters of Aktionsart

- Aktionsart is the classification of predicates as predicates of states or predicates of events, and the discussion of different types of predicates of events.

Parameters of Aktionsart

- Predicates can be classified using three parameters:
 - whether the predicate describes a state,
 - whether the predicate describes a durative situation,
 - whether the predicate describes a telic situation.
- We will discuss tests for these parameters in English.

Dynamicity/Stativity

- It is hard to test for dynamicity directly, but since only states are non-dynamic, we can test for stativity.
 - Stative predicates can be used in the present non-progressive without a habitual interpretation:

Felipe knows the answer. [stative]

Felipe runs. [non-stative: habitual]

Dynamicity/Stativity

- Another test is compatibility with the progressive:
 - Stative predicates are generally incompatible with the progressive aspect.
 - *John is knowing the answer. [stative: ungrammatical]
 - John is running. [non-stative: grammatical]
 - John is building a house. [non-stative: grammatical]

Dynamicity/Stativity

- There are two systematic exceptions to the previous generalization:
 1. Positional stative predicates are commonly attested in the progressive:
 - John is standing in the corner.
 - The book is lying on the table.
 2. Many adjectives can occur in *being X* constructions with a dynamic interpretation *acting X*:
 - John is being silly.

Duration

- When a predicate is modified by *at X time*, if the modifier locates the whole situation at the exact moment X, the predicate describes a punctual situation:
 - **The guest arrived at midnight.** [punctual, non-durative]
- If the modifier locates X within a larger situation, or if it conveys that some event starts at X, the predicate does not describe a punctual situation:
 - **Mary was happy at midnight.** [durative]
 - **John ran at 9 p.m.** [durative]

Telicity

- A telic predicate conveys that the situation it describes has an expected terminal point, called its telos:
 - **Maya was walking to the park.** [telic]
 - ☞ event stops/culminates when Maya reaches the park
 - **Maya was walking in the park.** [atelic]
 - ☞ event could go on indefinitely

Telicity

- Test 1: *for*- versus *in*-adverbials
 - Telic predicates are generally compatible with *in X time* modification, while atelic predicates are generally compatible with *for X time* modification.
 - Mary walked to the park in an hour/?for an hour.
 - Mary walked in the park for an hour/?in an hour.

Telicity

- Test 2: compatibility with *take X time*:
 - Telic predicates tend to be acceptable as complement of *take X time*:
 - It took me an hour to write this letter.
 - ?It took me an hour to listen to music.

Aktionsarten

- We can classify predicates based on the parameters of stativity, duration and telicity:
 - States: +stative, +durative, - telic
 - Activities/Processes: -stative, +durative, - telic
 - Accomplishments: -stative, +durative, + telic
 - Achievements: -stative, -durative, + telic
 - Semelfactives: -stative, -durative, - telic

Aktionsarten

- States:
 - *be happy*: Maya is happy.
 - *be heavy*: That rock is heavy.
- Activities/Processes:
 - *dance*: Maya is dancing.
 - *walk in the park*: Bill walked in the park.

Aktionsarten

- Accomplishments
 - *build a house*: **The contractor built a house.**
 - *walk to the park*: **Bill walked to the park.**
- Achievements
 - *find*: **Maya found her watch in the garden.**
 - *arrive*: **Bill arrived in Boston yesterday.**

Aktionsarten

- Semelfactives
 - *cough*: Maya coughed.
 - *knock*: Paula knocked on the door.
- Semelfactives can describe both single events and repetitions of events:
 - When I pushed the button, the light flashed once.
 - The light flashed for 5 minutes.

Telicity and aspectual composition

Telicity and aspectual composition

- Telicity is a property of verb phrases, not verbs.
- With many verbs, the choice of object affects telicity of the VP.
- Objects that denote a specified quantity or volume make these VPs telic.
- Objects that denote an unspecified quantity or volume make these VPs atelic.

Telicity and aspectual composition

- Classify the following VPs and their objects:
 - **Maya drew a circle on the blackboard.**



- **Maya drew circles on the blackboard.**



Telicity and aspectual composition

- Classify the following VPs and their objects:
 - **Maya drew a circle on the blackboard.**
☞ specified quantity; telic
 - **Maya drew circles on the blackboard.**
☞ unspecified quantity; atelic

Telicity and aspectual composition

- Not all verbs behave like this:
 - **Maya looked at a circle on the blackboard.**
☞ specified quantity; atelic
 - **Maya looked at circles on the blackboard.**
☞ unspecified quantity; atelic
 - **Maya pushed the cart.**
☞ specified quantity; atelic
 - **Maya pushed carts.**
☞ unspecified quantity; atelic

Telicity and aspectual composition

- Verbs like **draw** are known as *incremental theme* predicates:
 - They describe events in which objects (the themes) are progressively affected by the event described by the verb.
 - The event 'grows' as the theme gets more affected.
 - If the theme description (usually the object) has a specified quantity or volume, the event culminates when the theme is completely affected.
 - In that case, the description of event (the VP) is telic.

Telicity and aspectual composition

- In verb phrases that describe a movement, spatial adjuncts or objects can contribute to the telicity of the VP:
 - Myriam ran along the river for/?in half an hour.
 - Myriam ran three miles in/?for half an hour.
 - Myriam ran to the store in/?for half an hour.
- Some modifiers create ambiguity or underspecification:
 - Myriam ran around the lake for/in half an hour.

Telicity and aspectual composition

- In verb phrases that describe a change of quality along a scale, measure phrases can contribute to the telicity of the VP:
 - Kimmy heated the soup in/for 10 minutes.
 - Kimmy heated the soup to 70C in/?for 10 minutes.
 - The gap widened in/for an hour.
 - The gap widened 6 inches in/?for an hour.

Grammatical Aspect

Tense

- Sentences make comments about what goes on at a time.
- We call this time the Topic Time (TT).

A: **What did you see when you entered the room?**

B: **There was a book on the table.**

- Tense is used to locate TT with respect to the Time of Utterance (TU).
- TU is the time at which the speaker makes her utterance.

Grammatical Aspect

- Grammatical aspect gives information on how the event or state described by the verb phrase relates to TT.
- It locates the time of the event or state described by the verb (Situation Time, TSit) with respect to TT:
 - is TSit included in TT?
 - is TT included in TSit?

Grammatical Aspect

- Two important grammatical aspects are:
 - the progressive aspect
 - the perfective aspect

Progressive Aspect

- Here are examples of verb forms in the progressive aspect:
 - June is laughing.
 - June was laughing.
 - June will be laughing.
- In English, the progressive aspect is expressed as:
 - BE V-ing

Progressive Aspect

- The progressive aspect conveys that:
 - an event is going on at TT (the Topic Time)
 - that is to say: TT is included in TSit (the Situation Time).

Progressive Aspect

- Past progressive sentence:
 - **At 10am, Mary was reading the newspapers.**
 - the past tense introduces a past Topic Time
 - the adverbial 'at 10am' identifies this time
 - the time of the event of reading includes the Topic Time

Progressive Aspect

- Future progressive sentence:
 - At 10pm, Mary will be reading the newspapers.
 - the future tense introduces a future Topic Time
 - the adverbial 'at 10pm' identifies this time
 - the time of the event of reading includes the Topic Time

Progressive Aspect

- Present progressive sentence:
 - Right now, Mary is reading the newspaper.
 - the present tense introduces a present Topic Time
 - the adverbial 'right now' identifies this time
 - the time of the event of reading includes the Topic Time

Unmarked Aspect

- In English, verbs can occur without morphological marks of aspect.
- Let us call this phenomenon *unmarked aspect*:
- Here are examples of verb forms with unmarked aspect:
 - June smokes.
 - June smoked.
 - June will smoke.

Unmarked Aspect

- Verb forms with unmarked aspect can take different aspectual values, depending on the context and the choice of verb:
 - Habitual: **Jess smokes.**
 - Habitual: **For many years, Jess played soccer.**
 - Perfective: **This morning, Jess played soccer.**

Unmarked Aspect: Perfective Uses

- Verb forms with unmarked aspect are sometimes interpreted as perfective.
- The perfective aspect locates TSit within TT:
 - Yesterday, Mary mowed the lawn.
 - Tomorrow, Mary will mow the lawn.

Unmarked Aspect: Habitual/Repetitive Uses

- Verb forms with unmarked aspect can also be used to describe habits or repeated events:
 - Habitual aspect:
 - **John smokes.**
 - Repetitive aspect:
 - **The light flashed for 10 minutes.**
 - **The light will flash for 10 minutes.**

Unmarked Aspect and Stative Predicates

- Most stative predicates in English do not occur in the progressive form:
 - ?John is being happy.
 - John is happy.
- However, stative predicates with unmarked aspect are not interpreted in the perfective aspect.

Unmarked Aspect and Stative Predicates

- Stative predicates with unmarked aspect simply convey that the state they describe is going on at the Topic time:
 - John is/was/will be happy.
- In that sense, stative predications are interpreted just as progressive dynamic predications.
- This is why some linguists describe progressive predications as *stative*.
- In this course, we maintain the difference between stative and progressive.

The imperfective aspect

- Many languages use the same morphology for the progressive and habitual aspects.
- In that case, the aspect is known as imperfective: the progressive is a type of imperfective aspect.
- Example from Spanish:
 - Juan fuma-ba.
Juan smoke-PAST.IMPFV
"Juan was smoking/used to smoke."