

LIN241, Winter 2021

Lecture 10 summary

1. Aktionsart

- (1) Aktionsart, also known as lexical aspect, is the type of event or state described by a verb phrase.

“Aktionsart” is a German word that means “type of action.” Its plural form is Aktionsarten.

Most linguists recognize five lexical aspects: states, activities (also referred to as processes), accomplishments, achievements and semelfactives. Each one of these is an aktionsart. They are all aktionsarten.

- (2) Each aktionsart is characterized by a certain combination of properties known as stativity, durativity and telicity.

(3) Stativity

The first property, stativity, differentiates states from events.

States are situations that are static, that do not involve change, while events are situations that are dynamic, that involve some change or progression.

Examples of stative predicates are: *be happy* or *be Italian*. Sentences like (1a) and (1b) convey that the subject, Joanna, is in a state of being happy, or in a state of being Italian.

a. Joanna is happy.

b. Joanna is Italian.

Note that while a state of being happy is temporary (it may last for a certain time and then stop), a state of being Italian is more permanent. In general, stative predicates may describe temporary states as well as permanent states.

- (4) The second major class of aktionsarten consists of events. It is broken down into activities/processes, accomplishments, achievements and semelfactives.

What these four aktionsarten have in common is that they are dynamic situations. They are situations in which some kind of change is taking place, or some process is going on.

Examples of predicates of events are *run*, *read a book*, *arrive* or *blink*.

(5) Durativity

Durativity differentiates situations that are punctual from situations that are extended in time.

Aktionsarten with a duration are states, activities and accomplishments. States have a duration because an individual can be in a state (e.g. of happiness) for an extended period of time.

Activities like *run* or *listen to music* have a duration because they are processes that take some time to be realized, and that may be continued indefinitely.

Accomplishments like *read a book* or *build a house* have a duration because they consist of a process that takes some time to be realized, before a culmination is reached. To illustrate, *reading a book* is a process that takes some time, and that culminates when the whole book has been read.

Achievements like *reach the summit* or *find the keys* are punctual, because they describe the moment when a change of state or transition to a new state takes place. To illustrate *find the keys* describes the moment when the keys are found, rather than the process of looking for the keys that precedes the finding itself.

Semelfactives like *flash*, *knock* or *blink* are also punctual, because they describe an instant-like event. Note that these predicates lend themselves to a repetitive interpretation (e.g. *knock on the door during five minutes*), in which case they have a duration, but we consider that this is a derived interpretation, rather than the basic interpretations of the verb.

(6) Telicity

Telicity differentiates descriptions of situations that include an expected terminal point or a culmination, from descriptions of situations that don't include one.

To illustrate, *run to the store* is a telic predicate, since it describes an event that must stop once the store is reached. By contrast, *run in the park* is an atelic predicate, since an event of running in the park can go on indefinitely without reaching a culmination. Of course, we know that any person who runs has to stop at some point. But this stopping point is not part of the description provided by the predicate *run in the park*, while the predicate *run to the store* describes its terminal point (the point where the store is reached).

Accomplishments like *run to the store* and achievements like *arrive at the station* are telic. The difference between accomplishments and achievements is that achievements are punctual, while accomplishments have a duration.

All other aktionsarten are atelic.

2. Tests of Aktionsart

(7) Tests of stativity

It is difficult to test for dynamicity directly. Instead, we test for two other properties that are characteristic of stative predicates in English:

- i. In English, stative predicates tend to be incompatible with the progressive aspect.
- ii. In English, stative predicates are generally acceptable without a habitual interpretation in the present progressive.

(8) Test 1 for stativity:

Stative predicates are generally incompatible with the progressive aspect:

- a. *Esmeralda is knowing the answer. [stative]
- b. Esmeralda runs. [dynamic]

You see that (8a), which is stative, is incompatible with the progressive aspect, while (8b), which is dynamic, is fine.

(9) Test 2 for stativity:

Stative predicates can be used in the present non-progressive without a habitual interpretation:

- a. Esmeralda knows the answer. [stative]
- b. Esmeralda runs. [dynamic: habitual interpretation]

(9b) is interpreted as a habitual description: it means that Esmeralda runs regularly. This description suggests that the kind of event it describes is repeated in different occasions.

By contrast, (9a) describes a continuous and homogeneous situation, rather than a repetition of situations that occur on different occasions.

(10) Issues with tests of stativity:

Tests of stativity have exceptions or limitations. For instance, some positional predicates are stative but can occur in the present progressive:

- a. *be standing, be lying down, ...*

There are also predicates that describe states but that can be reinterpreted (“coerced”) as descriptions of actions when they occur in the progressive:

- b. Chris is being silly.

(10b) means that Chris is *acting* silly.

(11) **Test of durativity**

For testing durativity, we can modify a predicate by the prepositional phrase “at X time”. If the modifier locates the whole situation at the exact moment X, the predicate describes a punctual (i.e. non-durative) situation:

- a. The guest arrived at midnight. [punctual]
- b. The boxer blinked at the exact moment when her opponent was punching her. [punctual]

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:

- c. Clyde was happy at midnight. [state of happiness includes midnight; not punctual]
- d. Jesse ran at 9 p.m. [event of running starts at 9; not punctual]

(12) Tests of telicity

There are several tests of telicity, but they all use the same logic. Telic predicates are compatible with modifiers that express that a situation is completed in a certain amount of time, while atelic predicates are compatible with modifiers that express that a situation goes on for a certain amount of time, but do not measure the time it takes for the situation to be completed.

(13) Test 1 for telicity:

Telic predicates are generally compatible with “in X time” modification, while atelic predicates are generally compatible with “for X time” modification.

- a. Bonnie walked to the park in an hour/?for an hour. [telic]
- b. Bonnie walked in the park for an hour/?in an hour. [atelic]

(14) Test 2 for telicity:

Telic predicates tend to be acceptable as complement of “take X time”, unlike atelic predicates:

- a. It took me an hour to write this letter. [telic]
- b. ?It took me an hour to listen to music. [atelic]
[okay with a coerced inchoative reading: it took an hour for me to start listening...]

(15) Remarks on these tests

These tests of aktionsart are not foolproof. You cannot reliably use them as necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in an aktionsart class. Rather, you should use your intuition to ask yourself whether the situations described by a predicate is stative, has a duration and is telic. Then, you should use the tests to support your intuition.

(16) Summary of Aspectual Features:

States: +stative, +durative, - telic

Activities/Processes: -stative, +durative, - telic

Accomplishments -stative, +durative, + telic

Achievements: -stative, -durative, + telic

Semelfactives: -stative, -durative, -telic

3. Aspectual composition

- (17) Aktionsart is not a property of verbs, but rather of verb phrases or predicate phrases. The reason for this is that aktionsart depends not only on the choice of verb (or adjective) but also on the choice of arguments and adjuncts of the verb/adjective.

Consider for instance the bracketed predicates in examples (17a) and (17b):

- a. Chris [wrote two letters].
- b. Chris [wrote letters].

(17a) is a telic predicate, while (17b) is atelic. The difference between the two examples is the choice of object of the verb.

We will refer to the process of building aktionsart by combining a verb with its arguments and adjuncts as aspectual composition.

(18) Incremental Theme Predicates

There is one class of predicates that is very important for aspectual composition. They are known as incremental theme predicates.

These predicates describe events in which a participant (the theme) is progressively affected, and the progression of the event towards a culmination tracks the degree to which the participant is affected during the event.

A clear example of incremental theme predicate is *eat*: as an event of eating progresses, the thing that is eaten is progressively consumed, until there is nothing left of it. At that point, the event culminates.

Whether incremental theme predicates are telic or atelic depends on the form of their incremental theme argument.

If the theme denotes a specified quantity of objects or substance, then the predicate is telic, because the specific quantity of the theme provides a culmination point for the event. This is illustrated in (18a): once the two apples are consumed, the event of eating them culminates.

- a. Bonnie ate two apples.

If the theme denotes an unspecified quantity of objects or substance, then the predicate is atelic, since the open ended nature of the theme means that the event described by the predicate can in principle continue indefinitely. This is illustrated in (18b): since *apples* can describe an unbounded quantity of apples, an event of eating apples can in principle continue indefinitely and still be correctly described as “eating apples”:

- b. Bonnie ate apples.

- (19) Adjuncts can also add a culmination to an event description or convey that the event is open ended.

This is commonly attested with verbs of movements. If we add an adjunct that describes the destination or goal of the movement, the predicate will be telic, since the destination serves as a culmination point. However, if we only add an adjunct that expresses a location where the movement takes place, or a path that lacks an endpoint, then the predicate will be atelic:

- a. Jesse walked to the station. [telic]
- b. Jesse walked across the river. [telic]
- c. Jesse walked along the river. [atelic]
- d. Jesse walked in the park. [atelic]