

The Syntax and Semantics of Inner Aspect

Class 1: Vendler's aspectual classification, aspectual diagnostics, event decomposition

OVA Summer School

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The topic of this course

- This is a course about inner aspect (aka lexical aspect or situation aspect): Our central goal is to learn about the linguistic encoding of events and their representation in a way that we focus on the grammar of event descriptions associated with an endpoint (aka telic event descriptions).
- It is not our goal to survey many studies on inner aspect/telicity (though the literature on this topic is vast). Instead, we will discuss a smaller number of works from the past several decades and see how they have dealt with some major puzzles of inner aspect research.
- We will first talk about analyses from the second half of the previous century that view inner aspectual phenomena as semantic phenomena, and then see why syntacticians have also become more interested in event aspect in more recent decades (i.e. we will see how they have argued for the syntactic representation of this aspect).

The target audience of this course

- In this course I will assume that you already have some background in formal syntax and semantics, though I will also do my best to make the course content accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students.
- If you have any questions about the topics of this course, please let me know. You can reach me via e-mail (kardoseva@unideb.hu) or talk with me in person between classes or at the social events of OVA 2026.

More specific topics

- Our more specific goals will be to see how semantic and syntactic analyses have captured facts like those illustrated in (1)-(7):

(i) inner aspectual phenomena like measuring out where properties of direct internal arguments are reflected by properties of events expressed by verbal predicates

(1) a. John ate a sandwich/two sandwiches.

The verbal predicate is telic with a direct object that is a "quantity" expression.

b. John ate sandwiches/bread.

The verbal predicate is atelic with a direct object that is a "non-quantity" expression.

More specific topics

(ii) the relationship between case assignment and aspectual interpretations such as telic and atelic readings

(2) a. Ammu-i-n kah-ta karhu-a. Finnish

shoot-PST-1SG two-PART bear-PART

'I shot at two bears.'

'I shot at the two bears.'

Partitive objects give rise to atelic readings.

b. Ammu-i-n kaksi karhu-a.

shoot-PST-1SG two-ACC bear-PART

'I shot two bears.'

'I shot the two bears.'

Accusative objects give rise to telic readings.

More specific topics

(iii) the relationship between result states and telicity

(3) #John killed Bill, but Bill is still alive.

The expression *kill Bill*, which is telic, entails that Bill is not alive at the end of the killing event.

(4) #John cooled the solution, but the solution remained intact.

The expression *cool the solution* illustrates variable telicity despite the entailment that the solution undergoes a change of state.

(5) Kim ran around the corner. (Higginbotham 2000)

A telic interpretation is available in the absence of a well-defined endpoint.

More specific topics

(iv) cross-linguistic variation regarding the encoding of telicity

(6) Kate painted a fence. (preferably telic)

(7) a. Kati festett egy kerítést. Hungarian (strictly atelic on a
Kati painted a fence.ACC change-of-state reading)
'Kati carried out a fence-painting activity.'

b. Kati le-festett egy kerítést. (strictly telic)
Kati PRT-painted a fence.ACC
'Kati painted a fence.'

Class schedule

Class 1: Vendler's aspectual classification, aspectual diagnostics, event decomposition

Recommended readings: [Vendler \(1957\)](#), [Dowty \(1979, Ch. 2\)](#), [Rappaport Hovav and Levin \(1998\)](#)

Class 2: Theories of aspectual composition, the semantics of direct objects in (a)telic expressions

Recommended readings: Verkuyl (1993, Ch. 1), [Krifka \(1998\)](#), Borer (2005, Ch. 5)

Class 3: Measuring out and the syntax-semantics interface, the syntactic instantiation of telicity 1

Recommended readings: Tenny (1994, Ch. 1), Kratzer (2004), Borer (2005, Ch. 3)

Class 4: The syntactic instantiation of telicity 2, the syntax of inner aspect in Hungarian

Recommended readings: [MacDonald \(2008a\)](#), Travis (2010, Ch. 3), [Kardos and Farkas \(2022\)](#)

Class 5: More recent developments

Recommended readings: [Borer \(2023\)](#), [Kardos \(2024\)](#)

Aspectual classifications: Vendler (1957)

- Why is it that (9a) is an adequate answer to (8), whereas (9b) is unnatural.

(8) What are you doing?

(9) a. I am running.

b. *I am knowing.

The predicate *run* is compatible with the progressive, whereas the predicate *know* is not.

Aspectual classifications: Vendler (1957)

- The difference between *run* and *know* is also illustrated by (10) and (11), where (11) is inadequate.

(10) a. Do you know?

b. Yes, I do.

#(11) a. Do you run?

b. Yes, I do.

Aspectual classifications: Vendler (1957)

- Vendler describes running, writing and their kin as processes going on in time. They consist of successive phases following one another in time.
- By contrast, knowing and its kin are not processes going on in time. For example, *I know geography* does not mean that a process of knowing geography is going on at present consisting of phases succeeding one another in time.
- **Central observation:** The time schemata associated with verbs fundamentally determine how verbs are used in language.

Aspectual classifications: Vendler (1957)

- Four types of verbal predicates are distinguished based on the time schemata associated with them:

(i) **activities**: run, walk, swim, write, push a cart

"A was running at time t " means that time instant t is on *a* time stretch throughout which A was running.

So, the concept of activities calls for periods of time that are not unique or definite.

(ii) **accomplishments**: run a mile, write a letter, draw a circle, paint a picture, build a house, read a novel

"A was drawing a circle at t " means that t is on *the* time stretch in which A drew that circle.

Accomplishments imply the notion of unique and definite time periods.

Aspectual classifications: Vendler (1957)

- (iii) **achievements**: reach the hilltop, win the race, recognize something, cross the border, find an object

"A won a race between t_1 and t_2 " means that *the* time instant at which A won that race is between t_1 and t_2 .

Achievements involve unique and definite time instants.

- (iv) **states**: know, love, like, dislike, believe, want something

"A loved somebody from t_1 to t_2 " means that at any instant between t_1 and t_2 A loved that person.

States involve time instants in an indefinite and nonunique sense.

Other aspectual classifications

Other verb classifications are found in Ryle (1949), Kenny (1963), Mourelatos (1978) and Bach (1981, 1986), to be discussed in some detail on Tuesday, among others.

For more on these classifications, see also Dowty (1979), Verkuyl (1993), and Filip (2012).

Other verb classes

- **degree achievements** (Dowty 1979): cool, warm, lengthen

(12) The soup cooled for ten minutes.

Such predicates resemble achievements, but also allow durational adverbs. They are characterized by variable telicity.

- **semelfactives** (Smith 1991/1997): knock, wink, jump

(13) Peter knocked on the door.

Semelfactives express punctual events (like achievements), but no result state/well-defined endpoint is associated with them. (13) can have an instantaneous or an iterative interpretation.

Other verb classes

But see, for example, Hungarian, where there are distinct forms for the two interpretations:

- (14) a. pislog 'blink', csillog 'sparkle', villog 'flash' (iterative reading)
b. pillant 'blink', csillan 'sparkle', villan 'flash' (single-event reading)

See, also, Russian:

- (15) a. prygnut' 'jump once'
b. prygat' 'jump more than once'

(Levin 2009: 11)

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

states vs. activities and accomplishments

(i) States are not compatible with the progressive. See also (8) and (9).

(16) a. *John is knowing the answer.

b. John is running.

c. John is building a house.

(ii) Non-statives occur as imperatives, statives don't.

(17) a. *Know the answer!

b. Run!

c. Build a house!

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(iii) The adverbs *deliberately* and *carefully* can occur in the environment of activities and accomplishments. States don't co-occur with them.

(18) a. *John deliberately knew the answer.

b. John ran carefully.

c. John carefully built a house.

(iv) Activities and accomplishments are fine in pseudo-cleft constructions, states are not.

(19) a. *What John did was know the answer.

b. What John did was run.

c. What John did was build a house.

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(v) Activities and accomplishments in the simple present tense have a frequentative or habitual interpretation, while states don't.

(20) a. John knows the answer.

b. John runs.

c. John recites a poem.

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

activities vs. accomplishments

(i) Accomplishments admit *in*-adverbials and are at best marginally acceptable with *for*-adverbials, whereas activities are fine with *for*-adverbials and unnatural with *in*-adverbials.

(21) a. ?John painted a picture for an hour.

b. John painted a picture in an hour.

(22) a. John walked for an hour.

b. *John walked in an hour. (on relevant reading)

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(ii) Entailments from the progressive to non-progressive forms also separate accomplishments from activities.

(23) a. John was painting a picture.

does not entail

b. John painted a picture.

(24) a. John was walking.

entails

b. John walked.

Every part of walking can be described as walking, whereas every part of painting a picture cannot be described as painting a picture due to the endpoint associated with this predicate. Activities are homogeneous, while accomplishments are heterogeneous.

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(iii) Accomplishments can normally occur as complements of *finish*, activities can't.

(25) a. John finished painting a picture.

b. *John finished walking.

(iv) Both predicate types are fine as complements of *stop*, but different entailments arise.

(26) a. John stopped painting the picture. (does not entail that
John did paint a picture)

b. John stopped walking. (entails that John did walk)

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(v) The presence of the adverb *almost* in the environment of accomplishments and activities has different interpretive effects.

(27) a. John almost painted a picture.

On one reading John did not begin painting a picture, whereas on another reading John did begin the painting but failed to finish it.

b. John almost walked.

(27b) can only mean that John did not begin walking.

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

achievements

(i) They are normally strange with *for*-adverbials.

(28) a. John noticed the painting in a few minutes.

b. ??John noticed the painting for a few minutes.

(ii) The entailments of achievements differ from those of accomplishments.

(29) a. John painted a picture in an hour

entails

b. John was painting a picture during that hour.

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(30) a. John noticed the painting in a few minutes.

does not entail

b. John was noticing the painting throughout the period of a few minutes.

(iii) Achievements can't occur as complements of *finish* or *stop*.

(31) a. *John finished noticing the painting.

b. *John stopped noticing the painting. (on relevant reading)

Aspectual diagnostics (Dowty 1979, Ch. 2)

(iv) Achievements are not ambiguous with *almost* in the sentence.

(32) John almost noticed the painting.

(v) Adverbs like *attentively* and *carefully* are semantically anomalous with achievements.

(33) a. ??John attentively noticed the painting.

b. ?? John carefully noticed the painting.

Aspectual diagnostics: Some caveats

- Some tests of stativity diagnose agentivity.

(34) a. *Roll down the hill, rock!

b. The rock was rolling down the hill.

(Levin 2009: 9, (30c) and (31a))

Non-statives like that in (34) associated with an inanimate subject fail the imperative diagnostic, but pass the progressive one.

(35) Stand in the corner! (Levin 2009: 9, (32a))

Imperative sentences are acceptable with states in them if the latter pattern as if they were agentive.

Aspectual diagnostics: Some caveats

- Meaning shifts can occur with temporal adverbs in the sentence.

(36) John swam in an hour. (Dowty 1979: 61)

"if I know (and the addressee knows) that John is in the habit of swimming a specific distance every day (to prepare himself for a swimming race perhaps), then I can assert that today John swam in an hour"

- It is possible that a test works in one language, but it doesn't work in another language.

How do we explain the differences between the predicate types?

In the course of these five days we will see what kind of answers have been provided to this question in

- **decomposition theories** such as Dowty (1979) and Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998),
- **theories of aspectual composition** like Verkuyl (1972, 1993) and Krifka (1989, 1992, 1998),
- a **syntax-semantics theory** by Tenny (1987, 1994),
- and **syntactic theories** by Kratzer (2004), Borer (2005, 2023), Travis (1991, 2010) and MacDonald (2008a,b).

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- Dowty (1979) provides a decomposition analysis of verb classes. Verb meanings are derived from abstract meaning components and the way they are combined in the lexical semantics of verbs.
- An important predecessor for him is Lakoff (1965) and the following observations regarding the data below:

(37) a. The soup was cool.
 b. The soup cooled.
 c. John cooled the soup.

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- The verbs in (37b) and (37c) share selectional restrictions with respect to the subject in (37b) and the object in (37c).
- Also, the sentences in (37) are connected by entailment. The (b) and (c) examples entail the (a) example. The (c) example also entails the (b) example.
- To account for these phenomena, Lakoff (1965) already assumes that the structures underlying such examples are associated with abstract verbs having features like [+INCHOATIVE] in (37b) and (37c) and [+CAUSATIVE] in (37c) and the structure underlying (37a) is also embedded in the other two structures associated with (37b) and (37c).

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

Central hypothesis in Dowty's theory: One verb class differs from another in which of the abstract operators CAUSE, BECOME or other such operators appear in the lexical semantics of all verbs of each class.

The simplified version of Dowty's decompositions regarding (37) is given in (38) from Wechsler (2015: 154):

(38) a. **cool'**(*the.soup*)

b. BECOME[**cool'**(*the.soup*)]

c. $\exists P[P(\textit{John}) \text{ CAUSE } [\text{BECOME}[\textbf{cool}'(\textit{the.soup})]]]$

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

Some things to keep in mind regarding this analysis:

(i) Accomplishments like *cool the soup* have the logical structure [Φ CAUSE ψ], where Φ and ψ are propositions. This analysis contrasts with McCawley (1968), a prominent representative of Generative Semantics (along with scholars like Lakoff), where CAUSE is a relation between individuals and propositions.

- Another example illustrating this is (39) from Dowty (1979: 91):

(39) a. John killed Bill.

b. [*John does something*] CAUSE [BECOME-*[Bill is alive]*]]

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- A notable piece of evidence for Dowty's analysis of CAUSE is the resultative construction illustrated in (40):

(40) a. She hammered the metal flat.

b. He swept the floor clean.

In these examples an activity verb combines with an adjective and an object noun phrase to give an accomplishment. The verb describes the causing activity and the adjective expresses the caused result state.

(41) [*He sweeps the floor*] CAUSE [BECOME[*the floor is clean*]]

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- Another kind of structure that may motivate Dowty's analysis of CAUSE is the verb-particle construction in (42) from Dowty (1979:94) :

- (42) a. throw NP away
 b. throw NP down
 c. throw NP aside
 d. throw NP in
 e. throw NP up

The complex event structure associated with these examples is reflected by the verb and the particle: the verb describes an activity, whereas the particle expresses a result state.

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- Some data challenging the causative analysis of resultatives:

(43) The pond froze solid. (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1999: 206)

This example cannot be paraphrased as *The pond got solid/solidified by freezing*.

- (44) a. Reluctant to let him go, the audience clapped the singer off the stage.
b. At the opening of the new Parliament building, the crowd cheered the huge gates open.

(Borer 2005: 225)

There is no necessary causal relation between a development part of a complex event and a result state.

For more on this, see Rothstein (2004), Beavers (2012) and Williams (2015).

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

(ii) On decompositional analyses like Dowty (1979) and Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998), the telicity of expressions like *kill Bill*, *sweep the floor clean* and *throw something away* follows from the assumption that they are associated with the result state operator BECOME.

- But, as we will discuss in more detail, this makes incorrect predictions:

(45) John hammered metal flat. (for an hour/*in an hour)

(Borer 2005: 225)

(45) has the structure of a resultative, and yet no telic reading is available.

- See also verbs like *read* and *peruse*, which have telic uses without an obvious result state (Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2010: 27).

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

(iii) An important advantage of Dowty-style compositional analyses is that they allow us to explain the scope effects observable with adverbials like *again*, *almost* and *for four years* in the sentence. Consider (46) from Dowty (1979: 250):

(46) The Sheriff of Nottingham jailed Robin Hood for four years.

The temporal adverbial either describes the length of the jailing activity or the amount of time Robin Hood spent in jail.

This follows on the assumption that the adverbial can have scope over the entire event (in which case the former reading arises) or just the result (in which case the latter reading becomes available).

Event decomposition: Dowty (1979)

- Here is another example from Dowty (1979: 252):

(47) John closed the door again.

The adverbial either has scope over the entire closing activity, in which case the sentence describes multiple closing events (repetitive reading)

or

it has scope over the result state, in which case the sentence expresses that John caused the door to become closed again (restitutive reading). On this second reading, no earlier closing event is necessary for the truth of (47).

- See also (27a) with two interpretations, which can now be predicted, and see also MacDonald (2008b) (to be discussed in class 4) for a syntactic account of the ambiguity associated with examples like *Phil almost drank the pitcher of beer*.

Event decomposition: Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998)

- Dowty's decompositions also inspire the research of Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998) on event structure and argument structure.
- By way of illustration I discuss the following event structure templates these scholars propose for activities like *sweep* and *run* and accomplishments like *break*, *melt* and *open*.

(48) a. [x ACT <*MANNER*>] (activity)
 b. [x ACT] CAUSE [BECOME [y <*STATE*>]] (accomplishment)

Event decomposition: Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998)

Some central assumptions on this analysis:

- The set of event structure templates is fixed and these templates correspond to the Vendler-Dowty aspectual classes of verbs.
- Verbs are associated with two types of meaning components:

Primitive predicates like ACT, CAUSE and BECOME representing recurring meanings and idiosyncratic constants (or roots) encoding, for example, the manner of an activity or a result state associated with an accomplishment.

Event decomposition: Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998)

- Specific verb meanings come about in a way that canonical realization rules associate roots with the event templates based on the ontological type of the root.

Here is an example of such a rule giving rise to manner verbs like *sweep*:

(49) manner → [x ACT <MANNER>]

The verb *sweep* has the following structure:

(50) [x ACT <SWEEP> y]

Event decomposition: Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998)

- Resultatives like *sweep the floor clean* come about via template augmentation, where an activity template is combined with a result state through CAUSE to give rise to an accomplishment structure:

(51) [[x ACT <SWEEP> y] CAUSE [BECOME [y <CLEAN>]]]

- The telicity of *sweep the floor clean* is again linked to the presence of a caused result state in the event structure in (51).

Event decomposition: Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998)

- Rappaport Hovav and Levin also formulate well-formedness conditions on the syntactic realization of event structures in both Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998) and their later work, thereby accounting for differences between the argument realization patterns associated with manner verbs like *sweep* and result verbs like *break*.

(52) a. Phil swept the floor.

b. Phil swept. (object omission is allowed)

(53) a. Tracy broke the dishes.

b. *Tracy broke. (object omission is disallowed)

(54) *Phil swept clean.

(object omission is disallowed)

A well-formedness condition on the syntactic realization of event structures

(54) **Argument-per-subevent condition:** There must be at least one argument XP in the syntax per subevent in the event structure.

(Rappaport Hovav and Levin 2001: 779)

What (54) says is that event complexity figures in argument realization. The omissibility of the object in (52) follows from the simple event structure associated with *sweep*, whereas the ban on object omission in (53) and (54) is a consequence of the complex accomplishment structure associated with *break* and the resultative structure *sweep the floor clean*.

The debate concerning the locus of event structure information

- The event decompositions we have seen so far are lexical semantic structures. In lexicalist accounts such as Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998), event structures are lexically stored.
- In other analyses, event structural (and argument structural) information is directly associated with syntactic functional heads and lexical items are primarily the locus of conceptual information. Syntactified event decompositions are found in the work of Hale and Keyser (1993, 2002), Harley (1995), Marantz (1997), Folli and Harley (2005) and Ramchand (2008), among others.
- That there is a rich syntactic component and an impoverished lexicon is also a central idea in Borer (2005), which is a highly influential theory of inner aspect representing a significant departure from earlier analyses such as those discussed today. More on this to follow in the coming classes.

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