V07-Aktionsart

Course in Semantics · Ling 531 / 731
McKenzie · University of Kansas

1 Aktionsart

We can classify verbs and (extended) verb phrases based on the kinds of temporal entailments they generate.

For instance *Paul built a house* entails *Paul has built a house*. Meanwhile, *Paul was building a house* does not entail this, because he might not have ever finished.

(1) Paul built a house ⇒ Paul has built a house ⇒ A house got built by Paul

(2) Paul was building a house ⇏ Paul has built a house ⇏ A house got built by Paul

This is not simply a feature of aspect, though: *Paul worked in Texas* does entail *Paul has worked in Texas*, just as *Paul was working in Texas* does. There is an important difference between building a house and working in Texas.

(3) Paul worked in Texas ⇒ Paul has worked in Texas ⇒ Texas was worked in by Paul

(4) Paul was working in Texas ⇒ Paul has worked in Texas ⇒ Texas was worked in by Paul

We can also classify verbs based on the temporal properties they can**not** have. For instance, some verbs don't take the imperfective, without a change in meaning (that is, without being a different verb altogether).

(5) *Elena saw/*was seeing the movie*

(6) *Elena knew/*was knowing French*

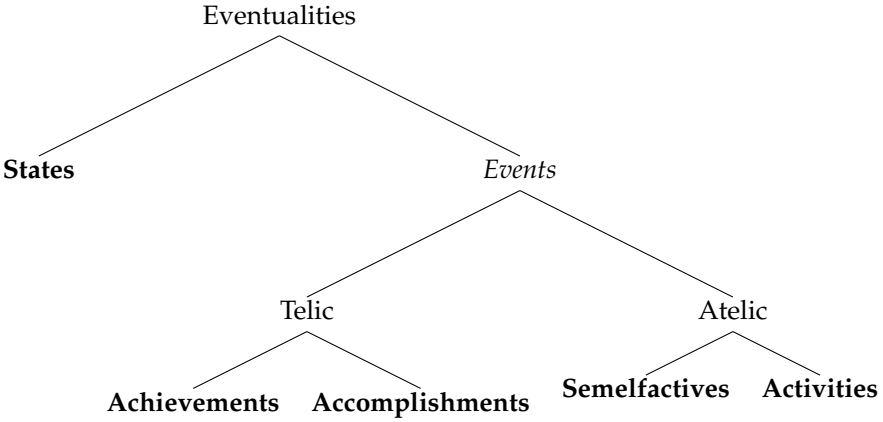
Other times, you can modify certain predicates with some modifiers, others not.

(7) a. *Paul built a house in three weeks.*
    b. * *Paul built a house for three weeks.*

(8) a. * *Paul worked in Texas in three weeks.*
    b. *Paul worked in Texas for three weeks.*

With facts like these, we can classify verbs and verb phrases based on the inherent temporal properties of the events they describe. These properties are called the **Aktionsart** [ˌæk.siˈjon.zart] of the verb (phrase).[1]

Jumping ahead, we can start with the main classification, which was first brought forth by Zeno Vendler (1967). He classified verb phrases into four categories, later expanded to five (see Dowty (1979)).



2 Basic distinctions

The main distinction is between **states** and **events**.

States are **stative**, and do not change without some input of force. Events are **dynamic**, and involve changes between states.

2.1 States

Put another way, a VP denotes a state if everything in the universe stopped... and the VP would still hold.

(9) Some states:
believe in yourself, be from New Jersey, love Paul

Vendler mainly used distribution tests to categorize verb phrases into these classes. One such diagnostic for states in English is very simple: They cannot be put into the progressive.

[1]The term **lexical aspect** is also sometimes used to describe these, but due to confusion with viewpoint aspect people tend to use Aktionsart. The word Aktionsart is a noun borrowed from German (it means "action type"), so it is always capitalized.

(10) *He is believing in himself, *He is being from New Jersey, *He is loving Paul.

Note "in English": Distribution tests are language-specific.

3 Telicity

Briefly put, telicity [tɨˈlɪs.i.ɾi] concerns whether the event has a 'natural endpoint'.

For instance, *build a house* has a natural endpoint where you can say you're done— the moment you finish the house. If you haven't reached that point, you can't say you've built a house. On the other hand, *sit on the porch* does not have a natural endpoint, since you only stop when you decide to stop. As soon as you start you can say you've sat on the porch.

If a predicate describes events that have a *natural* endpoint, it is called **telic** [ˈtʰiː.lɪk]. If it lacks one, it is **atelic** [ˈeɪ.tʰiː.lɪk].

A classic test for telicity in English is to use the 'frame' adverbials *in T* and *for T*, where *T* is a length of time. Telic predicates marked for past tense can take in-PPs, but atelic ones cannot. In the other direction, atelics easily work with for-PPs, but telic predicates do not. They are grammatical, but do not have the reading where the event was completed. With some predicates this triggers a general failure.

(11) Telic :
  a. *I ran a mile in ten minutes.*
  b. # *I ran a mile for ten minutes.* ($\not\Rightarrow$ I ran a mile)

(12) Atelic :
  a. * *I ran in ten minutes.*
  b. *I ran for ten minutes.*

This test doesn't work on all predicates: *I painted the house in/for an hour*, although notice the slight difference between the two readings of the VP.

4 Telic event types

Telic predicates can be divided into accomplishments and achievements based on the **duration** of their events. Accomplishments describe events that last

some amount of time, while achievements describe events that are instantaneous.

Achievements are telic predicates that occur instantly, yet which require some preparation. For instance, when you arrive somewhere, the moment of arrival is instantaneous. But short of teleportation, arrival is the end of a process.

(13) *reach the top of the mountain, arrive, win the game, find my glasses*

Accomplishments are telic predicates that include the process in the meaning. They can be distinguished from achievements using *almost*.

A good English test to distinguish these is to use *almost* with a past-tense perfective. With an accomplishment, *almost VP* is ambiguous between nearly starting and nearly completing the process. An achievement lacks this ambiguity.

(14) *I almost painted the house* can mean I almost went and painted the house

(15) *I almost arrived in Lawrence* can't mean I almost left home to go to Lawrence

5 Atelic event types

Atelic events can bedivided into activities and semelfactives. Semelfactives are instantaneous, while activities are ongoing.

(16) Semelfactives: *cough, knock on the door, jump*

(17) Activities: *walk, sit on the porch, draw*

The progressive distinguishes activities from semelfactives in English.

With the progressive, semelfactives have a sense of repetition.

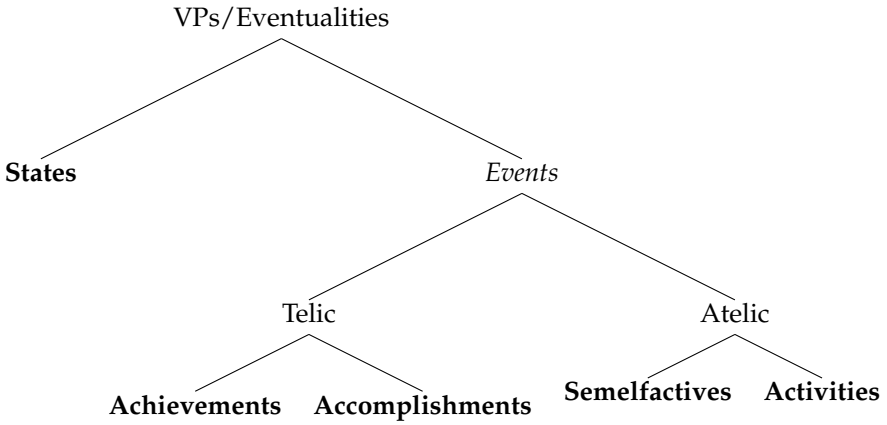
(18) *I was coughing all night*.

(19) *Paul was knocking for ten minutes*.

Activities do not. Instead, we get a sense of continuous action.

(20) *I was walking all night*.

(21) *Paul was drawing for ten minutes*.



Here is a common feature matrix of event types sorted by these factors:

event type	**dynamicity**	**telicity**	**duration**	**example**
states	−	−	+	*be in New Jersey*
activities	+	−	+	*hang out with Paul*
semelfactives	+	−	−	*fart in church*
accomplishments	+	+	+	*complete a mid-term*
achievements	+	+	−	*find the buried treasure*

Here is the same list, with the various behaviors and tests listed.

event type	**progressive**	**temp PP**	**with *almost***
states	can't take it	for/*in PP	must be close or did not start
activities	continuous	for/*in PP	did not start
semelfactives	repetition	for/*in PP	did not do it
accomplishments	ongoing	*for/in PP	did not start, or did not finish
achievements	ongoing	*for/in PP	did not finish