

Incomplete Events and the “Actionality-as-Polysemy” View

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1. The Problem

The lack of an entailment relationship between sentences with “accomplishment” verbs in the English Progressive (1) and in the English Simple Past (2) has been dubbed “the imperfective paradox” in the literature (Dowty 1979). The problem is that once we assume that sentence meanings involve an existentially bound event variable, such that the denotation of the matrix verb holds of it, (1) must entail that there exists a crossing event (somewhere in the past). However, clearly, (1) can still be true, even if Mary never crossed the road (say, a truck hit her).

(1) Mary was crossing the road.

(2) Mary crossed the road.

There have generally been two approaches to the problem. The overwhelming majority of scholars pursue some version of the “modal” approach, whereby the Progressive’s meaning is said to involve quantification over possible worlds in one way or another. Another line of thought (Parsons 1990, Ramchand 2018) resolves the problem by allowing “accomplishment” predicates to hold of **incomplete events**.

In the present talk I would like to argue that the typology of actional classes (Tatevosov 2002 and subsequent works) presents unambiguous evidence for incomplete events.

2. Tatevosov’s Actional Classification

Showing that Vendler’s (1957) actional classification is inadequate both for English and cross-linguistically Tatevosov develops a methodology general enough to be universally applicable and avoid some other problems of the Vendlerian approach. In a language with an inflectional aspectual system like English (as opposed to a derivational aspectual system as in Russian) a verb’s actional class is the range of actional interpretations available to it in the most general perfective and the most general imperfective verb forms of the given language. The interpretations form a closed set: P — process, S — state, EP — entry into a process, ES — entry into a state, *etc.* S differs from P in being true of moments of time (Taylor 1977) and both differ from EP and ES in being cumulative and non-quantized (Krifka 1998)¹. An “accomplishment” verb such as *to cross* belongs to the <ES, P> class, which means that it has the interpretation ES in the most perfective form (Simple Past) and the interpretation P in the most imperfective form (Present Progressive). Another “accomplishment” verb such as *to paint* with a quantized object belongs to the <ES P, P> class, since it also has the interpretation P in the Simple Past (*He painted the wall for 3 hours*).

Overall, an investigation of three typologically distinct and unrelated languages reveals a staggering 10 cross-linguistically stable actional classes and at least 17 classes attested in at least one language for a set of verbs. These involve such classes as: <ES, S>, <ES S, S>, <S, S>, <EP P, P>, <EP, P>, <ES S, P>, <ES P S, P>, *etc.* Note that the presence of an atelic interpretation in the imperfective form does not entail its presence in the perfective form.

Importantly, languages differ as to which actional classes are present and to which actional classes same verbal meanings are assigned. For instance, the verb ‘burn’ belongs to the <EP ES P, P> class in Karachay (Turkic; Tatevosov 2016), but to the <P, P> class in Hill Mari (Finno-Ugric, F. Golosov, p. c.).

3. The “Actionality-as-Polysemy” View

I argue that these observations present a strong motivation for **the “actionality-as-polysemy” view**², in which a verb such as *to cross* has in fact two meanings: CROSS’_{ES} and

¹ These are argued to be the only universally applicable actional criteria by Tatevosov.

² To my knowledge this view has not been pursued in the literature.

CROSS'_P. The subscripts indicate that the former is quantized and non-cumulative and *vice versa* for the latter.

This view implies that the P interpretations of “accomplishment” verbs are in no way derivative of the ES interpretations. Which is the same as saying that [[to cross]] can hold of incomplete events (a process event that does not entail any entry into a state). If we assume that the Progressive selects for P meanings, the lack of entailment from (1) to (2) is no longer a problem. A sentence like (1) only entails a cumulative non-quantized — *i. e.* processual — crossing event. While (2) describes a non-cumulative quantized crossing event. The former and the latter are in no way equivalent, although they do bear a family resemblance (Wittgenstein 1953/2009), which enables both to be referred to with the same verb stem.

In the talk I will further argue that (i) we should distinguish the P interpretation in the most perfective form and the P interpretation in the most imperfective form and that (ii) the analysis of Ramchand (2018) is inferior to the present proposal in being incompatible with Tatevosov’s observations. I will also provide an explicit formulation of the basic actional meanings and a semantics for the progressive, compatible with the present system.

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