THE CONCEPT OF TELICITY IN ENGLISH, ROMANIAN AND SERBIAN

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Abstract: *Given that the notion of telicity was simply defined by English linguists as a situation which tends towards a goal, this paper will additionally explain and define telicity in the English language. Moreover, the issue of telicity in the Serbian and Romanian relevant linguistic literature has been scarcely analysed. This paper aims to ascertain and define telicity as an indispensable semantic characteristic of Serbian and Romanian verbs. Since the paper proves that the concept of telicity can be detected in languages other than English, telicity can and should be considered a linguistic universal.*

Keywords: *Aktionsart, aspect, boundedness, goal, telicity*

1. Introduction

This paper argues that telicity represents the link between the grammatical and semantic dimensions of the verb. In other words, telicity connects aspect and Aktionsart, that is, it brings together the grammatical and semantic domain of the verb.

The very concept of telicity can be the basis for the lexical, i.e. semantic classification of verbs and verb phrases into activities, states, achievements and accomplishments (traditionally Aktionsart) (Vendler 1967:97-121). In addition, this paper will prove telicity to be in direct correlation with the grammatical category of aspect.

The relevant linguistic literature (Vendler 1967:97-121, L. Brinton 1985:158, Smith 1986:103, Dahl 1987:26, Novakov 2005:115) asserts that telicity is one of the basic semantic characteristics, i.e. distinctive features of verbs. Telic situations are those that tend to attain a specific goal, after which the situation naturally ends. The final segment or natural end of the physical situation is a crucial part of the telic situation itself (Smith 1986, Novakov 2005:115). On the other hand, atelic situations do not have the concept of a goal. Thus, it can be argued that, based on the semantic characteristics of the telicity, situations can be divided into telic and atelic (Vendler 1967:97-121, Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov 2005:115).

Both English and Romanian prominent linguists (Vendler 1967:97-121, Comrie 1976:44, Declerck 1979:761-793, Brinton 1988:54, Novakov 2005:115 Rothstein 2004:1, Brăescu et al. 2005:458, Luchian 2007:64, Avram et al. 2001:65-68) considered the difference between these two types of situations very important for the study of both verbal aspect and Aktionsart, because telicity is one of the basic semantic characteristics or distinctive features of verbs (Vendler 1967:97-121, Novakov 2005:115). And as such, it exists in both Romanian and Serbian, but so far it has not been considered in detail or clearly defined. Therefore, one of the main goals of this scientific research is to examine the influence of the semantic characteristic named telicity on verbs in the Romanian and Serbian languages.

2. The Influence of Telicity in Verbal Aspect

This section of the paper will examine the influence of the semantic category of telicity on aspect, and determine the direct correlation between them, as well as the

relationship between the grammatical category of aspect, and the semantic categories of telicity and boundedness (Declerck 1979:773, Novakov, Lazović 2009:43).

It is well known and also proposed in the relevant literature (Belić 1958:231, Maslov *ed.*, 1962:35-37, Ridanović 1976:7) that the category of aspect is traditionally associated with Slavic languages, because in them verbal aspect is morphologically expressed by prefixes, and telic distinctions are visible in the basic verb form, i.e. in the infinitive. Therefore, aspect in the Serbian language can represent a starting point or a framework for the study and reinterpretation of aspect in Romanian, but also in English.

In the Serbian relevant linguistic literature (Ridanović 1976:7, Klajn 2002, Novakov 2006:12), the term aspect encompasses two dimensions of Slavic verbs - perfective and imperfective, and the term Aktionsart denotes semantic functions of verbs.

In the literature, perfectivity is usually related to the completion of the action, i.e. to telic situations or those situations in which the goal has been reached and which cannot be continued. It can be stated that perfectivity characterizes the execution of an action, and signifies the whole situation, and not only its end. On the other hand, imperfectivity implies a situation that lasts in time, that is, a situation that is not over.

Typical examples perfective / imperfective aspectual opposition are Serbian verbs *pisati* / *napisati* (*to be writing* / *to write, a scri* / *a scria*). The verb *napisati* (*to write / a scria*) is perfective, because it means that the action is over and that it cannot continue, because the goal has been reached. Therefore it depicts the situation as a single whole. On the other hand, the verb *pisati* (*to be writing / a scri*) is imperfective. It signifies the duration of the situation and does not imply a goal or a natural end to the situation. At the mere attempt to translate these verbs into English or Romanian, we encounter a problem, because both verbs in the infinitive should be translated with *to write*, i.e. *a scri*. It is at the level of the verbal phrase, and in some cases at the level of the sentence, that the mentioned verbs in English and Romanian can be defined as telic or atelic.

Prefixed verbs in the Serbian language express perfectivity, while their basic verb forms are mostly imperfective. Verbs to which prefixes are added are most often activities, and less often achievements or states. Prefixed achievements do not change their distinctive features, while with activities and states there is a modification of features (Novakov 2005:81). In the process of prefixation, without exception, the characteristics [- goal] and [+ stativity] change. The prefix primarily changes the feature [goal], which introduces the final segment or the natural end of the situation. Thus, in the Serbian language, the connection with the grammatical category of aspect is realized through this feature (Klajn 2002:205-286, Novakov 2005:61-86). Thus, the lexical feature [goal] can be related to aspect, in the sense that the situation that tends towards a goal can be presented as a whole (*perfective aspect*), and the situation that does not aspire to the goal as a structure (*imperfective aspect*) (Comrie 1976:3, Novakov 2005:75-80).

Thus, prefixation in the Serbian language has both a lexical and grammatical function (Ridanović 1976:5, Klajn 2002:207), and affects both verbal semantics and verbal aspect, and the connection between the meaning of verbs and grammar is realized through the distinctive feature [goal], i.e. telicity (Novakov 2005: 85).

On the other hand, the study of aspect and Aktionsart is relatively new in Romanian linguistics (Lazović 2019:13). In traditional Romanian literature (Evseev 1974, Graur, Al. Et al. 1966, Dimitriu 1979) aspect is not treated as a separate verb category, but rather the aspectual characteristics of the verb were processed within the category verb tense, while telicity was not mentioned. Only in the last few years has aspect acquired the status of an independent verb category in Romanian. In the Romanian language, there is also a perfective / imperfective aspectual opposition (*perfectul* / *imperfectul*), but it is morphologically expressed only in the past tense (Evseev 1974:86-87, Popescu 1995:242).

On the other hand, in the relevant Anglistic literature, aspect is defined as the possibility of presenting the situation as a single whole (*perfective aspect*) or as a structure (*imperfective aspect*) (Comrie 1976:3, Brinton 1985:158, Novakov 2005, Lazović 2019:19).

If a telic situation is combined with the perfective aspect, the situation includes the final segment, while the perfective aspect implies the integrity of the situation, so that the goal is reached and included in the situation itself (Declerck 1979:763). For example:

1) John drew a tree. / John a desenat un copac. / Džon je nacrtao drvo.

Therefore, these are examples of a bounded, telic situations.

On the other hand, telic situation combined with imperfective aspect results in a situation that implies a final segment, and imperfective aspect emphasizes the structure of the situation, and excludes the mentioned final segment or does not state whether the goal has actually been reached or not (Declerck 1979:761-793).

In other words, the use of the progressive form in English, the imperfect in Romanian and in Serbian implies that the goal has not been achieved (Lazović 2019:96). As shown in the example below:

2) John was drawing a tree for hours. / John desena un copac ore întregi. / Džon je crtao drvo satima.

Thus, these are examples of unbounded, telic situations, where the goal is implied, but not achieved.

However, if an atelic situation is expressed in the perfective aspect, the situation does not include the final segment, so the perfective aspect cannot ascertain whether the goal has been achieved or not (Comrie 1976:3, Lazović 2019:97).

3) John swam yesterday. / John a înotat ieri. / Džon je plivao juče.

The situation in examples 3 can be defined as an unbounded, atelic situation.

On the other hand, the atelic situation in combination with the imperfective aspect implies a situation that does not strive for the goal, and the imperfective aspect does not imply the final segment (Comrie 1976:3, Lazović 2019:97).

4) John was reading yesterday. / John citea ieri. / Džon je čitao juče.

The situation in examples 4 can also be defined as an unbounded, atelic situation.

One of the most significant correlations between the verbal aspect, Aktionsart and boundedness is illustrated in the examples above. Namely, bounded, telic situations have perfective aspect and are expressed by simple present or past tense in English, while in Romanian they are most often expressed by complex perfect, while in Serbian they are expressed by a perfective verb form. On the other hand, unbounded situations have imperfective aspect, so they are expressed by progressive forms in English or imperfect (*imperfectul*) in Romanian, while in Serbian they are expressed by an imperfective verb form. Unbounded situations can be telic or atelic, depending on whether the goal has been achieved or not (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:44).

This analysis has shown that there is a correlation between aspect and boundedness in the sense that the perfective aspect denotes a situation that has a final segment, while this is not the case with the imperfective aspect (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:44). Furthermore, according to Novakov, Lazović (2009:47-50), it can be argued that telicity and boundedness are similar, but not identical semantic characteristics of verbs and

verb phrases, since telicity implies the mere existence of a goal, but boundedness determines whether that goal is reached or not (Novakov 2005, Lazović 2019). Thus, it can be concluded that aspect defined as a whole / structure infers the existence of the bounded / unbounded distinction. In other words, the semantic categories of telicity and boundedness are in fact in direct correlation with the verbal aspect.

3. The Influence of Telicity on Aktionsart

As previously mentioned, telicity is one of the most important distinctive features on the basis of which verbs are divided into lexical classes. Telicity refers to the existence of a goal in a particular situation. Accordingly, the semantic category of telicity groups atelic situations (activities and states) on the one hand, and telic (achievements and accomplishments) on the other (Vendler 1967:97-121). As stated in the relevant linguistic literature (Comrie 1976:44, Declerck 1979:761-793, Brinton 1988:54, Novakov 2005:115, Rothstein 2004:1) atelic situations do not strive for the goal and do not have a final segment, while telic situations have a specified goal and tend towards achieving it.

For example, activities include verbs like *run* / *trčati* / *a alerga*, *swim* / *plivati* / *a înota*... Verbs denoting states are: *know* / *znati* / *a ști*, *believe* / *verovati* / *a crede*, *love* / *voleti* / *a iubi*... (Lazović 2019:82) On the other hand, achievements include the following verbs and expressions: *find* / *naći* / *a afla*, *reach the summit* / *popeti se na vrh planine* / *a se urca pe vârful muntelui*, etc (Vendler 1967:97-121, Novakov 2005:100-120). Accomplishments include the expressions such as: *paint a picture* / *naslikati sliku* / *a picta o pictură*, *run a mile* / *pretrčati milju* / *a fugi o milă*, etc (Vendler 1967:101).

The examples above indicate that in some cases the semantic characteristics of the verb are sufficient to establish the type of verb situation (Aktionsart), while in other cases the meaning of whole verb phrases and even the context must be taken into account. Therefore, one of the central questions in the theory of lexical classes, i.e. the semantic division of verbs, is the following: whether verbs are classified into classes or this classification should be applied to larger syntactic units, i.e. to verb phrases or even whole sentences? This question also arises due to the simple fact that one verb can appear in several verb phrases that have different aspectual characteristics and features. There are examples where the same verbs belong to different lexical classes if used in different contexts:

5) *John was running.* / *John alerga.* / *Džon je trčao.*

6) *John ran to the store.* / *John a alergat până la prăvălie.* / *Džon je trčao do prodaivnice.* / *Džon je otrčao do prodaivnice.* (Rothstein 2004:32)

Some linguists (Krifka 1992, 1998, Rothstein 2004: 79) believe that verbs are not telic or atelic in themselves, but telicity or atelicity depends on the description of the situation itself. Thus, the description of the situation can change. Therefore, one and the same verb can have an atelic (5) or a telic (6) meaning. Which is exactly what the sentences in the Serbian language prove. These sentences show that in the same context, the imperfective (*je trčao* / *he ran* / *a alerga*) and the perfective aspect of the verb (*je otrčao* / *he ran out* / *a alergat*) can be used, but in both examples the meaning is telic, i.e. the situation implies a goal (*to the store*).

Thus, there are cases where telicity is not based on the meaning of the verb, but is determined by other parameters, such as: subject, direct object, modifiers, complements, adverbs, as well as the broader context.

Based on the research related to this study, it can be concluded that the telic or atelic distinction is not only semantic in nature, but sometimes it depends on the arguments of the verb, in this case the direct object (Comrie 1976:47). For example:

7) *John was singing a song.* / *John cânta un cântec.* / *Džon je pevao pesmu.*

Unlike sentence (5), the situation in sentences (7) strives for the goal, because it has a natural end, that is, the moment when the subject will sing the whole song. The following two examples further clarify this argument:

8) *John was singing songs.* / *John cânta cântece.* / *Džon je pevao pesme.*

9) *John was singing five songs.* / *John cânta cinci cântece.* / *Džon je pevao pet pesma.*

According to Comrie (1976:47), sentence (8) expresses a situation that does not tend towards a goal, because the subject can sing an unlimited number of songs, while sentence (9) expresses a situation that strives for the goal, i.e. a situation that will end after the subject sings five songs. The analysis related to this study has shown that the direct object affects telicity, because the same verbs can be found with telic (examples 7 and 9), and also with atelic situations (example 8). Therefore, it can be stated that the direct object (*song, five songs*) can determine the end of the situation and define the final segment or goal to which the situation aspires.

As already pointed out, telic situations imply a specific goal. After achieving this goal, the situation naturally ends, which suggests that the situation can no longer continue. In contrast, atelic situations have no goal and do not include a final segment, and at least theoretically can last indefinitely. However, there are examples of atelic situations that also tend towards a goal (sentences 8).

These challenging examples which involve situations that cannot be easily classified as telic or atelic, indicate that the category of telicity should be explained in more detail. Namely, as it has already been stated (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:41-50), the telicity only indicates the existence or non-existence of a goal, but not whether that goal has really been achieved or not. Some solutions to this problem are offered by Declerck (1979:773-785), who further deepens the semantic category of telicity by distinguishing between bounded and unbounded situations.

Declerck (1979:761-793) believes that bounded situations strive for a goal and achieve it, while unbounded situations can tend towards a goal or not. If they do not strive for the goal, they are atelic, and if they strive for the goal, they are telic. What is crucial for unbounded situations is that the goal is never reached.

In examples 6, 7, 9 the goals are clearly defined: the store to be reached, and the songs to be sung, but the context makes it clear that the goals have not been reached. These examples are defined as unbounded, telic situations. Thus, unbounded situations can be telic or atelic, but the goal is not achieved in them (Novakov, Lazović 2009:49-50). It can be stated that telic situations can be bounded or unbounded, depending on whether the goal is actually reached or not (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:49-50).

Declerck (1979: 764) points out that the division into bounded and unbounded situations, and consequently the division into telic and atelic situations, does not depend only on the verb used, but also on the context, more precisely on the subject and object. For example:

10) *John drank whiskey for hours.* / *John a băut whiskey ore întregi.* / *Džon je pio viski satima.*
(Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:79)

- 11) John drank six glasses of whiskey. / John a băut șase pahare de whiskey. / Džon je popio šest čaša viskija. (Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:79)
12) For hours water ran out of the tap. / Apa a curs ore întregi din robinet. / Voda je satima curila iz slavine. (Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:79)
13) A litre of water ran out of the tap. / Un litru de apă a curs din robinet. / Litra ovde je iscurila iz slavine. (Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:79)

The situations in the English and Romanian sentences in example 10 are unbounded and atelic, although they are expressed in perfective aspect in both English and Romanian. The direct object expressed by the uncountable noun *whiskey* affects telicity of the situation modifying it into atelic. However, the situations in the English and Romanian sentences in example 11 are bounded and telic because the object *six glasses of whiskey* indicates the attained goal, thus the situation cannot continue. In the Serbian sentences (11 and 12), telicity or goal is expressed at the morphological level of the verb. On the other hand, in sentences 13 the subject *litre of water* introduces the notion of the goal, and the situations in both sentences are telic and bounded, while the situations in 12 are atelic and unbounded (Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:79).

Activities can be imposed with the meaning of telicity by means of a resultative predicate. For example:

- 14) Mary hammered the metal. / Mary a bătut metalul cu ciocanul. / Meri je udarala čekićem po metalu.
15) Mary hammered the metal flat. / Mary a bătut metalul cu ciocanul până nu l-a foit drept. / Meri je udarala čekićem po metalu do ga nije izravnala. (Rothstein 2004:124, Lazović 2019:86)

1) Namely, example 14 is an activity that involves hitting a metal with a hammer, while example 15 involves a qualitative change in the state of the metal, where it becomes flat. On the other hand, example 14 does not imply a qualitative change in the metal itself. Thus, the resultative predicate *flat* introduces the culmination of the situation or the meaning of the goal. In other words, the resultative predicate *flat* gives information about the state of the direct object of the activity verb at the end of that activity (Rothstein 2004:124, Lazović 2019:86). The English resultative predicate was translated into Romanian and Serbian with a temporal sentence (*până nu l-a foit drept / dok ga nije izravnala / until it was flattened*).

The previous examples have confirmed that Declerck's division (Declerck 1979:761-793) is based on the meaning of the whole sentence, i.e. context, and not on the meaning of the verbs themselves. The Romanian and Serbian translation equivalents have proven that this claim is valid in both Romanian and Serbian.

Thus, telicity and boundeness should be considered different characteristics of verbs and verb phrases (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:49-50, Lazović 2019:111).

4. Conclusion

The study related to this paper has proven that *goal* is a very important semantic characteristic of verbs. Goal is the final segment, which implies a qualitative change in the state of the situation (Lazović 2019:171, Novakov 2005:28). Based on the existence of the goal, situations can be divided into telic and atelic (Comrie 1976:44, Declerck 1979:761-793, Brinton 1988:54). Telic situations are those that strive for a specific goal or end segment. They are always dynamic, which means that they imply a constant input of energy and tend towards achieving a goal (Comrie 1976:48-49, Lambalgen and Hamm 2005:83-96). On the

other hand, atelic situations do not imply a goal (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov 2005:118, Lazović 2019:231).

This analysis has shown that both Romanian and Serbian verbs can be divided into telic or atelic.

However, some difficulties arose concerning the fact that telicity only indicates the existence or non-existence of a goal, but not whether that goal was actually reached or not (Declerck 1979:764, Novakov, Lazović 2009:49-50, Lazović 2019:79). Therefore, following the example of Declerck (1979: 761-793), the distinction between bounded and unbounded situations was taken into account in the analysis related to this study. At the same time, it was concluded that bounded situations strive for the goal and achieve it, while unbounded situations can strive for the goal or not, with the proviso that the goal is never achieved in them.

Based on this research, it can be concluded that both telicity and boundeness can be associated with the presence of a goal (Declerck 1979:761-793, Novakov, Lazović 2009:41-50), with the addition that boundedness implies the achievement of that goal. Since there are situations that are telic but do not reach the goal, it can be concluded that there are differences between telicity and boundeness in the sense that telic situations imply a goal, but do not state whether that goal is achieved or not, while bounded situations specify that the goal is achieved, and unbounded that it is not (Novakov, Lazović 2009:41-50).

If these definitions were applied to lexical classes, it could be stated that accomplishments and achievements in English and Romanian are telic situations that can be bounded or unbounded (Declerck 1979:764, Lazović 2019:10, Novakov, Lazović 2009:41-50, Lazović 2011:221-237). Accomplishments and achievements that have a goal and are bounded, are those in which the goal is reached, while unbounded accomplishments and achievements are situations in which the goal exists but is not achieved. Activities and states in both languages are always bounded and atelic (Lazović 2011:221-237).

In addition, the analysis related to this study has shown that in English and Romanian the meaning of a verb alone is not the most important element on the basis of which a verb is classified in a certain class or defined as telic or atelic, but telicity is influenced by other syntactic elements. Thus, when it comes to the meaning of verbs and telicity, the influence of the context cannot be neglected. This analysis points to the fact that lexical meanings, and therefore telicity, are based on the interaction of the semantics of verbs and other linguistic elements such as prefixes, periphrases, verb tenses, adverbials, subject, direct object, and even broader context. It should be emphasized that in both English and Romanian, telicity is not a feature present at the lexical level, thus most English and Romanian verbs are neutral in their basic form, or in the infinitive, and telicity can be determined at the syntactic level. While in the Serbian language, the perfective / imperfective aspectual distinction, as well as the semantic categories of telicity and boundeness are visible at the morphological level of the verb.

This study has shown a clear connection between verb semantics (Aktionsart) and aspect. Namely, verbs that are telic and imply the achievement of the goal require to be presented as a whole, while atelic verbs usually imply structure.

This analysis has proven that the semantic category of telicity, as well as its associative concepts, such as boundedness and goal, exist in all three languages studied. Based on that, it can be justifiably stated that the concept of telicity as a semantic characteristic of a verb represents a general linguistic category, and as such it should be considered a linguistic universal.

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