

Imperfectivity: Its Delimitation from Genericity, Progressivity, and Atelicity

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Imperfective verb forms (and sentences) have a wide range of interpretations within a particular language, and it differs across different languages. Hence, their semantics resists any simple account in terms of a single operator. It is very common to associate imperfectivity with genericity (and also with habituais, iteratives, repetitives), progressivity (as in English), or with atelicity. In this presentation, I will first argue for a clear separation of imperfectivity from these three categories, and second, I will outline a proposal for a semantics of the perfective and imperfective aspect.

I will argue that imperfectivity does not subsume genericity as one of its subcategories (contrary to Comrie 1976, and Dahl 1995, for example), but rather imperfectivity and genericity each constitutes a category in its own right (see also Filip and Carlson 1997). Although imperfectives in Slavic languages are used to express progressivity (unlike perfectives), it does not follow that the Slavic imperfective can be semantically assimilated to the progressive in English, for example (contrary to Zucchi 1999). We also find widespread claims that the semantics of the imperfective is to be equated with atelicity, thus blurring the boundary between the category of ‘grammatical aspect’ and the semantic level of eventuality types (or ‘lexical aspect’, ‘situation aspect’ in Smith (1991/1997), ‘Aktionsart’ in Hinrichs (1985), de Swart (1998), and also Dowty (1999), for example). However, such claims are problematic given the functional diversity and flexibility of imperfectives, the presence of prefixes within secondary imperfectives that induce their telic interpretation, and certain interactions between imperfectives and nominal predicates in Slavic languages (see also Filip 1993/1999 and 1997). In general, the grammatical aspect, perfective/imperfective, and eventuality types (telic/atelic) are best taken as constituting two clearly separate categories, formally and notionally.

The semantics of the aspectual perfective/imperfective opposition is not an absolute universal, but rather its core is constituted by the opposition between two cluster concepts ‘partitivity’ and ‘totality’ (see also Filip 1993/1999). ‘Totality’ is interpreted in terms of the requirement for the time of a given eventuality to be completely included in the time of reference (see Klein’s (1995) time-relational analysis of aspect). If the imperfective is the unmarked member in the aspectual opposition, as in Slavic, ‘partitivity’ is interpreted in terms of “not necessarily proper part of”, which amounts to “not necessarily properly included in the time of reference”, which allows us to subsume the completive uses of imperfectives. If the imperfective is the marked member in the aspectual opposition, as the English progressive, partitivity is interpreted in terms of “proper part of”. This, however, does not mean that the semantics of various aspectual categories, as they are realized in natural languages, is reducible to just these two mereologically based notions and that these two notions are equally applicable to the aspectual systems of all languages. Rather, ‘part’ and ‘whole’ are the two core properties among several other contributing properties that characterize the semantics of the imperfective and perfective categories across languages (‘temporary/contingent property’, ‘result’, and the like). The encoding of additional contributing properties is determined by the specific requirements of a given aspectual system. For example, in addition to expressing the ‘proper part’ relation, the English progressive operator requires that predicates and sentences in its scope be episodic, and denote some ‘temporary’ or ‘contingent’ property (see Comrie 1976; Carlson 1977, Bach 1981, and others). This view of the grammatical aspect as a prototype category seems to be compatible with some recent typological proposals of Paslawska and von Stechow for the form-meaning mappings in the tense-aspect system in Russian.