From language-specific to universal aspectual classes: issues and possible solutions

Language-specific aspectual (actional, Aktionsart) classes are best understood as the aspectual classes of verbs established separately for each language on the basis of language-specific tests (cf. Smith 1996: 228).

The idea of language-specific aspectual classes is therefore based on the assumption that there is crosslinguistic variation in the domain of aspectual classification. This assumption has a number of practical consequences. Above all, it requires us to recognize that much of our knowledge about aspectual classes is based on linguistic facts specific to English: “many of the phenomena discussed in formal semantic literature depend on contingent aspects of linguistic structure that happen to be present in English” (Evans 2011: 530–531; cf. Tatevosov 2002: 319 for a similar point). If this is accepted, it becomes obvious that, in order to arrive at an aspectual classification of predicates in a language, it does not suffice to equate the predicates of a given language with their nearest English translational equivalents (Ebert 1995: 185; Tatevosov 2002: 338; cf. also Wilhelm 2007: 90).

Moreover, it is important to understand that tests used for English are often inapplicable to other languages, and that they can even yield unexpected results (Bar-el 2015: 77–79). Consequently, tests used for English should never be assumed a priori to be applicable to other languages. Instead, the starting point should be that each language has its own tests and groups its predicates into language-specific aspectual classes.

There is an open question whether the semantic distinctions involved in constituting language-specific classes can be claimed to be universal. In a typologically informed framework of the semantic typology of actionality, a major goal is to determine whether the semantic notions employed in different language-specific aspectual classes can be reliably equated with universal semantic notions (cf. Tatevosov 2002, Bach 2005). To put it more simply, we ask ourselves whether the ‘telicity’ in language A can be equated with the ‘telicity’ in language B when they are manifested through different tests in different languages. This introduces the hotly debated issue of crosslinguistic identification and comparison from morphosyntactic typology (Stassen 2011) into the semantic typology of aspectual classes.

In our discussion, we will address these issues by looking at analyses of aspectual classification in two languages that are structurally dramatically different from English, with the focus on telicity tests. First, we will discuss the Athabaskan language Dëne Sųlinë (or Chipewyan; Bortolin 1998, Wilhelm 2007), where the test with the adverb k’ájëne ‘almost’ is employed to determine the telicity of predicates. Note that this test has been examined for other Athabaskan languages as well (Smith 1996, 1997; Rice 2000).

Subsequently, we will discuss Northern Iroquoian languages, in particular Seneca (Chafe 1980, 2016: 24–26) and Cayuga (Sasse 1997), where the interpretations of aspectual forms called Stative and Habitual are claimed to be sensitive to the telic/atelic distinction.

The two tests are different insofar as the first one (with k’ájëne ‘almost’) is transferred from English (e.g. Dowty 1979: 58), whereas the second test, from Northern Iroquoian languages, is a true language-specific test, since the two discussed aspectual formatives (Stative and Habitual) have highly language-specific aspectual semantics. Therefore, in the case of k’ájëne ‘almost’, we ask ourselves on what grounds this test is assumed to be applicable to Dëne Sųlinë. On the other hand, we want to know about the arguments in favor of the claim that the opposition manifested in the two aspectual forms of Northern Iroquoian languages can be equated with the telic/atelic distinction manifested in languages such as English and others.
Bibliography:


