

# TELOCITY IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

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## 1. Introduction

If we start from the theoretical assumption that language is a system which associates specific meanings to specific forms and structures, we could proceed by saying that the meanings, i.e. notions, are expressed by the given forms in a given language. Some of these notions represent general concepts which belong to the categories included in the cognitive structuring of our reality. For example, such concepts are temporal and spatial location, possession, agentivity, telicity and many others; thus temporality represents a temporal determination or localization of a situation, a gradual quantification measured from the zero point, the deictic centre or the point of speech (now). These notions could be indicated by various means, both lexical and morpho-syntactic—therefore, they could be lexicalized or grammaticalized. To use the same example, temporality could be grammaticalized within the category of tense, but lexicalized in the adverbial expressions denoting time.

Moreover, these general notions need not have exactly the same status in different languages, because they often depend on the “point of view” taken in a language (or ethnolinguistic categorization of the world, cf. Piper et al 2005: 576). Therefore, it could be assumed that some of these notions would have a central or peripheral role in the system of different languages or be related to other notions in different ways.

To complete the theoretical framework, these general notions are best represented as elements in a clause structure. Like most linguistic units, clauses consist of structure (form) and content, so a complete and systematic description of clauses requires a thorough analysis of the content, too. Thus, in addition to the syntactic structure, one should also discuss the semantic and pragmatic notions related to the given structure. The semantic structure of the clause is usually called the proposition—the predicate and its arguments, that is the relation(s) between the participants included in the situation denoted by the predicate. The proposition could be placed

within a certain modal framework—indicative or some other mood—which implies the attitude of the speaker to the proposition. This relation between the form and content in the clauses is rather complex, because one structure/form could denote several different semantic components and one semantic component could be denoted by different syntactic and lexical means.

Therefore, lexical and syntactic means of expression usually do not denote just one such semantic concept, but several such concepts “coexist” in one expression, with one of them usually dominating. So, semantic concepts resemble prototypes, or are present in a higher or lower degree and do not always have clear-cut borders. For example, the category of person is typically and centrally indicated by personal pronouns and finite verb forms, but is merged with the category of possession in possessive pronouns/determiners (Piper *et al* 2005: 580).

After this general theoretical framework, the paper will discuss the semantic category of telicity in English in Serbian and then compare it with the category of aspect in order to specify possible domains of each of these two categories.

## 2. Telicity

The very term *telicity* is derived from the Greek word *telos* denoting “a goal, end”, and it seems that the distinction between the verbs which involve an end or a goal and the verbs which do not could be related to Aristotle’s work (Binnick 1991: 189). However, the very term was introduced by Garey (Garey 1957) to denote telic verbs which have a natural culmination, and atelic verbs which do not have a goal to be realized (Binnick 1991: 189). So, in contemporary linguistic literature, the distinction between telic and atelic situations is related to the notion of the goal, i.e. the telic situations take a specific time to be completed, while the atelic ones do not. This distinction was further developed by many other authors, among them Z. Vendler (1967: 97–121): without using the actual terms telic/atelic, he writes about the difference between the verbs and verb phrases which have a natural terminal point (e.g. *run a mile*, *draw a circle*) and those which do not (e.g. *run*, *swim*). Vendler also points out that the atelic predicates which are true for a certain time interval, are also true at any subinterval of that time, whereas telic predicates are not. Therefore, if someone swam during the

time interval  $t$ , it is true that he was swimming during any part of that interval; but if someone wrote a letter during the time interval  $t$ , it is not true that he wrote a letter during each part of that interval.

Some linguists (for example, Declerck 1979) related the notion of telicity to the notion of boundedness, because bounded situations tend toward a goal, have a limit, a well-defined endpoint (Declerck 1979: 762). Moreover, unbounded situations are homogeneous, while the bounded ones are not, which implies that the former consist of qualitatively equal segments, whereas the latter do not. Such a determination of telicity is quite similar to the contemporary definition of aspect, since aspect is understood as viewing the situation in its entirety (perfective aspect) or as a structure (imperfective aspect) (cf. Comrie 1976: 4). Even more explicitly, some linguists (cf. Smith 1986: 100–101) wrote that perfective aspect includes the endpoints of a situation (i.e. the initial and final point), whereas imperfective aspect does not imply the inclusion of these endpoints. Therefore, there is a direct link with telicity: aspect is a category which implies the inclusion or exclusion of the boundary in the situation denoted by the verb, and this boundary to a great degree coincides with the achievement of the goal.

Finally, telicity is sometimes viewed as a component of the categorial complex of causativity (Piper et al. 2005: 578), because it is related to the causes of a certain situation, conditions for the realization of that situation and eventually to the goal to be achieved. Therefore, it is also implicitly related to the notions of animacy and agentivity necessary to reach a set goal (Piper et al. 2005: 804). The entire telic situation would thus typically include the animate agent wishing to achieve a certain goal or starting a certain activity to achieve a certain goal, with the cause and effect relation between the initial and final stage of the situation. In that case, the notion of a goal is quite similar to the notions of purpose and intention, and different languages might also have specific means to indicate them (Piper et al. 2005: 809–810).

### **2.1. Telicity in English**

As far as English is concerned, telicity could be indicated in various contexts, both at the lexical and the syntactic level. First of all, at the lexical level telicity could be indicated by prefixes and by some particles in phrasal verbs. Thus, for example, most of the following verbs imply a goal:

a) *rebuild*

- b) *drink up*
- c) *pull through*
- d) *drive on*

The prefix *re-* in (1a) indicates the repetition of the situation denoted by the basic verb and the full completion of that repetition represents the goal. The particles *up* and *through* in phrasal verbs in (1b) and (1c) also indicate a boundary, natural terminal point which should be reached to “fulfill” the semantic content of the lexeme: to drink the entire quantity (usually a glass) of a certain liquid or to recover fully from an illness. However, the particle *on* in (1d) does not indicate a goal and thus does not make the lexeme telic (cf. Brinton 1985; Brinton argues that most particles in phrasal verbs mark telic *Aktionsart*, not perfective aspect, except the particles like *on* and *along*).

Secondly, telicity in English could be marked at the syntactic level; for this paper, it is interesting to discuss the influence of the direct object (cf. Brinton 1988). Actually, in English the direct object can add a goal even to the verbs which do not have it at the lexical level. The typical examples are the following:

- a) *to read* vs. *to read the letter*
- b) *to run* vs. *to run a mile*
- c) *to read novels* vs. *to read the novel*
- d) *to drink beer* vs. *to drink a beer*

The verbs used without an object in (2a) and (2b) do not imply any goal—these activities can go on and stop at any moment without having any natural terminal point, but if the object is added the situations become telic (it takes a definite period of time to read a letter or run a mile). The examples (2c) and (2d) show that even the structure of the object plays a role: the nonmodified plural countable noun (*novels*) and the nonmodified singular uncountable noun (*beer*) do not indicate a specific goal, while the premodified nouns (*the novels*, *the beer*) do. So in (2c) the noun *novels* just presents further qualification of the situation, whereas the noun phrase *the novel* implies both qualification and quantification of the situation, which means that it sets a goal.

### 2.1.1. Aspect and telicity

Starting from the assumption that the basic English aspectual opposition includes the progressive (i. e. imperfective, with the exclusion of end-

points) and nonprogressive (i. e. perfective, with the inclusion of endpoints) aspect, we could illustrate the interaction between telicity and these two aspects with the following examples:

- (3)a) *She read the letter.*
- b) *She was reading the letter.*
- (4)a) *They rewrote their report.*
- b) *They were rewriting their report.*
- (5)a) *The children ate up the apples.*
- b) ? *The children were eating up the apples.*

The examples (3a), (4a) and (5a) indicate both the presence and the attainment of the goal, that is the entire situation is presented inside its initial and final endpoints. However, if these verbs are shifted into progressive aspect, the goal is still there, but it is not included in the denoted segment of the situation, no confirmation is provided that the goal was reached (examples 3b, 4b). The last example, (5b) is not acceptable for some native speakers, because the phrasal verb *eat up* requires the attainment of the goal and the inclusion of the final point, which is not the case with the progressive aspect. Therefore, the examples with the progressive aspect prove that the telic situations and the imperfective aspect (progressive) could be combined in the same verb phrase, but this combination results in the neutralization of the goal, i. e. it does confirm the attainment of the goal.

## 2.2. Telicity in Serbian

In Serbian, the notion of telicity has been systematically discussed only in more recent grammars and articles (cf. Piper et al. 2005: 803–812). These grammars and articles indicate that in Serbian the goal is typically expressed with syntactic structures like prepositional phrases including specific case forms, then with infinitive constructions and decomposed predicates, but also with lexical means (Piper et al. 2005: 805). While mentioning some of these ways of expression, my paper will focus on the intersection between aspect and telicity, as well as the role of the verb's arguments in denoting telicity.

### 2.2.1. Aspect and telicity

It is a well known fact that aspect in Slavic languages is almost always marked already at the lexical level, by prefixation; however, prefixes could be assumed to mark both the semantic feature of telicity and the category

of aspect, and it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish “pure” perfectivization from the cases when the prefix also modifies the meaning of the basic verb. In this paper, I shall make an attempt to delimit these two functions, using examples with the prefix *na-* and starting from the taxonomy presented by Klajn (2002: 250–251).

The morpheme *na* has a double function in Serbian: it is a preposition denoting primarily a spatial relation, like English *on*, the position when one object is touching the surface of another object. This spatial meaning is reflected in its second function, that of prefixation. First of all, according to its function, the prefix *na-* could be divided into two large groups: 1) when it has the pure perfectivizing function, and 2) when the prefix, in addition to perfectivization, also modifies the lexical meaning of verbs.

In the former case (e.g. the verbs *nahraniti—feed*, *naučiti—learn*), it seems that the prefix only indicates the entirety of the situation, the situation which is viewed inside its endpoints. Since the prefix also sets the boundary of the situation, adding the telic quality to the situation, the verb implies that the boundary was reached, i.e. that the goal is inside the situation’s endpoints.

In the latter case, the prefix *na-* could be roughly further subdivided into two groups: 1) with the spatial meaning similar to the English preposition *on* occurring with the verbs of motion, and 2) with the meaning of saturation (activity carried out to the point of saturation on the part of the subject). The variants within the spatial meaning include a) placing/putting something on(to) a surface or object (e.g. *natovariti—load up*, *namazati—put on grease or oil*), b) accidental contact with an obstacle (e.g. *nagaziti—step on*), c) specific activities on a surface (e.g. *naslikati—finish painting*, *napisati—write out*), and d) sudden movement of a large number of living beings (e.g. *nagrnuti—swarm up*).

There are several degrees of saturation denoted by the verbs with the prefix *na-*: a) begun or just slightly realized activity (e.g. *načuti—hear something*, *nagristi—bite slightly*), b) partial saturation or “a rather large” portion of an activity (e.g. *naseći—cut a large quantity*, *napričati—tell a lot*) and c) total saturation (e.g. *najesti se—eat one’s fill*, *našetati se—walk one’s fill*).

In these cases, the perfective aspect introduced by the prefix indicates the inclusion of endpoints, and the telic quality (also introduced by the prefix) indicates the presence and attainment of the goal, with the additional semantic implications like spatial relations and saturation.

### 2.2.2. The Verb and its Arguments

The structure of the verb phrase offers another area interesting for the discussion about the interaction between aspect and telicity. Namely, in some cases, the object NP can also indicate a goal which interacts with the aspectual content of transitive verbs. For example:

- (6) a) *napisati pismo* (to write a letter, perfective)  
 b) *nabрати cvеće* (to pick flowers, perfective)

In these examples, the perfective verbs are followed by direct objects expressed by either a nonmodified singular noun (6a) or a nonmodified plural noun (6b); both objects just specify the semantic content of the goal, because the prefixes in these perfective verbs already indicate telic situations which are placed inside their endpoints.

However, with their imperfective pairs (i.e. the same verbs, but without prefixes), the direct object seems to add a goal to an atelic situation, for example:

- (7) a) *pisati pismo* (to write a letter, imperfective)  
 b) *brati cvеće* (to pick flowers, imperfective)

The verbs *pisati* and *brati* are atelic, they denote the situations which can go on without reaching the natural terminal point. However, the objects (the same nouns as in 6a and 6b) add the goal, making them telic. So, there are the following components in these verb phrases: the imperfective lexemes which do not include the endpoints of the situation, and the nouns which specify the goal. In Serbian, the interaction between imperfective aspect and telic quality results in the same implication as the English combination “progressive aspect + NP denoting a goal”: the situation is presented as having a goal, but the attainment of that goal is left unspecified; in other words, the verb phrase does not specify if the goal was reached or not (cf. Novakov 2005: 128–129).

### 3. Conclusion

After a brief theoretical overview concerning the notion of telicity in general and its expression in English and Serbian, as well as after the discussion about the interaction between telicity and aspect in the two languages, it could be concluded that these languages show both similarities and differences.

Telicity is defined as a semantic concept which is possibly present in the propositional content of the clause and which denotes a goal, i.e. a natural terminal point to be reached in a situation denoted by a verb. As for the category of aspect, it is understood as viewing the situation as a whole or as a structure, that is including its endpoints (perfective) and excluding its endpoints (imperfective). Therefore, the interaction between telicity and perfective aspect results in the implication that the goal was reached within the situation's endpoints, while the interaction between telicity and imperfective results in the implication that the achievement of the goal is not specified in the denoted situation.

Within this framework, the paper points out some similarities and some differences between English and Serbian. First of all, telicity is indicated in both languages and it interacts with the category of aspect. Thus in English, telicity is usually not indicated at the lexical level and could be cancelled within the imperfective aspect (specifically, the progressive), whereas the perfective aspect (non-progressive) implies the attainment of the goal. On the other hand, in Serbian, telicity is typically indicated already at the lexical level together with perfective aspect. The second issue investigated in the article is the influence of the object NP on the telic quality of the situation. It was pointed out that English reinterprets telicity at the syntactic level according to the type of NP, while Serbian does not, because telicity is fully determined already at the lexical level.

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