The Telicity Parameter Revisited

Hana Filip

SRI-Discern and Stanford University

BACKGROUND. Much of the current research on aspect is predicated on the assumption that there are two major mechanisms for the encoding of telicity across languages: (i) an object-marking mechanism (aka compositional telicity), with the accusative case assuming a prominent role (see Krifka 1986, 1992, Kiparsky 1998, Basilico 1998, Ramchand 1997, 2001, Svenonius 2001, Kratzer 2004, for example); and (ii) a verb-marking mechanism (aka predicate telicity), including verbal prefixes (see Kratzer 2004, Filip 1993/99, 2000, Piñón 1994, 1995, Schmitt 1996, di Sciullo and Slabakova 2001, Borer 2003, among others). Following Kratzer's (2004) proposal one possible implementation of the telicity parameter is to take [telic] to be an operator that generates telic predicates in interaction with the lexical meanings of verb stems, and to assign the direct object argument or the verbal prefix an essential role in defining the telicity of the described event. [Telic] operates over a semantic constituent denoting a relation between individuals and events. The parametric variation among languages then resides in the different ways in which the semantic operator [telic] is morphologically and syntactically instantiated. In the most general terms, English uses the object-marking mechanism, while in Russian telicity is marked on the verb, primarily by prefixes.

MAIN CLAIMS. For Slavic languages, it will be first argued that there is no strict correlation between prefixes and telicity, and second, there is a connection between telicity of certain VP's and their direct objects in the accusative case. Third, if these two claims are correct, then it follows that Slavic languages are not exclusively verb-marking languages as far as telicity is concerned, and they do not differ from English, and other languages with an object-marking strategy for telicity, in absolute terms predicted by the telicity parameter.

SUPPORTING ASSUMPTIONS AND ARGUMENTS. The notion of 'telicity' is here reconstructed in terms of atomicity, following some suggestions in Rothstein (2004, p.168):

- (1) A verbal predicate is telic if it denotes a set V_c , i.e., an atomic set contextually restricted by a context $\langle t, \mu_c \rangle$. Otherwise, the predicate is atelic.
- In (1), ' V_c ' is a set of events which are atomic in a given context, 't' a time index and ' μ_c ' a free variable over contextually determined measure functions. (1) is in the spirit of Kiparsky (1998) in relying on atomicity, and it involves contextual factors, similarly as the characterization of telicity in Hay, Kennedy, and Levin (1999). Assuming (1), it can be shown that the presence of a verbal prefix on a verb constitutes neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the telicity of a verb. Russian examples below illustrate this point: there are telic verbs that are unprefixed (2), and prefixed verbs that are not telic (3).
- (2) dat'^P 'to give' (3) (moč'¹ 'can, to be able' \rightarrow) s-moč'^P 'can, to be able' The use of the prefix s- in s-moč 'can, to be able' in (3), which is formally perfective but semantically atelic (modal), clearly suggests that (i) Slavic verbal prefixes do not uniformly express the [telic] operator and (ii) Slavic perfective verbs do not constitute a semantically uniform class of telic predicates. The claims (i) and (ii) will be further supported by the applicability of prefixes to perfective verb stems that express telic predicates, as in Czech (4b-c), and a recursive application of prefixes on a single verb, as in (4c).
- (4) a. sednout si → b. od-sednout si → c. po- od- sednout si oit.INF REFL source-sit.INF REFL to sit down way from to sit down small distance away from fall Slavic prefixes uniformly functioned as telicity operators, then (4b) and (4c) ought to be

excluded as ungrammatical, assuming the intuitive 'one delimitation per event' constraint (cf. cp. *run a mile for ten minutes, *wash the clothes clean white, see Tenny 1987, Krifka 2001, Filip 2004, for example).

The second main argument concerns the telicity effects of certain direct objects on VP's in Slavic languages. For Russian, it has been observed (Jakobson 1936, Paducheva 1998, 2003, among others) that direct objects with a totality expression like 'whole/all', a measure expression (5a) or a quantifier (5b) are odd/ungrammatical in imperfective sentences used to describe on-going ('progressive') single events. However, when interpreted iteratively or habitually, (5a-b) are fully acceptable.

(5) a. (?)Ivan p'et^I <u>stakan</u> vody. b. (?)Ivan est^I <u>každoje</u> jabloko.

Ivan drink.PRES.3SG bottle.SG.ACC water.SG.ACC Ivan eat.PRES.3SG each.SG.ACC apple.SG.ACC 'Ivan is drinking a glass of water.' ?'Ivan is eating each apple'.

Now, this interpretive constraint on imperfective sentences only holds if the direct objects (i) are measured or quantified (but *not* bare mass or bare plural nominals), *and* (ii) stand in the Incremental Theme relation to their governing verb ('Incremental Theme' in the sense of Dowty 1991, based on Krifka 1986, 1989). Notice that these are precisely the conditions under which a direct object determines the telic interpretation of a VP in those cases in which the telicity of a VP is taken to be *compositional*, as in English and other languages that are assumed to exhibit the object-marking strategy for telicity.

PROPOSAL. First, I will argue that there are classes of (uses of) prefixes that are *not* morphological exponents of the [telic] operator: namely, paradigm examples are iterative, distributive and Sourceoriented (uses of) prefixes. The application of the source-oriented prefix od- to a perfective verb that expresses a telic predicate, as in (4b), is then fully tractable/unsurprising, rather than exceptional. This will lead me to propose that admissible combinations of prefixes on a single verb are sanctioned just in case they do not contain more than one (use of a) prefix that functions as the [telic] operator. A paradigm example of such a [telic] prefixal use is the measure prefix po- in (4c). Second, the iterative or habitual interpretation of (5a-c) can be motivated if we assume that the semantic structure of (5a-c) involves a multiplicity of telic predicates, each built from a bare verb stem and the measured or quantified Incremental Theme argument. Crucially, it is the latter that supplies the individuation 'tool' for each single atomic event. In so far as the direct object arguments in (5a-c) are in the accusative case, Russian patterns with other languages that use the accusative case on measure and degree phrases, all of which systematically contribute to the expression of telicity (see also Wechsler and Lee (1996). Moreover, if the Slavic imperfective suffix can be interpreted as an operator that takes scope over [telic] prefixes, as Filip (1993/99 and 2000) proposes, then the imperfective operator can generally be taken to take scope over telic predicates, including syntactically constructed ones via 'verbal [acc] (= [telic])' in Kratzer's (2004) terms. In (5a-c) the imperfective operator maps singular telic predicates into a plurality of telic predicates. Additional evidence for this type of systematic interaction between the 'higher' imperfective operator and the 'lower' [telic] operator will be provided by sentences that contain secondary imperfectives formed with the imperfectivizing suffix and a measure (= [telic]) prefix, which show close semantic affinities to sentences like (5a). To conclude, Slavic languages exhibit a verb-marking and also an object-marking strategy for telicity, whereby the former is dominant. The observation that a measured Incremental Theme argument does not freely allow for a particularevent-in-progress interpretation of a sentence in Russian, but it does in English (see (5a)), may provide us with an opening wedge to the insights regarding the semantic and pragmatic differences between languages with primarily verb-marked vs. object-marked telicity.