

The grammar of things that can never happen

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It is a question of ongoing debate whether aspect/aktionsart properties like *telicity* or *atelicity* are properties of *events*, lexical properties of *verbs* with at best a fossilized motivation (like case marking), or semantic properties of the *denotations* of V projections.

If one ascribes a/telicity to events, one will have to assume that the same spatio-temporal “ongoing thing” in fact has several different ontological counterparts which correspond to different ways of describing matters (e.g. as *drinking* vs. *drinking a glas of wine*). This is an unwelcome consequence, for many, because philosophers of language believe that ontology should be a domain which is more or less independent of natural language(s).

In Slavic linguistics, where aspectual classification has rich grammatical (morphological) consequences, it is traditionally assumed that *aspect/aktionsart* of verbs need to be learned and described on a case-by-case basis. However, linguists are constantly searching for semantic motivations for classifications, and for languages without a very elaborate grammar of aktionsart like English, or German, a purely lexical account would be unattractive.

Krifka (1989) and subsequent work seems to offer the optimal treatment of the phenomenon. It is assumed that aspectual properties are properties of event predicates, not of events. Specifically, properties like QUANTIZEDNESS and HOMOGENEITY are used to characterize telic event descriptions and atelic ones. Hence, aktionsart properties are semantic properties, but semantic properties of descriptions of events, not of events themselves. This move allows one to maintain a lean ontology. Moreover, the approach fares very well with aktionsart properties of complex event descriptions and can mirror the influence of quantized object descriptions, bare plural subjects, and other parts of the sentence that influence aktionsart, and which lead to opulent mechanisms of feature propagation in other frameworks (e.g. Verkuyl 1993).

Such properties, however, collapse once we build event predicates that denote the empty set (here, and in all other worlds where the words of English have the denotation they have in actual English). Predicates like the following necessarily cannot describe any event.

- (1) **draw a square circle**
write down largest prime numbers
find the largest prime

For any subject, they will hence denote the empty set (and necessarily so). However, different descriptions of the empty set can have different aspectual properties. While (2.a) is just necessarily false, (2.b) is illformed. (3.a) is necessarily false and (3.b) ill-formed; here the empty set shows the opposite preferences with respect to temporal modification. (4) offers another example.

- (2) **a. Tom drew a square circle in ten seconds**
b. *Tom drew a square circle for ten seconds
- (3) **a. Tim wrote down largest prime numbers for hours**
b. * Tim wrote down largest prime numbers in two hours
- (4) **a. Mary found the largest prime in 2 days**
b. *Mary found the largest prime for 10 days

Hence, the puzzle is this: How can two expressions which both denote the empty set of events have different aktionsart properties?

Krifka, Manfred. 1989. *Nominalreferenz und Zeitkonstitution. Zur Semantik von Massentermen, Pluraltermen und Aspektklassen*. München: Fink.

Verkuyl, Henk. 1993. *A theory of aspectuality. The interaction between temporal and atemporal structure*. Cambridge University Press.