

Telicity at the Dinner Table: Do I have to eat it all?

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A problem which Professor Dr Manfred Krifka (along with the author of this squib) is no doubt familiar with is the child who doesn't want to eat her dinner. Instructions to the child to stop playing with her spoon and get on with the job in hand, at least in the author's home, have led to an interesting observation about the interaction between telicity and mood.

It is a well known fact (which Krifka himself has brought to the centre of linguistic discussion over the last 25 years) that the direct object or theme of an accomplishment verb determines whether the VP headed by the verb is telic or not. Thus we have the familiar contrasts in (1):

- (1) a. Lydia ate her soup in record time.
b. #Theresa ate her soup for five minutes.
c. Dafna ate soup for half an hour.
d. *The girls ate soup in half an hour.

When the theme/direct object is what Krifka (1989, 1992) called quantized as in (1a/b), the accomplishment headed VP is telic, and can be modified by standard *in α time* PPs, but not by *for α time*. When the theme is cumulative as in (1c/d), the converse is the case, and *for α time* is acceptable but not *in α time*.

The reason why the direct object/theme has this effect is the subject of some debate. There is some general agreement that telic verb phrases denote events which can be measured in some kind of way, and that this measurement takes place via a homomorphic function whose values form a partition on the temporal parts of the event (sometimes with added constraints). Beyond this there are different theories as to how the homomorphism works. Krifka, in a number of very influential papers (Krifka 1989, 1992, 1998) argues that the event can be measured because of a thematic property of accomplishment verbs. The relation between the event and the direct object is mediated by the thematic role which determines the nature of the participation of the theme in the event. In the case of accomplishment verbs the thematic relation is **incremental**, which is to say that it determines that the involvement of the theme in the event is on a part-by-part basis in such a way that there is a homomorphism from the part-of structure of the theme to the part-of structure of the event. Since allotted parts of the theme are assigned to parts of the event on a once-only basis, when the theme has been 'used up' the event must be over. Quantized nominals are those where the quantity or size of the nominal are determined. When a nominal denoting the theme is quantized, the incremental homomorphism determines an event of a specified size since it is possible to specify completely the function from parts of the theme to temporal parts of the event. This means that we can determine when every part of the theme has been 'used'. When every part of the theme is used, the event must be over, and since we can determine when the event is over, the VP comes out telic.

A crucial element of Krifka's theory is that it explains not only what telicity is, but also how the direct object is involved in determining the telicity of the VP, and indeed any decent theory of telicity must explain this dependence. I have argued elsewhere (Rothstein 2004) that there is good reason to suggest that telicity is in fact not determined by a homomorphism from the part structure of the theme onto parts of the event. Instead, assuming that accomplishment headed VPs denote complex events consisting of an activity and an event of change, the measurement of the whole event takes place via a homomorphism from the parts of the event of change onto the event as a whole. But in this approach, the direct object DP still plays a crucial role in determining the telicity of the VP, since it is this DP which individuates the relevant events of change, and only quantized, or countable, DPs can have this individuating role. So the interdependence between the telicity of the VP and the properties of the theme DP is maintained here too.

The relation between the determination of telicity and the properties of the DP expressing the theme is common to all theories of telicity, and the point that I want to make in this squib bypasses the debate about which the correct theory is. Instead I want to make an observation which poses a question to all theories of telicity that I know about.

Whatever the explanation for the facts in (1), and no matter how crucial the role of the DP is in determining the telicity of the VP, the dependency disappears (or is severely weakened) in the imperative. Look at the example in (2):

(2) Dafna, eat your soup!

It seems to me, and to my informants, that this instruction is clearly an instruction to Dafna to get on with eating her soup, and not an instruction to finish it. If I issue the instruction in (2), and my daughter picks up her spoon and begins to eat, she is clearly complying with my instructions, and she is entitled (semantically) to ask "Do I have to finish it all?"

An obvious suggestion is that the contrast between (2) and the earlier examples is because of the effect of tense. However, as the examples in (3) show, the contrast cannot be because of tense, since we get the same telicity effects that we saw in (1) in the bare VPs in complements of perception and causative verbs.

- (3) a. I made Theresa eat her soup in five minutes.
b. I saw Lydia eat her soup in five minutes.
c. #I made Dafna eat soup in five minutes
d. I made the girls eat soup for five minutes.

Similarly, (4a) strongly implies that Dafna finished eating her soup, and if I want to indicate that I saw the event going on, rather than that I saw the whole event, I will use the participial form in (4b):

- (4) a. I saw Dafna eat her soup.
b. I saw Dafna eating her soup.

(4b) is pragmatically compatible with the question "Did she finish her soup?" while (4a) makes the question redundant.

I have no answer to the question why the imperative mood should weaken the telicity effects in this way, since, as we have seen, the bare VP with quantized theme denotes completed events and is telic. Telicity doesn't disappear in (2), since (5a) is infelicitous, but (5b) is odder than one would expect in a 'normal' telic sentence.

- (5) a. #Eat your soup for five minutes!
b. Eat your soup in five minutes!

Similarly (6) is odd:

- (6) #I saw/heard Dafna eat her soup for five minutes.

A plausible suggestion is that it is mood, rather than tense, which is playing a role here. Thus telicity effects seem to be weakened in the same way in (7):

- (7) I insist that you eat your soup!

To show that these effects are not dependent on a particular choice of verb, look at a clearly telic predicate like *build a house*. We get the same effects:

- (8) a. Build your house tomorrow and stop wasting time!
b. I suggest that you build your house tomorrow.

Both the examples in (8) can be taken as an instruction or suggestion that you get on with the work of building your house tomorrow, whereas (9) strongly implies completion:

- (9) John will build his house tomorrow.

A consequence of the weakened telicity effects in non-indicative mood is that we find a clear case in English where 'telic particles' have an explicit semantic contribution to the sentence. An instruction, whether couched in the imperative or the subjunctive, to eat the whole plate of soup has to use the particle form as in (10a) or (10b), and thus we find an instance where *eat* and *eat up* are not synonymous.

- (10) a. Eat your soup up!
b. I insist that you eat your soup up!

I have no idea why we should get weakened telicity effects in (2) nor why mood should apparently be the factor which leads to these effects. But this is a puzzle, not a paper, and maybe Manfred will enjoy thinking about a solution!

Happy Birthday!

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