AKTIONSART OR ASPECT?

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ABSTRACT. In this paper the issue of the relationship between aktionsart and aspect with the point of departure in Swedish, (compared to English and Polish) is being discussed. It is argued that the definition of bounded aktionsart in Swedish does not allow for maintaining the distinction between aktionsart and aspect. The division *bounded/unbounded* types of action overlaps to a great degree, but not systematically, with the distinction perfective/imperfective aspect in the equivalent Polish sentences (aspectual values being overtly marked). Thus, in some cases, aspectual and actional meanings involve the same defining features, in other cases the defining features are different. It is suggested that maintaining the distinction between **having** and **reaching** the natural final point (reaching entails having, but having does not necessarily entail reaching) may, in many cases, make it possible to keep those two categories apart.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the meaning of the semantic category *aktionsarten* (type of action) and its relationship to the notion *aspect* is probably one of the most widely disputed issues in linguistics. There is hardly any other domain that has suffered more from conceptual and terminological confusion. Although many books and articles have been written, no land seems to be in sight.

The dispute around the semantics of verbs goes back to the end of the nineteenth century. One of the intensively debated research questions at that time was whether some counterparts of the Slavic aspect could be found in Germanic languages. Jespersen (1924:286) noticed that when different scholars tried to apply notions of Slavic aspect to their respective languages, they rejected the terminology of their predecessors proposing their own and put together the phenomena which should have been distributed into "totally diffe-

rent pigeon holes" e.g. the distinction between: conclusive and non-conclusive verbs, the durative and the punctual verbs, the finished and the unfinished action, implication and non-implication of results etc. Also at present there is no consensus between the scholars as to the autonomy of these two categories and the two categories are often confused, Bache (1997:217).

Even if greatly imprecise, the category has not infrequently been used in linguistic theoretical and empirical research. The two most important fields are the narrative text with its two layers *the foreground* and *the background* and the acquisition of native or foreign/second languages. In the latter field, a vast array of studies of the effect of the type of action upon the correct use of tense involving many different languages have been carried out and the results are, most regrettably, claimed to be reliable.

2. THE UNDERLYING THEORY

A shift of focus in linguistic research from syntax to semantics and pragmatics in the second half of this century brought about a new approach in the analysis of the meaning of verbs. This approach has its origin in the classification of English verbs made by Vendler (1967). Vendler's classification is based on referential properties of verbs, i.e. internal time structures of situations in reality and time schemata of English verbs referring to those situations. Vendler (1967:99ff.) distinguishes four semantic classes of English verbs: *states*, which do not indicate processes (do not consist of successive phases) but can go on in time, *activities*, i.e. processes going on in time but not having any terminal point, *accomplishments*, i.e. processes going on in time but, unlike activities, having a terminus which is logically necessary for their being what they are, and *achievements*, i.e. events occurring at a single moment. The main criterion for the distinction of the four types of English verbs is the compatibility of respective classes of verbs with two different types of temporal adverbs: temporal adverbs of duration, e.g. *for two hours* with states and activities, and temporal adverbs of completion, e.g. *in two hours* with accomplishments and achievements.

Vendler's theory came under serious criticism. One of the early critics of this theory was Mourelatos (1981:194). Mourelatos claimed that six completely different factors were involved in the description of Vendlerian categories of verbs: the inherent meaning of the verb itself, the nature of the verb's arguments, adverbials, aspect, tense as phase (the perfect) and tense as time reference. Thus, Mourelatos seems to be one of the first scholars to notice some inconsistencies in Vendler's definitions, among others, the neglected role of aspectual meaning in the classification of the time schemata of English verbs.

Although strongly criticized, Vendler's theory has been taken as a draft for further studies of the semantics of verbs. It is known under many labels, e.g. lexical (inherent) aspect (as opposed to grammatical aspect), aktionsarten,

or situation aspect, to name only a few. In what is called post-Vendlerian aspectology, Vendler's time-schemata have been described as configurations (absence or presence) of the features: *punctual, durative, telic, dynamic* and the actional meaning is regarded as compositional, i.e. assessed on the sentence level as a sum of the influence of relevant components. This description has also been adjusted to fit individual languages.

An attempt at integrating aspect, strongly neglected in earlier theories, into situation types was made by Smith (1991). The overall aspectual meaning conveyed by a sentence is defined by her as "a composite of the information from two components", the situation type (aktionsart) and the point of view aspect (grammatical aspect). Smith (1991:5) claims that "the two types of information are independent, but they co-occur in sentences". The patterns of co-occurrence of the two components: situation type and viewpoint are different in different languages. In French all viewpoints may be used with all situation types. In Russian one viewpoint (perfective) has limited distribution, while the other (imperfective) may appear in every situation type (Smith 1991:10).

Smith's (1991) attempt at integrating viewpoint aspect with situation types does not seem fully successful. There seems to be some contradiction in her discussion of the distribution of aspect across situation types in Russian. Smith claims (1991:302) that in Russian, thus also in Polish, "the imperfective is formally available for all situation types", thus also for accomplishments, e.g. *My pisali* (imperfective) *pismo*. 'We were writing a letter', and that "accomplishments and achievements are incompatible with adverbials of simple duration" (Smith 1991:54). As pointed out by Grzegorczykowa (1997:36), imperfective forms of Polish (thus also Russian) verbs are generally compatible with adverbs of duration. So as can be seen from the above considerations, the description of the meaning of each of the categories, aspect and situation type, is not incontrovertible. My observation concerning the two contradictory statements has been assented by C. Smith in e-mail communication and the error was to be amended in a new edition of her book.

3. AKTIONSART IN SWEDISH

On the Swedish ground, a comprehensive description of actional meaning of verbs modelled on Vendler's (1967) system has been presented by Teleman et al. (1999:IV:323ff.). Similar to Smith's (1991), the four types of actions suggested by Vendler (1967) have been defined in terms of temporal properties such as: *boundedness, processuality, durativity, dynamicity* and *resultativity*.[1] The presence or absence of some of the temporal properties, i.e. various groupings of

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[1] Some aspectologists use the term *telicity*. The use of the term *boundedness* for the compositional feature of bounded aktionsart seems most unfortunate. In result, Schema I in Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324) shows a group of bounded processes which are unbounded.

those properties, constitute the criteria for distinguishing particular types of actions. The employed terminology is: *tillstånd* (states), *oavgränsade processer* (unbounded processes), *avgränsade processer* (bounded processes) and *punktuella händelser* (punctual events).

States are unbounded (do not have a natural terminal point), non-processual (do not consist of successive phases), durative (have unlimited extension in time), static (do not denote that something "happens") and non-resultative (do not involve change of state). Stative type of aktionsart is illustrated with an example taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324) presented as (1) below:

(1) Lotta bodde hemma.
    'Lotta lived at home.'

Unbounded processes do not have a natural terminal point. They are processual (consist of successive phases), durative (have unlimited extension in time),[2] dynamic (denote that something "happens") and most often non-resultative (do not involve a change of state). Only one sub-group of unbounded processes, namely those which denote a cumulative change of some sort, is resultative. Unbounded processes are dividable which means that the term *unbounded process* can also be used about a fragment of the whole action. Non-resultative and resultative unbounded processes, are exemplified with respective sentences taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324):

(2) Oscar ritade.
    'Oscar drew.'

(3) Temperaturen steg.
    'The temperature rose.'

Bounded processes have a natural terminal point beyond which the process cannot continue. They are processual, durative, dynamic and resultative. Bounded processes are indivisible. The term *bounded process* may refer only to the action in its totality and not to any arbitrary part of the action, (Teleman et al. 1999:IV:327). A bounded process is illustrated with an example taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324) and presented as (4) below:

(4) Lotta skrev ett brev.
    'Lotta wrote a letter.'

Punctual events have a natural terminal point beyond which the process cannot continue. Being instantaneous, they are non-durative, but sometimes can be

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[2] The full defintion is: "En aktion som inte har en naturlig slutpunkt utan antingen är tidsligt obegransad eller också kan upphöra när som helst eller fortsatta ännu längre kallas oavgränsad". 'An action which does not have a natural final point and is either temporally unlimited or kan stop at any point or continue still longer is called unbounded' (Teleman et al 1999:IV:327).

perceived as durative (slow motion). Punctual events are non-processual and dynamic. There are two groups of punctual events: resultative and non-resultative. Punctual events (instantaneous resultative, instantaneous resultative slow motion and instantaneous non-resultative are illustrated with sentences taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324, 352) and presented respectively as (5), (6) and (7) below:

(5) Lampan slocknade.
'The lamp went off.'

(6) Sven vakande en bit i taget.
'Sven woke up/was waking up gradually.'

(7) Gubben hostade.
'The old man coughed/was coughing.'

Aktionsart does not have any systematic formal markers in Swedish. Actional meaning may be marked or reflected at different linguistic levels. It may be gathered from the inherent meaning of a single verb, e.g. *bo* 'live' and *slockna* 'go off'. It may manifest itself at the level of a verb phrase or at the level of a sentence, i.e. in the meaning that the verb receives when combined with some obligatory and non-obligatory complements.

Many Swedish verbs are, according to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:327), neutral with respect to the actional meaning and acquire actional meanings when combined with verbal complements. This means that aktionsart is an open system in which one and the same actionally neutral verb may have different actional values in different linguistic contexts. For example, the presence or absence of an object, different types of objects, singular/plural, countable/uncountable i.e. objects indefinite or definite in number, may account for the actional meaning of sentences as in (8) and (9):

(8) Sedan sjöng man sorgsna visor. (unbounded)
'Then they sang sad songs.'

(9) Sedan sjöng man nationalsången. (bounded)
'Then they sang the national anthem.'

Similarly, adverbial expressions of duration such as *i två timmar* 'for two hours' and adverbial expressions of completion such as *på två timmar* 'in two hours', which according to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:329) reflect and, at the same time, also indicate aktionsart, may trigger situation type shift. This phenomenon is illustrated with examples (10) and (11) below, taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:329):

(10) Han laste tidningen i tre timmar – unbounded
'He read the newspaper for three hours.'

(11) Han laste tidningen på tre timmar – bounded
'He read the newspaper in three hours.'

4. AKTIONSART OR ASPECT?

A helpful contribution to the elucidation of the relationship between actions-art and aspect was made by Comrie (1976). Although in his now calssical work he refuses to use the term *aktionsart*, he clearly maintains the difference between aspectual and inherent meanings of verbs. According to him, the perfective form referring to a telic situation, (defined has having a terminal point built into it) implies attainment of the terminal point of that situation. The imperfective form implies that the final point has not been reached at the time referred to.[3]

Some interesting observations as to the distinction between having and reaching the natural final point were also made by Declerck (1991). Declerck (1991:262f.) presents two positions taken by scholars with respect to this issue. In terms of Vendler's (1967) terminology, the use of progressive turns accomplishments into activities, as in *John was drawing a circle*.[4] Some scholars, e.g. Bennet (1981:13ff.), accept this semantic transposition provided by the progressive. Other scholars, e.g. Dowty (1977:147f.), maintain that although the progressive indicates that a natural terminal point has not been reached, the most important feature of accomplishments – **having** the terminal point – is still present.

A view similar to Dowty's is held by Laskowski (1998:167). His claim is that only telic verbs can constitute aspectual pairs in Polish, i.e. can enter into purely aspectual oppositions. The imperfective form of telic verbs highlights the process, i.e. the middle phase of an action which has a natural final point, the natural final point not being reached. Imperfective sentences are compatible with the adverbs of duration. Perfective sentences are compatible with adverbs of completion. The perfective form indicates that the natural final point of an action having such a point has been reached.

Teleman et al. (1999:IV:326f.) define bounded aktionsart in the following way:

> En aktion som har en naturlig slutpunkt kallas avgränsad. Efter slutpunkten kan skeendet inte längre aga rum. Slutpunkten definierar aktionen eftersom aktionen inte kan sagas ha ägt rum i sin helhet eller överhuvudtaget om inte slutet uppnås. Inte heller skulle aktionen kunna fortsätta efter det att dess slutpunkt uppnås. En avgränsad aktion är i princip odelbar, dvs. benämningen för aktionen i dess helhet kan inte anvandas om ett godtyckligt uttsnitt av aktionen: verbfrasen *äta upp morötterna* kan bara användas om hela den avgränsade processen.
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> *An action which has a natural final point is called bounded. When this point is reached, the event cannot any longer be taking place. The final point defines the action because the action*

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[3] In the publication *Att använda SAG,*'Using SAG', K. Aijmer, makes an erroneous statement, p.19, that Comrie (1976) is one of the scholars who do not make a distinction between aspect and aktionsart.

[4] This sentence is compatible with adverbs of duration if the tense of this sentence is changed into the present perfect: *He has been drawing a circle for five minutes.*

> *cannot be said to have taken place as a whole or at all, if the final point is not reached. Neither can the action go on after its final point has been reached. A bounded action is as a matter of principle undividable, i.e. the name of the action as a whole cannot be used about an arbitrary section of the action; the phrase* to eat up the carrots *can only be used of the whole of the bounded process.* [translation mine]

Teleman et al.'s (1999:IV:326f.) definition, if discussed in terms of the above discussion, seems to be rather vague and inconsistent. It does not unambiguously say whether **having** or **reaching** a natural final point is the defining feature of bounded aktionsart. The natural final point is mentioned in passing, but it seems to be a reminiscence of Vendler's explanation of the difference between activites and accomplishments, rather than the fundamental feature of bounded aktionsart.[5] In several other places, e.g. Teleman et al. (1999:IV:324,350), Teleman et al. (1999:II:504), in the register of terms, Teleman et al. (1999:I:152), **having** a natural final point is given as the fundamental distinctive feature of bounded actionsarter, **reaching** this point not being given as the necessary condition for an action to be bounded. This distinction is of great importance since, as Dahl (1981:81) pointed out, reaching a natural final point entails having one, but having one does not entail reaching it.

Although Teleman et al. (1999) repeatedly give **having** a natural final point as the distinctive defining feature of bounded aktionsart, **reaching** rather than **having** a natural final point seems to be involved.[6] According to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:326f.) the term *bounded process* cannot refer to an arbitrary part of an action but it refers to the action as a whole. If the whole action having a natural final point is referred to, the natural final point must of necessity be reached. Similarly, the statement that adverbs do not only reflect but also assign situation type, adverbs of completion indicating bounded actions and adverbs of duration indicating unbounded actions, seems to highlight **reaching** rather than **having** a natural final point. If it is assumed that reaching the natural final point is meant as the fundamental defining feature of bounded aktionart, aspect rather than aktionsart is being discussed. Reaching the natural final point is, according to some Slavic scholars, e.g. Laskowski (1998), the fundamental defining feature of aspect. Also all the other commonly known definitions of aspect: *completion* or *making reference to the totality of the situation* must of necessity be interpreted as **reaching** the natural final point if this point is present.

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[5] Vendler (1957:101) observes that contrary to states and unbounded processes of which a part is of the same nature as the whole, a part of a bounded process is not of the same nature as the whole process. For example, *running for half an hour* (unbounded, not having a natural final point) means that the runner has been running for every period within that half hour, *running a mile* (bounded, having a natural final point) does not mean that the runner has been running a mile for every period of time the action has been taking place.

[6] My assumption seems to be supported by Noreéns statement that the defining feature of bounded aktionsart as presented in Teleman et al. (1999) is reaching the natural final point (see *Att använda SAG*, p.390).

A similar inconsistency in Teleman et al.'s (1999) definition of aktionsart can also be noticed in the classification of sentences with explicitly marked imperfective aspect in terms of actional meanings. According to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:334), the verb with the progressive meaning *hålla på* may sometimes subordinate even an inherently bounded verb.[7] Teleman et al. (1999:IV:335) explain that in this case the part of the action preceding the result is being in focus. This is the case in the example (12) below, taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:335):

> (12) Pella höll på (med) att tömma brunnen når vi kom.
>   'Pella was emptying the well when we came.'

Since, as stated by Teleman et al. (1999:IV:334), the above sentence highlights the part of action preceding the result, the natural final point must of necessity be present in this action, even if this point has not been reached. Thus, in agreement with the repeatedly given definiton of unbounded aktionsart as **not having** a natural terminal point, no acceptions admitted, (Teleman et al. 1999:IV:324,327, and in the register of terms, Teleman et al. 1999:I:202), this action cannot be classified as unbounded. If **reaching** the natural final point is meant to be the defining feature of bounded aktionsart, this clause cannot be classified as bounded since the natural final point has not been reached. And besides, according to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:326) the term *bounded process* cannot refer to an arbitrary part of an action, but it refers to the action as a whole. Difficulties in the classification of clauses with overtly marked imperfective aspect and bounded verb seem to be insurmountable.

The above clause could, perhaps, be a case of semantic transposition, a bounded aktionsart turned into an unbounded, similar to the cases discussed above. But if this shift of meaning is accepted, the definition of unbounded aktionsart as **not having** a natural final point is greatly misleading.

If the transposition of actional meaning discussed above is accepted, there seems to be a strong affinity between actional meanings as described by Teleman et al. (1999:IV:323ff.) and aspectual meanings. Many cases of overlap in the classification of Swedish sentences in terms of actional meaning and the Polish counterparts of those sentences in terms of aspectual meanings may be observed. Besides the cases of transpositions of meaning, bounded processes (the perfective aspect) transposed into unbounded processes (the imperfective aspect), states most often overlap with Polish imperfectiva tantum and punctual verbs most often overlap with Polish perfectiva tantum. The overlaps occur also with the class of verbs and verb phrases which, according to Teleman et al. (1999:IV:332), are neutral with respect to actional meaning. These verbs may be combined with each type of adverbs, adverbs of duration

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[7] Teleman et al. (1999:IV:335) give no further information about under what conditions and how often this may be the case.

and adverbs of completion, and consequently have either bounded or un-
bounded meaning, e.g. *borsta tänderna i två timmar/på två timmar* 'to brush
teeth for two hours/in two hours'. The Polish counterparts of the bounded mean-
ings of those verbs have the perfective aspect and are compatible with adverbs
of completion and the Polish counterparts of the unbounded meanings of those
verbs have the imperfective aspect and are compatible with adverbs of duration.

The frequent overlaps of actional and aspectual meanings, bounded = perfec-
tive, unbounded = imperfective, seem to justify Teleman et al.'s (1999:I:155)
statement that the term *aspect* is just another cover term for aktionsart.

However, the overlaps of actional meanings of the Swedish verbs as
described by Teleman et al. (1999) and the aspectual meanings of the Polish
verbs are not quite systematic. Or in other words, it is not always the case that
unbounded aktionsart is the same as the imperfective and bounded aktionsart
the same as the perfective aspect. Aspect in Swedish is a non-obligatory cat-
egory. Thus aspectual meaning does not have to be overtly marked but it may be
derived in context, e.g. when one narrated event is interpreted in relation to
another narrated event. Aspectual imperfective meaning derived from the con-
text seems to be strongly neglected in Teleman et al.'s presentation of aktions-
art (1999:IV:323ff.). If it had been taken into consideration, it would be easy
to notice that actional meanings are not always indentical with aspectual mean-
ings, i.e. aspect is not the same as aktionsart. The clause below is imperfective
and bounded, boundedness being established by a directional complement.[8]

(13) Han gick längs en stor väg. Han bar hem ett stort vedfång.
    'He was walking along a way. He was carrying home a bunch of wood.'

Similarly, when interpreted in relation to another narrated event, the phrase
äta upp morötterna does not seem to necessarily have to refer to the whole
process, as claimed in Teleman et al. (1999:IV:327), but may be used about
some part of the action preceding the result (the final point not reached) as in
(14) below.

(14) Jag såg på när Kalle åt upp morötterna.
    'I watched Kalle eating up the carrots.'

Neither there is a systematic overlap between aspectual meanings and ac-
tional meanings that are derived from verbal complements. The distinctive fea-
tures of bonded/unbounded aktionsart such as: different types of subjects and
objects: definite/indefinte, singular/plural, countable/uncountable and directional
complements of different types seem to belong to 'totally different pigeonholes'.
In many sentences of this type, actional meanings do not overlap with aspectual
meanings according to the pattern: bounded = perfective, unbounded = imperfec-

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[8]This sentences was classified as bounded by prof. S. Hellberg (personal communication).

tive. The distinction between *sjunga nationalsängen* 'sing the national anthem' and *sjunga sorgsna visor* 'sing sad songs' is not directly aspectual since the former situation may be presented in the imperfective aspect as in (15):

(15) Alla stod i givvakt. De sjöng natinalsången.
'Everybody stood at attention. They sang/were singing the national anthem.'

Thus, Teleman et al.'s (1999:I:155) claim that the term *aspect* is just another cover term for aktionsart, which can be understood that the same category is involved in both cases, does not seem to be correct. Aktionsart as presented by Teleman et al. (1999:IV) involves: aspect, i.e. semantic transposition of bounded aktionsart (the perfective aspect) into unbounded (the imperfective aspect), intrinsic actional meanings that some verbs may have and boundedness obtained through verbal complements, e.g. directional adverb or definite or quantized object, aspectual distinctions of the latter being strongly neglected.

Some serious weaknesses in the classification of imperfective sentences in terms of aktionsart may also be noticed in the revised edition of Smith (1991), i.e. in Smith (1997). In her monumental monograph, Smith (1997:48) claims that the possible span of a viewpoint aspect may differ from this of the situation type, i.e. the imperfective of a telic situation remains telic (thus the semantic transposition discussed above is not accepted) and that viewpoints, similarly to adverbials, may trigger situation type shift (thus semantic transposition discussed above is accepted). The two claims seem to be in strong contradiction. This means that the erroneous contradictory statement in Smith (1991:54) that in Russian the imperfective may appear in every situation type, thus also in bounded processes, and that bounded processes are incompatible with adverbs of duration, to which I drew her attention, has not been successfully amended.

Some of Smith's (1991) and (1997) and Teleman et al.'s (1999:IV) contradictory statements could have been avoided if the distinction between **having** and **reaching** the natural final point had been maintained. This will be once again seen in (16), taken from Teleman et al. (1999:IV:333), where it is classified as unbounded (or punctual).

(16) Pella tömde brunnen när vi kom.
'Pella was emptying/emptied the well when we came.'

Having a natural final point, (16) is bounded. Since this point has not been reached, (16) is imperfective. So, if the distinction between having and reaching the natural final point is maintained, the two categories *aktionsart* and *aspect* may, in many cases, be kept apart and the definitional paradox may be avoided. In this way, the long-lasting controversy surrounding the nature of the two categories may be, at least partly, solved.

The above, greatly superficial, analysis of the nature of aktionsart shows that the issue is far from being satisfactorily explained, not only on the Swedish

ground. From this follows that this category should not be referred to in empirical studies, Classification of aktionsart based on different types of complements as proposed by Teleman et al. (1999:IV:328) may lead to the almost absurd assumption that the phrase *sjunga nationalsången* (bounded) 'sing the national hymn' enhances and the phrase *sjunga sorgsna visor* (unbounded) 'sing sad songs' inhibits the correct use of tense by learners of native or second/foreign language. Thus, most of the results of earlier research on the influence of actional meanings of verbs upon the correct use of tenses should be taken with great caution.

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