QUANTIZED DIRECT OBJECTS DON’T DELIMIT AFTER ALL

A revised account of the role of quantized direct objects in aspectual composition

Abstract. In the literature on aspectual composition, it is generally claimed that the combination of a verb of a certain class (Tenny’s “measuring-out” verbs, called here “measuring” verbs) and a quantized direct object yields a delimited expression. However, judgments of such expressions are in reality highly variable. In this paper I show that, with adequate context, all expressions with a verb of this class and a quantized direct object allow both non-delimited and delimited readings. I conclude that, while the direct object does establish a scale along which the event progresses, making delimitation possible, it does not itself delimit. In addition to accounting for the variable judgments of these expressions, the analysis presented here clarifies the distinction between the aspectual role of a direct object and that of true delimiting elements such as goal phrases, resultatives, and particles, elements that delimit obligatorily. This analysis requires us to reject the homomorphism usually posited between objects and events; however, it reveals instead a consistent parallel between the aspectual role of a quantized direct object of a measuring verb and that of a spatial path.

Keywords. Semantics, English, aspect, delimitation, telicity, quantization.

1. INTRODUCTION

A standard claim in the literature on delimitation (or telicity) is that a quantized NP as the direct object of certain classes of verbs delimits the expression it appears in (see Krifka 1989, 76; Verkuyl 1993, 14-23; Tenny 1994, 24-29, among many others). This is typically illustrated using the familiar test for delimitation based on felicity with temporal adverbials of the type “for X time” and “in X time” (Vendler 1957, 1967 and Dowty 1979). Expressions like the ones in (1)—it is usually claimed—cannot be combined with an adverbial of the type “for X time” and are thus shown to be delimited.

(1) a. Kathleen ate an apple for a couple of minutes.
    in a couple of minutes.

b. Jack built a house for a month.
    in a month.

Tenny (1994, 10-18) refers to verbs that receive a delimited reading with a quantized direct object as being “measured out” by the quantized direct object. For Tenny,
“measuring-out” involves two components—the establishment of a scale along which the event progresses, and the establishment of an endpoint to that scale (p. 15).\(^1\) For example, as Tenny describes it, in (1a) the event progresses “through” the apple and the end of the apple provides the endpoint to the event.

Unfortunately, judgments of expressions with a verb of Tenny’s measuring-out class and a quantized direct object are much more variable than this account would lead us to expect. They vary according to the semantic subclass the verb belongs to, with some expressions readily allowing a non-delimited reading. In addition, judgments of the same expression often vary from speaker to speaker. Finally, most authors acknowledge that all expressions with a verb of this class and a quantized direct object in fact allow a non-delimited reading to some extent. In this paper, I argue that a quantized NP as the direct object of a verb of Tenny’s measuring-out class does establish a scale, but that it does not enforce an endpoint to that scale. In other words, a quantized direct object of these verbs does not itself delimit the event. Where a delimited reading is favoured, we are led to it by world knowledge of the processes and entities involved. In addition to accounting for the murky judgments elicited by sentences of the kind in (1), this analysis will allow us to distinguish the aspectual role played by direct objects of this class of verbs from that played by true delimiting elements such as goal phrases, resultative secondary predicates, and verb particles. Finally, it will reveal a consistent parallel between the aspectual role of a quantized direct object of these verbs and that of a spatial path with a verb of motion.

2. THE STANDARD ACCOUNT

Since Verkuyl (1972), it has been generally acknowledged that delimitation is compositional: whether an expression receives a non-delimited or a delimited reading depends on both the choice of verb and the choice of object. Delimitation is typically viewed as arising in a straightforward way from the combination of a particular kind of verb and a particular kind of direct object. For example, in Verkuyl’s algebraic account, the verb and the object are each assigned a semantic feature: a positive value for both features yields a delimited expression; a negative value for either feature yields a non-delimited expression (Verkuyl, 1989).\(^2\)

A typical set of examples illustrating the compositional nature of delimitation is shown below. (I will define the two relevant features labelled here as [Q] and [M] shortly.) I have selected different verbs from those in Verkuyl’s example sets for reasons that will soon become clear.

\(^1\) A “scale” should be pictured as a “graded parameter,” as Tenny refers to it elsewhere, extending in a single direction from the starting point of the event. Crucially, it allows infinitely many potential endpoints. My thanks to Östen Dahl for discussion of this point.

\(^2\) Verkuyl’s algebra also takes into account the role of the choice of subject in determining the availability of delimited and non-delimited readings. Here, I will focus on the roles of the verb and object only, choosing singular count noun subjects for all example sentences.