

THE SEMANTICS OF ENGLISH TRANSITIVE VERBS AND THEIR TRANSLATIONAL EQUIVALENTS IN SERBIAN AND ROMANIAN

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the semantics of English transitive verbs related to tourism and hospitality terminology. Apart from the actual meaning of the verbs, the paper also offers an interesting scientific insight into the change in the lexical meaning influenced by the structure and semantics of the direct object. Furthermore, the paper studies the translation of such verbs into Serbian and Romanian with the aim to facilitate the translational process for the students of Tourism and Hospitality Management.*

Keywords: *transitive verbs, direct object, type of verb situation, verbal aspect, telicity*

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents a contrastive analysis of English transitive verbs and their translational equivalents in Serbian and Romanian. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the syntactical and morphological means used to translate such verbs into the other two languages. This study attempts to establish whether the direct object modifies the distinctive features of transitive verbs and whether a change in verbal aspect and/or lexical meaning has occurred.

One of the aims of this paper is to offer solutions to the problems of how to translate English transitive verbs into Serbian and Romanian in the context. It is my experience as a Business English professor that when faced with English transitive verbs, hospitality students struggle to translate them into Serbian. The students have difficulties in comprehending the semantic and grammatical correlation between the direct object and the transitive verb which results in failing to capture the essence of the meaning of such verbs which consequently leads to providing an incorrect Serbian translational equivalent. This paper attempts to facilitate this process and offers solutions to this translational problem.

The study of English transitive verbs and their Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents is significant because the structure and semantics of the direct object affects the meaning of the transitive verbs as well as the verbal aspect. The analysis conducted for this paper has shown that the distinctive feature [goal], i.e. semantic category named telicity sheds a light on the link

between the verbal semantics (Aktionsart) and grammar (aspect). For this reason, the paper aims to establish and explain the correlation between the verbal aspect, telicity and transitive verbs and their direct objects. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the existence of particular distinctive features with transitive verbs in order to determine the aspect and type of verb situation.

The analysis was conducted on a corpus which consists of 200 English sentences with transitive verbs both in non-progressive and progressive forms. The English part of the corpus was obtained from various tourism and hospitality text books, magazines, journals, websites and brochures and other marketing materials. The sentences from the corpus were translated into Serbian and Romanian by the authors and the following dictionaries were consulted: *Rečnik srpskohrvatskog književnog jezika*, *DEX (Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române)*, *Dicționar român-englez*, *Dicționar englez-român*, *Veliki hrvatsko-engleski rječnik*, *Veliki englesko-hrvatski rječnik*, *Srpsko-rumunski*, *Rumunsko-srpski rečnik*.

To be more exact, the whole corpus for this research can be divided into three parts: English, Serbian and Romanian part, consisting of a total of 600 sentences. The sentences from the corpus were analyzed with respect to the verbal semantics and the influence of the direct object on aspect and type of the situation expressed by transitive verbs.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As it has been pointed out previously, this paper discusses the semantic features of English transitive verbs as well as the influence of the direct object on aspect and Aktionsart. The structure of the noun phrase functioning as the direct object may introduce the notion of telicity to atelic verbs consequently altering the type of verb situation. Furthermore, the paper will analyze the influence of semantic features such as telicity and boundedness on aspect and Aktionsart. In addition to the above mentioned, the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents will be analyzed.

To start from the most general theoretical assumptions in the relevant linguistic literature, it can be pointed out that there seems to be a significant correlation between verbal aspect, certain semantic features of transitive verbs and the direct object. The relevant semantic features analyzed in this paper are *stativity*, *duration*, *telicity* and *boundedness*. Therefore, it is necessary to define the two main categories aspect and Aktionsart (the type of verb situation).

Comrie (1976:3) defines aspect as different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation, stating that aspect is subjective; i.e. it depends on the speaker's choice. Thus, it indicates how the speaker sees the action expressed by the verb.

There are two pairs of aspectual oppositions: progressive / non-progressive (perfective / imperfective) and perfect / non-perfect. The perfect / non-perfect aspectual opposition will not be discussed in this paper.

Perfectivity indicates the view of the situation as a single whole, without distinction of various separate phases that make up that situation. The imperfective aspect pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation. The perfective form also indicates completion of the situation, while the imperfective indicates a situation in progress (Comrie 1976:19).

Unlike aspect which is a grammatical category, Aktionsart is a lexical i.e. semantic category which refers to the way the action is realized.

The basis of the analysis conducted in this paper is the Vendler's (1967:97-121) classification of verbs into activities, states, achievements and accomplishments. This classification is based on the meaning of verbs and their syntactic characteristics. Vendler uses linguistic tests to determine whether the verb situation denotes a process or development or not, whether the situation consists of segments which are of equal quality or perhaps there is a segment which denotes an endpoint or completion. Vendler's verb types can be defined according to distinctive features which are incorporated in the meanings of verbs. Those features are: [+/- stativity], [+/- duration], [+/- goal]. The distinctive features which determine type of verb situation can be defined as follows:

1. Distinctive feature [+ stativity] is a characteristic of situations which do not have development and process, they simply last in time. Only states have the feature [+ stativity]. On the other hand, if a situation has segments and development it has the feature [- stativity]. Such situations are activities, achievements and accomplishments.

2. Distinctive feature [+ duration] is a characteristic of situations which last in time, like activities, states and accomplishments. The feature [- duration] denotes momentary situations, such as achievements.

3. Distinctive feature [+ goal] is a characteristic of situations which have a goal after which the situation naturally ends. Such situations are accomplishments and achievements. Distinctive feature [- goal] is a characteristic of situations which do not have a goal, i.e. a final point, like activities and states. Situations with the feature [+ goal] are called telic, as oppose to the atelic situations which have the feature [- goal].

Furthermore, the notion of boundedness can provide a more advance analysis of the notion of telicity. Bounded situations reach a goal; while unbounded do not (Declerck 1979:761).

Even though telicity seems to imply boundedness, they present rather complex notions. They are both related to the notion of goal which presents a final point after which the situation naturally ends. On the other hand, a telic situation implies a goal which may or may not be reached. Bounded situations

indicate that the goal was actually reached while unbounded situations indicate that the final point was not reached. Such a distinction implies that there is a semantic feature of telicity and another feature of boundedness.

Following Vendler (1976) and Declerck (1979), we can define the following types of verb situation (Aktionsart):

Activities denote process and development, therefore can last in time. They have homogenous segments which means that any part of the process is of the same nature as the whole. The situation does not have a terminal point or goal. Their distinctive features are: [- stativity, + duration, - goal]. Activities are verbs such as: *run, swim, walk...*

States go on in time, they do not have segments and development and they do not denote a process. States do not have a goal. They simply denote that a characteristic or a situation exists. Their distinctive features are: [+ stativity, + duration, - goal]. States are verbs such as: *know, believe, love, etc.*

Achievements are punctual, i.e. the whole situation happens in one moment. Their distinctive features are: [- stativity, - duration, + goal]. Achievements are verbs and phrases such as: *find, lose, reach the summit, win a race, etc.*

Accomplishments go on in time and have a goal. They are not homogenous in nature, because they involve a terminal point. Their distinctive features are: [- stativity, + duration, + goal]. Accomplishments are verbs and phrases such as: *paint a picture, eat a sandwich, draw a circle, etc.*

In all three languages studied in this paper, transitive verbs are defined as verbs which require a direct object. The direct object is the patient of the situation denoted by the transitive verb. The direct object may introduce the final point of the situation after which the situation denoted by the transitive verb naturally ends. But it is not always the case. This paper will analyze this phenomenon in more detail.

2. THE RESEARCH

The analysis of the corpus has shown that the context plays a very important role in determining the type of the verb situation. Furthermore, on the basis of the research conducted for this paper, it can be stated that the distinctive semantic features of the direct object affect the type of the situation expressed by the verb. In fact, the very presence or absence of the direct object has an impact on the type of the verb situation (Aktionsart). For example:

(1) a. He was cooking.

Kuvao je.

El gătea.

b. He was cooking lunch yesterday.

On je juče kuvao ručak.

El gătea prânzul ieri.

Sentences (1a) denote activities with the distinctive features [- stativity, + duration, - goal]. Thus, the lack of the direct object excludes a goal and implies atelicity. On the other hand, the existence of a direct object entails a goal in sentences (1b) rendering the situations telic. Therefore, the situations in (1b) are accomplishments, which are telic and unbounded in this case. In other words, the goal exists but it has not been reached since the sentences denote imperfective aspect, i.e. in all three languages imperfective verb form has been used to express incompleteness of the verb situation.

The analysis has also shown that in all three languages, in addition to the presence or absence of the direct object in a sentence, the very structure of the noun phrase functioning as the direct object has an impact on the type of the verb situation. For example:

(2) a. He drank water.
 Pio je vodu.
 El bea apă.

b. He drank three glasses of water.
 Popio je tri čaše vode.
 El a băut trei pahare de apă.

Sentences (2a) are unbounded and atelic since the situations presented by them do not tend towards a goal. The direct object realized as an uncountable noun *water / voda / apă* causes the situation to be unbounded. On the other hand, in sentences (2b) the direct object (*three glasses of water / tri čaše vode / trei pahare de apă*) denotes a final point, or a goal which was actually reached and after which the situation could not be continued. Thus, sentences (2b) are bounded telic situations, i.e. accomplishments, while sentences (2a) are unbounded atelic situations i.e. activities.

As far as the translation of the English transitive verbs is concerned, it should be pointed out that the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents can have different verbal aspects depending on the meaning of the transitive verb and the direct object. Namely, if the direct object is an uncountable noun, the situation does not imply a goal, the translational equivalents of the English transitive verbs have imperfective forms, i.e. in Serbian and Romanian imperfective verb forms are used (*pio / bea*). On the other hand, if English transitive verb has a countable direct object which implies a goal, the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents have perfective forms (*popio / a băut*).

The research has also proven that accomplishment verbs such as *eat / jesti / mănca* differ in telicity depending on the properties of their direct objects. The verb *eat / jesti / mănca* normally indicates telic situations, but it can also indicate atelic situations when followed by a bare plural or mass nominal direct object. For example:

- (3) a. Mary ate a / the sandwich in an hour.
 Meri je pojela taj sendvič / sendvič za sat vremena.
 Mary a mâncat un sandviș / sandvișul într-o oră.
- b. Mary ate the sandwiches in an hour.
 Meri je pojela te sendviče za sat vremena.
 Mary a mâncat sandvișele într-o oră.
- c. Mary ate sandwiches for an hour.
 Meri je jela sendviče sat vremena.
 Mary mânca sandvișe o ară.

In all three languages, the examples (3a) illustrate the notion of a verb used together with a specified or unspecified singular direct object, the situations indicated by such constructions have characteristics of accomplishments with distinctive features [- stativity, + duration, + goal]. The same is valid for the definite plural direct objects (3b). However, if accomplishment verbs are followed by a bare plural direct object like in (3c), the situations in question are considered habitual activities with distinctive features [- stativity, + duration, - goal].

When the translational equivalents are analyzed, it can be pointed out that in all three examples the English verb has perfective form (*ate*), but it can convey both perfective (3a, b) and imperfective aspect (3c), depending on the nature and the lexical features of the direct object it takes. On the other hand, with the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents the verb form itself indicates the perfective / imperfective meaning.

The analysis has shown that the use of the progressive form in English as well as the use of the imperfect verb form in Serbian (*imperfekat*) and in Romanian (*imperfectul*) renders the perfective aspect imperfective and denote a situation in progress:

- (4) a. Mary was eating a / the sandwich for an hour.
 Meri je jela taj sendvič / sendvič sat vremena.
 Mary mânca un sandviș / sandvișul o oră.
- b. Mary was eating the sandwiches for an hour.
 Meri je jela te sendviče sat vremena.
 Mary mânca sandvișele o oră.
- c. Mary was eating sandwiches for a week.
 Meri je jela sendviče sat vremena.
 Mary mânca sandvișe o oră.

The examples (4a,b,c) show that the imperfective aspect modifies the distinctive feature [+ bounded] into [- bounded], but not the distinctive feature [+ goal] into [- goal], which means that the notion of a goal still exists, but it has not been reached. This notion is proven by the fact that both Serbian and Romanian imperfective verb forms have been used to translate the English progressive transitive verb.

The research has revealed that with activities, the properties of the direct object do not affect the telicity of the situation in all three languages:

(5) a. John pushed the luggage cart for an hour.

Džon je gurao kolica sa prtljagom sat vremena.
John împingea carul cu bagaje o oră.

b. John pushed luggage carts for an hour.

Džon je gurao kolica sa prtljagom sat vremena.
John împingea carele cu bagaje o oră.

The examples prove that, in all three languages, it will follow from the meaning of the activity that a verb phrase consisting only of an activity verb and a direct object will always be atelic regardless of the properties of that direct object. It is interesting to point out that even though the English verb is used in its perfective form, it implies imperfectivity, i.e. an atelic, unbounded situation. Compared to situations expressed in sentences (6), the use of perfective and imperfective verb forms with activity verbs does not bring about a significant change in meaning:

(6) a. John was pushing the cart for an hour.

Džon je gurao kolica sat vremena.
John împingea carul o oră.

b. John was pushing carts for an hour.

Džon je gurao kolica sat vremena.
John împingea carele o oră.

Based on the previous examples, it can be argued that, in all three languages, the use of activities in the imperfective aspect does not influence the telicity of the situation, i.e. the verb situations in (6a,b) are still atelic and unbounded.

However, as Rothstein (2004:3) argues, certain measure and directional phrases can make such verb phrases telic. This is again true for all three languages. For example:

(7) a. John pushed the cart a mile / to the edge of the park.

Džon je gurao kolica jednu milju / do kraja parka.
John împingea carul o milă / până la marginea parcului.

On the other hand, it can be argued that, in the English language, if no adverbial is used, the situation expressed by a perfective transitive verb can be both telic and atelic regardless of the characteristics of the direct object, but in Serbian and Romanian, the telic (9) and atelic (8) meanings are expressed by the transitive verb itself. For example:

- (8) a. John pushed the cart.
 Džon je gurao kolica.
 John a împins carul.
- (9) a. John pushed the cart.
 Džon je gurnuo kolica.
 John a împins carul.

However, Declerck (1979: 765) points out that there are unbounded situations that seem to imply a goal. For example:

- (10) a. He walked towards the house for hours.
 Hodao je ka kući satima.
 A mers spre casă ore întregi.

In sentences (10a) the goal is clearly specified, but the context reveals that it was not actually reached. Thus, the sentences are telic but unbounded, in all three languages.

The research has shown that, in both languages, the direct object does not affect the type of the verb situation with states as well. For example:

- (11) a. I know the answer.
 Zman odgovor.
 Știu răspunsul.
- b. I know the answers.
 Znam odgovore.
 Știu răspunsurile.

The situation has characteristics of a state when used with either singular or plural direct object. States are unbounded and atelic situations with distinctive features [+ stativity, + duration, - goal]. Some states can be used in the progressive and then they denote imperfective aspect:

- (12) a. I was hoping for a long time.
 Nadala sam se već duže vreme.
 Speram mult timp.

In all three languages the situations (12a) simply last in time and do not involve the notion of a goal.

Consequently, the English imperfective verb form is translated by imperfective verb forms in English and Romanian as well in order to express incompletion of the verb situation.

The research has shown that regardless of the structure of the noun phrase functioning as the direct object, achievement verbs indicate telic situations. This is true for all three languages. For example:

- (13) a. He won a / the race in ten seconds.
 Pobedio je u trci / toj trci za deset sekundi.
 A învins la competiție / această competiție în zece secunde.
- b. He won the races in ten seconds.
 Pobedio je u trkama za deset sekundi.
 A învins la competiții în zece secunde.
- c. He won many races in his career.
 Pobedio je mnogim trkama u svojoj karijeri.
 A învins la multe competiții în cariera sa.

However, the examples (13b,c) indicate that when used with achievement verbs a plural direct object implies repetition in all three languages.

In the mentioned examples, English non-progressive achievements are translated with the perfect verb forms in Serbian (*perfekat*) and Romanian (*perfectul*) which also imply telic and bounded meaning.

Despite the fact that achievements denote momentary situations, there are many achievement verbs which are grammatical in the progressive, as the examples in (14) show:

- (14) a. Susan was arriving at the station when she heard that the train to London had been cancelled.
 Suzan je stizala na stanicu kada je čula da je voz za London otkazan.
 Susan ajungea la stație când a auzit că trenul spre Londra fusese denunțat.
- b. John and Susan are finally leaving.
 Džon i Suzan konačno odlaze.
 John și Susan, în final, pleacă.
- c. The plane is landing.
 Avion slaće.
 Avionul decolează.

- d. Jane is just reaching the summit.
 Džejn se upravo popela na vrh planine.
 Jane se urca pe vârful muntelui chiar în acest moment.

English progressive achievements are translated with the Serbian imperfect (*imperfekat*) and respectively with Romanian imperfect (*imperfectul*) which also imply duration as well as atelic and unbounded meaning.

3. CONCLUSION

The research has proven that, in all three languages, verbs traditionally called accomplishments are either telic or atelic depending on the properties of their direct object. Thus, tests for telicity show that verbs like *write*, *build* and *eat* are telic when their direct objects have definite, quantified or numerical determiners and are atelic when the same objects are a mass noun or a bare plural.

Activity verbs with a direct object do not show such an alternation. Namely, activity verbs are always atelic regardless of the properties of the direct object. Certain measure and directional phrases, though, can render such verb phrases telic.

Verbs denoting states are not affected by the properties of their direct objects in both languages.

It will follow from the meaning (or characteristics) of achievements that they would always be telic regardless of the properties of their direct object. However, when used with achievements, a plural direct object implies repetition.

Furthermore, the research conducted for this paper has shown that the structure of the noun phrase functioning as the direct object may introduce the notion of telicity to otherwise atelic verbs consequently altering the type of verb situation. On the other hand, the examples from the corpus have shown that the imperfective aspect can modify the distinctive feature [+ bounded] into [- bounded], but not the distinctive feature [+ goal] into [- goal], which means that the notion of a goal still exists, but it has not been reached.

When the translation of the English transitive verbs is in question, the research has shown that English progressive transitive verbs are translated with the Serbian imperfect (*imperfekat*) and respectively with Romanian imperfect (*imperfectul*) which also imply duration as well as atelic and unbounded meaning. Thus, in all three languages imperfective verb forms have been used to express incompleteness of the verb situation.

On the other hand, English non-progressive transitive verbs are translated with the perfect verb forms in Serbian (*perfekat*) and Romanian (*perfectul*) which also imply telic and bounded meaning.

Based on this research, it can also be argued that the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents can have different verbal aspects compared to the English one depending on the meaning of the transitive verb and the direct object. Namely, the English verb may be expressed in perfective form, but it can convey both perfective and imperfective aspect, depending on the nature and the lexical features of the direct object it takes. In this case, with the Serbian and Romanian translational equivalents the verb form itself indicates the perfective / imperfective meaning.

As a final point, it can be argued that in English, Serbian and Romanian the telic / atelic interpretation results from the existence and properties of the transitive verb and the direct object.

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