Towards an account of coercion from situational achievement to state in the English language

Situational (Smith, 1991/97), or inner (Verkuyl, 1993), aspect is said to be the internal structure of a situation with respect to time as expressed in language. It has primarily been categorized into four major types: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements (see Ryle 1949; Vendler 1957; Kenny 1963; Dowty 1979). Situational achievements, specifically, are known to encode instantaneous changes—Rothstein (2004, p.155) refers to them as 'minimal changes from ¬φ to φ', taking no time. This work constitutes an investigation as to why, in the presence of durational adverbial modification, some VPs headed by verbs encoding achievement may be coerced to state, while others may not. For example, *I left for an hour* (meaning *I left and was gone for an hour*) is felicitous but *I arrived for an hour* (meaning *I arrived and was at the place of arrival for an hour*) is not. Following Rothstein (2004), situational aspect is defined by constraints on descriptions of events which determine how an eventuality, or situation, may be individualized. These constraints interface with syntactic operations in such a way as to affect felicity. On the theory in this work two classes of situational achievement exist: 1) achievements whose constraints contain an ‘end’, something of an atelic element taken to be last point of the pre-change φ, and 2) achievements whose constraints encode a ‘completion’, a telic element in the same position as the aforementioned ‘end’. These constraint properties determine whether or not, in the presence of durative adverbial modification, the achievement can be coerced into a state. In examples (1)–(4) situational achievements with a telic ‘completion’ fail coercion to state.

(1) # I finished building for an hour.
(2) # I reached the summit for an hour.
(3) # I won the race for an hour.
(4) # I completed the homework assignment for an hour.

In examples (5)–(9) situational achievements with an atelic ‘end’ allow coercion to state.

(5) I commenced building for an hour.
(6) I stopped hiking for an hour.
(7) John forgot she was Mary for an hour.
(8) John remembered she was Mary for an hour.
(9) I resumed reading for an hour.

As in Landman and Rothstein (2012), the durational adverbial ‘for x time’, maps all the
proper subintervals of an eventuality to the specified duration, and requires that each instant (or minimal interval) of the situation be the same as all the other instants (or minimal intervals). Another way to say this is that the modification of a verb in which duration is specified requires the verb encode an eventuality with a homogeneous, atelic structure. For instance, in John loved Mary for an hour (a sentence in which an atelic situational state is encoded), at every instant of that hour, John loved Mary is true. Telic eventualities are not homogeneous, having at least one proper subinterval, the completion of the eventuality, as distinct from its other subparts. For example, I built a house for an hour (meaning I built a house and it remained built for an hour) is not felicitous because the house having been built is not true throughout the duration of the event. It is thought that if this requirement of homogeneity is met by the pre-change eventuality of an achievement (specifically those in which an atelic ‘end’ is encoded, rather than a telic ‘completion’), the durational adverbial can act as an operator to coerce the achievement into a state, namely the negation of the achievement’s pre-change φ.

References


