

Verbal Aspectuality and Situation Types in Bulgarian: Preliminary Observations

Topics: linguistics, foreign-language learning

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to apply general theoretical findings of typological-functional linguistics to phenomena of contemporary Bulgarian, specifically the interface of morphology, syntax and semantics in Bulgarian verbs and predication.

Keywords: aspect, situation type, Bulgarian verbs, lexical semantics

Introduction

This article is an attempt to apply general theoretical findings of typological-functional linguistics to phenomena of contemporary Bulgarian, specifically the interface of morphology, syntax and semantics in Bulgarian verbs and predication. The inspiration came from my experience teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language to learners who did not have any Slavic-language background and the challenges in front of them to master verb aspectuality of Bulgarian. I am going to try to find correlations between grammatical aspect of Bulgarian verbs and universal situation types (Aktionsarten) as described by Vendler (1957, 1967) [1], Comrie (1976) [2], Dowty (1979) [3], Smith (1997) [4] and Van Valin, Jr. (2005, 2006) [5]. The research approach here is typological-functional.

My intention is to find correlations between a language-specific grammatical category (aspect of verbs in Bulgarian), which is somewhat difficult to grasp by learners, and purported universals of the lexical semantics of verbs that could help explain the characteristic features of the category. The findings could be useful for applied linguistics, e.g. enhancing the quality of (machine) translation, improving learning and teaching of Bulgarian as a foreign language.

In this paper I will use the Romanization currently used by the Bulgarian government for names, with the modification of using **â** for **ъ** and **x** for **х**.

Theoretical preliminaries

Aspect

Aspect is a grammatical category that has been defined in different ways. Comrie's [6] definition is "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation". Aspect in some languages is expressed by syntactic means (constructions). In Bulgarian, as in all Slavic languages, aspect is an inherent property of verbs. Every Bulgarian verb is either imperfective or perfective by aspect. Apart from a small number of biaspectual verbs, it is possible to tell the aspect of the verb from a single form, i.e. at the lexical level. It is not necessary to see the verb in a sentence. A lot of verbs come in aspectual pairs. An aspectual pair is two verbs with exactly the same lexical meaning which differ only in their aspect. A lot of common verbs do not form a pair; they are imperfective and, as we shall see, they normally describe an Activity or a State, i.e. they are [- telic] and [- punctual].

In this paper when I quote an aspectual pair I put the imperfective form first, e.g. **прочитам/прочета pročitam/procheta** 'read (through)'.

Situation type

The semantics of predicates has been discussed from different viewpoints in linguistic literature for a very long time. Different semantic classifications of predicates/verbs exist in different traditions. In this study I follow a formal system of semantic representation of predicates developed in Van Valin, Jr. (2006) [7]. Earlier versions of the same system have been presented in Van Valin, Jr. and LaPolla (1996) [8] and Van Valin, Jr. (2005) [9]. As Van Valin, Jr (2006) [10] states, the “fundamental insight comes from Vendler (1967) [11], who proposed a classification of Verbs into states, achievements, accomplishments, and activities.” These four categories, later expanded to twelve in Van Valin, Jr. (2005) [12], are called Aktionsarten or situation types. [13] They correspond to a typology of states of affairs in the real world.

The concept of Aktionsart or situation type is first proposed by Zeno Vendler (1957, 1967) [14]. In his classification there are four types: States, Achievements, Accomplishments, and Activities [15]. Later a fifth type, Semelfactive, is added (Comrie 1976; Smith 1997) [16]. Van Valin, Jr. and LaPolla (1997) [17] introduce another type: Active accomplishment. Finally, in Van Valin, Jr. (2005) [18], the number reaches twelve as each of the six types has a causative counterpart: Causative state, Causative achievement, Causative accomplishment, Causative semelfactive, and Causative active accomplishment.

In Slavic linguistics there is vast literature on “Aktionsarten” or “kinds of action” based on the semantics of specific derivational prefixes in Slavic languages. Some of the lists compiled by researchers contain dozens of such kinds of action. Although these kinds of action are relevant to the present topic, I have not used them at this initial stage since my goal here is to test the cross-linguistic validity of the situation types, namely their presence in Bulgarian. Morphological considerations could become useful at a later stage when subtler distinctions should be made to clarify specific usage.

Strictly speaking, situation types are attributes not only of verbs but of all predicating elements. In order to limit the scope of the paper and explore the correlation between aspect and situation types I will concentrate only on verbs.

Analysis

In my study I will try to identify the situation type of common Bulgarian verbs in their typical usage. I will explore the correlation of each verb’s inherent aspect (imperfective or perfective) with the situation type it typically instantiates.

I am not going to define all the situation types here. I am going to use the classification and tests in Van Valin, Jr. (2006) [19] and try to adapt them for Bulgarian verbs. Since this is an enormous task that requires a lot of consideration and attention to detail, I am just going to apply it to very common Bulgarian verbs and some common patterns of derivation and aspectual pairs in Bulgarian. Admittedly, some of these initial notes will have to be revised and corrected as a clearer picture of Bulgarian aspectuality and its interface with situation types emerges.

The criteria for differentiating different situation types are language-specific. The criteria for differentiating situation types for Bulgarian should be developed and tested very carefully. We should keep in mind that there will be complications arising with criteria. A verb would be typically used in a certain situation type; however, it could be used in a different situation type under certain conditions, or for expressive purposes. In this initial study will try to outline basic criteria for differentiating the situation types of verbs in typical usage. I will concentrate on the first six types, i.e. I will not discuss the Causative types here.

Situation types have been defined by different distinctive features across literature. I will use the features in Van Valin, Jr. (2006) [20]:

State:	[+ static] [- dynamic] [- telic] [- punctual]
Activity:	[- static] [+ dynamic] [- telic] [- punctual]
Achievement:	[- static] [- dynamic] [+ telic] [+ punctual]
Semelfactive:	[- static] [\pm dynamic] [- telic] [+ punctual]
Accomplishment:	[- static] [- dynamic] [+ telic] [- punctual]
Active accomplishment:	[- static] [+ dynamic] [+ telic] [- punctual]

The distinction between States and Non-States is fundamental. If a sentence could be used to answer a question like “what happened?” or “what is happening?”, then the verb in that sentence is [- static] (ibid). For the Bulgarian test the questions will be “какво се случи?” or “какво се случва?”. It is obvious that nominal predicates (including predicates with nouns, adjective, numerals and other predicative elements) will be typically States. As for verbs, **стоя стоа** ‘stand’, **седя sedya** ‘sit’, **лежа lezha** ‘lie’, **вярвам vyarvam** ‘believe’, **обичам obicham** ‘love’, **гордея се gordeya se** ‘be proud’, etc will be classified as States unproblematically. As expected, since they are both [- telic] and [- punctual], practically all of them are *imperfective* verbs that do not participate in aspectual pairs.

As for the feature “dynamic”, it “relates to whether the state of affairs involves action or not... [These verbs] can be modified by Adverbs like *violently, vigorously, gently, strongly* and *energetically*.” (Van Valin, Jr. 2006) [21]:

For the Bulgarian test the adverbs will be *силно silno, нежно nezhno, енергично energichno, буйно buyno, мощно moshtno and so on*. Typical verbs that are [+ dynamic] are **танцувам tantsuвам** ‘dance’, **пея peya** ‘sing’, **ям yam** ‘eat’, **пия piya** ‘drink’, **пиша pisha** ‘write’, **тичам ticham** ‘run’, etc. They are Activities since they are also [- telic] and [- punctual]. Similarly to States, practically all of them are *imperfective* verbs that do not participate in aspectual pairs.

The feature “telic” (Van Valin, Jr. 2006) “is concerned with whether a Verb depicts a state of affairs with an inherent terminal point or not.” [22] One of the tests used for the differentiation is co-occurrence with adverbials like “for an hour”. States and Activities readily take such adverbials but Achievements do not. The test shows that Achievements do not have temporal duration. They are [+ telic] and also [+ punctual]. For Bulgarian the adverbial would be “(в продължение на) един час” “v prodälzhenie na edin chas”.

The other test focuses on terminal points (Van Valin, Jr. 2006) [23]. It is the co-occurrence with adverbials like “in an hour” or “in ten minutes”. Accomplishments and Active accomplishments readily takes such adverbials. For Bulgarian the adverbialc would be “за един час” “za edin chas” or “в рамките на десет минути” “v ramkite na deset minuti”.

In English “He ate pizza for an hour” is Activity, while “He ate the pizza in ten minutes” is Active accomplishment. The verb – even the form of the verb – is the same. The distinction becomes clear from the adverbials. In Bulgarian the distinction will be normally made at the lexical level, by choosing different verbs. The Bulgarian sentences will be:

Той яде пица един час.
 Toj jade pitsa edin chas.
 he eat.Aor.3Sg pizza one hour
 He ate pizza for an hour.

Той изяде пицата за десет минути.
Toj izjade pitsata za deset minuti.
he eat.up.Aor.3Sg pizza.the PREP ten minute.Pl
He ate the pizza in ten minutes.

The Activity verb **ям уам** ‘eat (Activity)’ has a corresponding aspectual pair of Active accomplishment verbs **изяждам/изям izyazhdam/izyam** ‘eat up; eat to the terminal point; eat until the whole object is consumed (Active accomplishment)’. Just like in English the Activity sentence contains a non-referential nominal object while the Active accomplishment sentence contains a definite nominal object marked explicitly with the definite article. Triad like these are quite typical, especially with consumption verbs, creation verbs, etc: **пиша** → **написвам/напиша pisha** → **написвам/напиша** ‘write’, **чета** → **прочитам/прочета cheta** → **прочитам/прочета** ‘read’, **пия** → **изпивам/изпия piya** → **изпивам/изпия** ‘drink’, **строя** → **построявам/построя stroya** → **построявам/построя** ‘build’ etc.

The feature “punctual” Mairal, R., and J. Gil (Eds.), Van Valin, Jr. 2006 Mairal, R., and J. Gil (Eds.), “differentiates events with internal duration from those which lack it.” The test is whether the verb can occur with “pace” adverbs like *quickly* and *slowly*. In the adaptation for Bulgarian verbs the adverbs would be *бързо* *byrzo* and *бавно* *bavno*. [24]. The test is only for non-States. Activities, Accomplishments and Active Accomplishments, which are [– punctual], co-occur readily with these adverbs.

These tests are more or less sufficient for an initial review of the situation types of common Bulgarian verbs in their typical unmarked and non-expressive use. More language-specific tests and criteria could be developed as work progresses. Now we will continue reviewing aspect/type patterns that become apparent at first glance.

In one of the six types, namely the Semelfactives, verbs will be divided into dynamic and non-dynamic. Verbs like **кихам/кихна kixvam/kixna** ‘sneeze’ seem to be dynamic, while verbs like **зървам/зърна zârvam/zârna** ‘glimpse’ seem to be non-dynamic. Semelfactives are also [+ punctual] and come in aspectual pairs. Some dynamic Semelfactives seem to correspond to closely associated Activities which represent the same dynamic action without the durational limitation. In some contexts they could be interpreted as “multiple-event Activities” (Smith 1997) [25]. For example, the Activity verb **кихам kixam** ‘sneeze’ corresponds to the Semelfactive pair **кихам/кихна kixvam/kixna** ‘sneeze’. Compare:

Тази сутрин тя киха един час.
Tazi sutrin tyа kixа edin chas.
this morning she sneeze(Activity).Aor.3pSg one hour
This morning she kept sneezing for an hour.

*Тази сутрин тя кихна един час.
*Tazi sutrin tyа kixna edin chas.
this morning she sneeze(Semelfactive).Aor.3pSg one hour
*This morning she sneezed [once] for an hour.

Преди малко тя кихна веднъж.
Predi malko tyа kixna vednâzh.
before little she sneeze(Semelfactive).Aor.3pSg once
She sneezed once a while ago.

*Преди малко тя киха веднъж.
*Predi malko tya kixa vednâzh.
before little she sneeze(Activity).Aor.3pSg once
*She kept sneezing once a while ago.

Similar triads of an Activity verb and a pair of Semelfactive verbs are **чукам** → **чуквам/чукна** **chukam** → **chukvam/chukna** ‘knock’, **мигам** → **мигвам/мигна** **migam** → **migvam/migna** ‘blink’, etc.

Achievement verbs in Bulgarian tend to be in aspectual pairs, e.g. **намирам/намеря** **namiram/namerya** ‘find’, **удрям/ударя** **udryam/udarya** ‘hit’, **достигам/достигна** **dostigam/dostigna** ‘reach’, **пристигам/пристигна** **pristigam/pristigna** ‘arrive’, **виждам/видя** **vizhdam/vidya** ‘see’, **чувам/чуя** **chuvam/chuya** ‘hear’, **избухвам/избухна** **izbuxvam/izbuxna** ‘explode’, **пресичам/пресека** **presicham/preseka** ‘cross’, etc. The imperfective verbs in these pairs could describe a multiple-event situation or view the situation in progress within very short time limits. However, they are still [+ punctual] and most of them would not be used normally with pace adverbs.

However, there are triads consisting of an Activity verb and a pair of Achievement verbs which are derived from each other through affixes, e.g. **пукам се** → **спуквам се/спукам се** **rukam se spukvam se/spukam se** ‘pop’, **треса се** → **разтърсвам се/разтреса се** **tresa se → raztârsvam se/raztresa se** ‘shake’, etc. The Activity verbs in these triads could be viewed as [– punctual].

Similarly, there are triads consisting of a State verb and a pair of Achievement verbs which are derived from each other through affixes, e.g. **седя** → **сядам/седна** **sedja** ‘sit; be sitting; be in a sitting position’ → **sjadam/sedna** ‘sit down; assume a sitting position’, **лежа** → **лягам/легна** **lezha** ‘lie; be in a lying position’ → **lyagam/legna** ‘lie down; assume a lying position’, **обичам** → **обиквам/обикна** **obicham** ‘love’ → **obikvam/obikna** ‘start loving’, etc.

As for Accomplishment verbs, like Achievement verbs, a lot of them form aspectual pairs, e.g. **почервенявам/почервенeya**, **увеличавам се/увелича се**, **отварям се/отворя се**, etc. Some of the Accomplishment pairs form triads with a [– telic] verb that is semantically close, e.g. **съхна** → **изсъхвам/изсъхна** **sâhna** ‘dry; be drying (intransitive) → **izsâxvam/izsâhna** ‘dry completely (intransitive)’, **топя се** → **стопявам се/стопя се** **topya se** ‘melt; be melting (intransitive)’ → **stopyavam se, stopya se** ‘melt completely (intransitive)’, **уча** → **научавам/науча** **ucha** ‘study’ → **nauchavam/naucha** ‘learn’, etc. The [– telic] verbs view the process without considering an endpoint. That is the main different between them and the imperfective verbs from the pairs. Further research is needed to clarify the semantic differences of the three verbs in each triad, as well as the respective Causative verbs.

Findings and Conclusion

My initial analysis has shown that the situation types proposed initially by Vendler (1957) [26] on the basis of his analysis of the English language and later expanded and refined by other researchers, notably by Van Valin, Jr. (2006) [27], in order to serve as a universal basis for semantic representation for all languages, have validity for the Bulgarian language. Common Bulgarian verbs in typical usage can be readily determined to belong to a certain situation type. Also, it seems that language-specific tests and criteria can be developed for a thorough classification of all Bulgarian verbs.

It also proves very interesting to observe how the inherent grammatical aspect of Bulgarian verbs patterns along the lines of situation-type classification. Further research and thorough analysis is needed so that the full picture of interaction between aspect and situation types could be revealed with all its peculiarities, subtleties and idiosyncrasies. Similar research in other languages had been quite productive and has shown that important new insights can be reached. The findings will enrich our understanding of the grammar-semantics interface in the Bulgarian language. They could be also useful in the fields of both theoretical and applied linguistics. Further findings about non-typical and expressive usage of verbs are potentially relevant for the analysis of style and rhetoric, as well as for teaching these disciplines.

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- [13] The term Aktionsart is preferred by Van Valin, Jr. The term ‘situation type’ is used by Smith (1997) and others. Since these categories characterize predicates which depict situations, a term like ‘predication type’ might be more appropriate. However, I will use the term ‘situation type’ as it is already well established. The term ‘lexical aspect’ is also used with this meaning but it is not appropriate for Bulgarian since grammatical aspect in Bulgarian is not expressed syntactically and is either inherent to the root (non-derived verbs) or is expressed with prefixes or suffixes (derived verbs).
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