

The aspectual function of Slavic inceptive morphemes

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For over 100 years, inceptive morphemes (INC), i.e., morphemes that encode the initial point of an event, have been inconsistently classified as having either the same or different aspectual function as the morphemes that encode the final point of an event, i.e., completive morphemes (COM). The issue is still largely unresolved today. While some linguists view inceptive morphemes as telicity markers (Travis 2005, Borer 2005), others, assuming a distinction between telicity and perfectivity (Borik 2002), maintain that inceptive morphemes are rather perfectivity markers (Svenonius 2004).

In this presentation, I will argue that inceptive morphemes are telicity markers, supporting my claim by evidence from Russian, which, together with other Slavic languages, is famous for using aspectual prefixes to signal the initial point of events, e.g., *zarabotat'* “to start working”, *zapet'* “to start singing”.

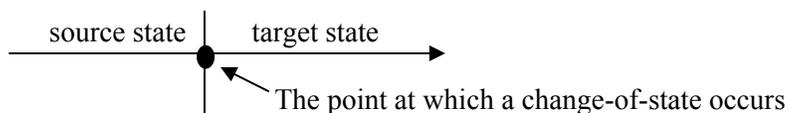
The temporal schema of inceptive verbs reveals that these verbs encode transitions from a source state to a target state (1). Thus, in *Kompjuter za-rabotal* “The-computer started-working” the INC verb signals the transition of the computer from the *non-working* state to the *working* state (2). Likewise, in *Petja zapel pesnju* “Petja started-singing a/the-song”, the INC verb emphasises Petja’s transition from the *non-singing* state to the *singing* state (3). Translated into the semantic decompositional framework, this observation implies that inceptive verbs contain the operator BECOME in their semantic structure (Dowty 1979, Pustejovsky 1991) together with an adjectival phrase that describes the target state (4) of the argument that undergoes the change-of-state. What sets aside INC verbs from COM verbs is that their adjectival phrase, describing the target state of the surface subject and not of the surface object, is an Active participle (AP) rather than Passive participle (PP) (4). In line with the standard assumption according to which BECOME encodes telicity (Dowty 1979, Pustejovsky 1991), we can conclude that Slavic inceptive morphemes are telicity markers.

To confirm my finding, I will show that the well-known algebraic definitions of telicity in terms of *quantization* (Krifka 1998) or *quantity* (Borer 2005) identify Slavic inceptive verbs as telic. Moreover, I will demonstrate that the standard telicity diagnostics classify these verbs as telic (5), once we take into consideration the fact that has been largely overlooked in the literature: in the case of inceptive verbs, one must negate the second clause in the Conjunction diagnostic (5c), provided that the source state of these verbs, unlike the source state of completive verbs, is negative, e.g., *zarabotat'*-INC “start to work” (*non-working* → *working*) vs. *spet'* “sing-COM” (*singing* → *non-singing*).

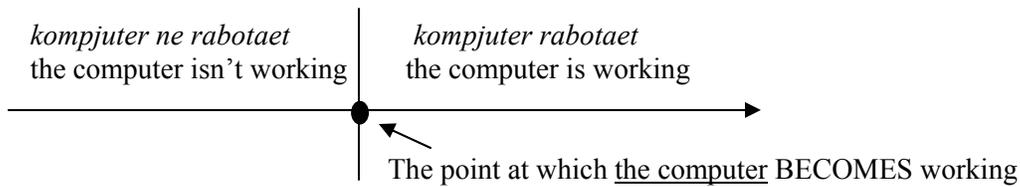
Somewhat confusingly, inceptive verbs are not only telic, but also perfective. The perfectivity of inceptive verbs, however, does not refute the claim that inceptive prefixes are telicity markers. In fact, completive verbs, whose aspectual prefixes have been consistently analysed as telicity markers, are also perfective. Thus, both COM and INC verbs pass the standard perfectivity diagnostics in that they (i) have a future tense interpretation in their present tense form, e.g., both *spoet* “sing-COM” and *zapoet* “sing-INC” mean “will-sing/will-start-to-sing”, (ii) cannot appear in the analytic future construction, e.g., **budet spet'/zapet'* “will sing-COM/sing-INC” and (iii) are incompatible with phase verbs, e.g., **načat' spet'/zapet'* “start to sing-COM/sing-INC”. The prevailing perfectivity status of Slavic telic verbs seems to suggest that perfectivity and telicity are one single notion – the claim, although particularly inviting (given that all existing definitions of perfectivity essentially overlap with those of telicity) demands for an extensive research.

Overall, this presentation contributes to an ongoing debate concerning the aspectual function of inceptive morphemes. Specifically, it supports the view according to which inceptive morphemes are telicity markers.

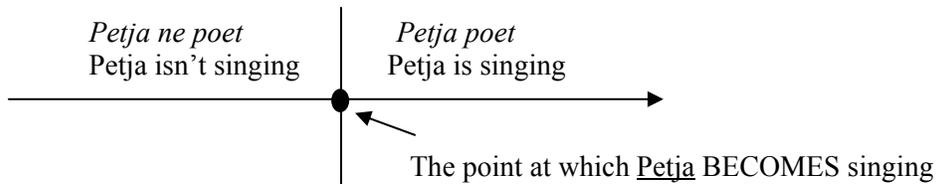
(1) The temporal schema of inceptive verbs:



(2) The temporal schema of *Kompjuter za-rabotal* “The-computer started-working”:



(3) The temporal schema of *Petja zapel pesnju* “Petja started-singing a/the song”:



(4) a. *Kompjuter za-rabotal* = *Kompjuter* BECOME-pst *rabotajuč'im*.
 Computer za-work-pst = *Computer* BECOME-pst working-AP.

b. *Petja za-pel pesnju* = *Petja* BECOME *pojuč'im (pesnju)*
 Petja started-singing a/the song = Petja to-BECOME singing-AP (a/the song)

(5) a. **Adverbial modification diagnostic**

*Kompjuter zarabotal *odin čas/?za odin čas.* *telic*
 “The computer started-to-work *for an hour/?in an hour.”

b. **Homogeneity diagnostic**

Kompjuter zarabotal za 1 čas. -/→ Kompjuter zarabotal za ½ časa. *telic*
 “The computer started-to-work in 1 hour.’ -/→ ‘The computer started-to-work in ½ hour.”

c. **Conjunction diagnostic**

*10 minut nazad *kompjuter zarabotal i vsjo eš'o prodolžacet ne rabotat'.* *telic*
 “10 minutes ago, the computer started-to-work and it is still **not** working.”

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