Is Verkuyl’s generalization universal?

It is a well-established fact that in English the argument that undergoes change of state during the course of an event – the Affected argument (Tenny 1987), Gradient Patient (Krifka 1989, 1992) or Incremental Theme argument (Dowty 1988, 1991), Subject-of-quantity (Borer 2005), Subject-of-change or Undergoer (Ramchand 2006) – plays a crucial role in the aspectual composition of dynamic non-motion verbs. Specifically, for a telic interpretation to emerge two conditions must be met: (I) a DP must be merged into [Spec, Asp0P] – a syntactic position that gives rise to an Incremental Theme reading (Borer 2005), (II) this argument must be of a specific aspectual type: quantized (Krifka 1986, 1992) or quantity (Borer 2005), i.e., a singular count, definite plural or overtly quantificational noun. Otherwise, an atelic interpretation is obtained (Verkuyl 1972):

(1) a. \[ V + \text{quantity Incremental Theme} \]
   Peter ate an apple/the apple/the apples/three apples (in ½ hour/for ½ hour).

   b. \[ V + \text{No DP} \]
   Peter read/walked (*in ½ hour/for ½ hour).

   c. \[ V + \text{non-quantity DP} \]
   Peter fixed chairs/furniture (*in ½ hour/for ½ hour).

In this paper I argue, contra Borer (2005), that Condition I must be satisfied even in the languages that violate Condition II. My claim is based on evidence from Russian, which, together with other Slavic languages, is famous for disobeying Condition II. In fact, telicity of Russian dynamic non-motion verbs does not depend on aspectual properties of the Incremental Theme argument, but rather on the presence of an overt telicity marker, e.g., a quantificational verbal prefix. This is why Russian perfective verbs that contain a quantificational prefix invariably obtain a telic interpretation, regardless of the aspectual value of their internal argument (2a). Russian imperfective verbs, lacking such a prefix, standardly receive an atelic interpretation (2b).

Filip (1999) points out that although Russian DPs do not influence the aspectual value of verbal predicates, presence of the Incremental Theme argument, in the case of telic predicates, is still obligatory (3). Recent research, however, have identified classes of Russian telic verbs that seem to constitute counterexamples to Filip’s observation, i.e., inceptive (i.e., verbs that encode the initial boundary of an event) and delimitative (i.e., verbs that encode both the initial and final boundaries of an event), causing some researchers to reconsider Condition I as being optional in Russian (Borer 2005).

In this paper, I show that even in the case of these “exceptional” verbs, the presence of the Incremental Theme argument is obligatory. Using temporal schemas of Russian inceptive and delimitative verbs as well as their semantic analysis of Dowty’s (1979) type (4), I demonstrate that these verbs encode at least one change of state, similarly to prototypical telic verbs (i.e., completive verbs - verbs that encode the final boundary of an event). Nonetheless, while the event encoded by a completive verb ends when the object undergoes a change of state, the event encoded by an inceptive/delimitative verb begins when the subject undergoes a change of state. Provided that the argument that undergoes the change of state is by definition the Incremental Theme argument, in the case of the “exceptional” verbs, it is the surface subject and not the surface object that functions as the Incremental Theme argument and is, thus, obligatory. This is why these verbs can omit the object, without violating Condition I.

These findings suggest that the Incremental Theme argument is a necessary component for a telic interpretation to arise, even in the languages that do not obey Condition II. This leads us to the conclusion that while Verkuyl’s Condition II is language-specific, his Condition I is universal and, as such, cannot be dispensed of.
(2) a. **Prefix + Root + AGR** - the verb contains a quantificational prefix → **telic**

    Petja po-čini-l stul/ tri stula/ mebel/ stilja.
    Petja fixed-PERF a/the chair/ three chairs/ furniture/chairs.

    b. **NO prefix + Root + AGR** - the verb lacks a quantificational prefix → **atelic**

    Petja čini-l stul/ tri stula/ mebel/ stilja.
    Petja fixed-IMP a/the chair/ three chairs/ furniture/ chairs.

(3) a. Petja čita-l (knigu/knigi). → **atelic**

    Petja read-IMP a/the book/the books.

    b. Petja pro-čita-l *(knigu/knigi). → **telic**

    Petja read-PERF a/the book/the books.

(4) a. **Completi**ve verbs: with a surface object as the Incremental Theme argument:

    Petja pro-čital *(knigu) “Petja read-PERF a/the book” →
    Petja CAUSED knigu “a/the book” to BECOME pro-čitannoj “read”.

    b. Inceptive verbs: with a surface subject as the Incremental Theme argument:

    Petja za-pel’ *(pesnju) “Petja started-signing-PERF (a/the song)” →
    Petja CAUSED Petja to BECOME pojuč’im *(pesnju) “singing (a/the song)”.

    c. Delimitative verbs: with a surface subject as the Incremental Theme argument:

    Petja po-čital (knigu) “Petja read-for-a-while-PERF (a/the book)” →
    Petja CAUSED Petja to BECOME počitavš‘im (knigu) “having read (a/the book) for a while”.

References:


