

Achievements in the Progressive: Have they Become Accomplishments?*

Takanori DEMIZU

0. Introduction

This is a study of Vendlerian Achievements in the progressive, and my aim is to elucidate that though, as shown in (1), Rothstein (2004) uses the term “abstract accomplishments” to describe the temporal peculiarities of progressive Achievements, they are not Accomplishments in the strict sense of the word.

- (1) [To explain the interpretation of the sentence “Mary is arriving at the station.”] We posit an aspectual type shifting operation, triggered by PROG, which raises the achievement meaning into an “abstract” or “derived” accomplishment meaning denoting a set of events e , which are the sum of an activity e_1 whose particular properties are lexically unspecified, and a culmination event e_2 which is in the denotation of the lexical achievement.

(Rothstein 2004: 48)

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of relevant Vendlerian aspectual classes. Section 2 elaborates on Achievements. I will focus here on their preliminary stage and the role such a stage plays when Achievements are used in the progressive form. In section 3, I introduce the event structure templates proposed by Rappaport Hovav and Levin. In section 4, I demonstrate that event structure templates cannot explain the linguistic phenomenon discussed in section 2, and reconsider the nature of Vendlerian classification. Section 5 considers the true identity of “abstract accomplishments”, and examines two other linguistic phenomena that create “abstract accomplishments”. Section 6 is a conclusion.

1. Vendlerian Classification

Among a plethora of verb classifications espoused by many linguists and philosophers, the best-known seems to be Vendler’s quadripartition. As is familiar to semanticists, Vendler (1957) divides verbs (or, to put it more correctly, verb phrases) into four classes according to their time schema. Binnick (1991), a voluminous guidebook to tense and aspect, describes the prominence of Vendler’s methodology in semantics as follows:

(2) Of the attempts at a definitive Aristotelian classification, the Vendlerian system is the most familiar. Vendler distinguishes four categories:

Activities: run, walk, swim, push a cart, drive a car

Accomplishments: run a mile, walk to school, paint a picture, grow up, deliver a sermon, recover from illness

Achievements: recognize, find, win the race, stop/start/resume, be born/die

States: desire, want, love, hate, know/believe (Binnick 1991: 172)

Of these four classes, only Activities, Accomplishments and Achievements are thought to be relevant to my discussion. In this paper, as I have said at the outset, my first concern is Achievements and their relation to Accomplishments, which in turn have an Activity phase as their integral part. States are indeed included as a subordinate part in Achievements and Accomplishments, but the explication in this paper focuses on the supposed shifts from Achievements to Accomplishments and the concomitant incorporation of an external Activity phase, and therefore requires no reference to the State part.

Let us now consider the details of Activities, Accomplishments and Achievements. Smith (1997: 17-37) makes a detailed explanation of Vendler's aspectual classification, and she defines the three categories as follows:

(3) Activities are processes that involve physical or mental activity, and consist entirely in the process. [...] Typical Activities are [stroll in the park], [laugh], [revolve], [think about], [enjoy], [eat cherries]. (Smith 1997: 23)

(4) Accomplishments consist of a process and an outcome, or change of state. The change is the completion of the process; [...] Typical examples are [build a bridge], [walk to school], [drink a glass of wine]. Accomplishments have successive stages in which the process advances to its natural final endpoint. They result in a new state. (Smith 1997: 26)

(5) Achievements are instantaneous events that result in a change of state. [...] Typical examples are [leave the house], [reach the top], [recognize Aunt Jane]. (Smith 1997: 30)

What is immediately apparent from their definition is that Accomplishments have, as their component, a process and a change of state, which in turn constitute an Activity and an Achievement respectively. To put it the other way, when an Activity and an Achievement are combined together, the whole forms an Accomplishment.

2. Incorporation of Preliminary Stages and Shifts to “Accomplishments”

Having looked at the specifics of the relevant Vendlerian classes, we now turn to preliminary stages of Achievements. When a change of state occurs, some process often happens just before it.

Smith (1997) terms such a process “a preliminary stage” and expounds upon it as follows:

(6) Many Achievements allow or require preliminary stages. They may be conventionally necessary, as in [win a race]: to win a running race one must run it. Again, [reach the top] requires a preliminary approach. If a magician whisked Mary to the top of a pyramid, we would not say that she had reached the top.

Other Achievements have preliminaries in some cases, but not others. For instance [I recognize John] may occur with preliminaries: I may meet John at a party and gradually find him familiar, eventually recognizing him as an acquaintance of year ago. But I may also recognize John instantly. Similarly, [find your watch] may occur after some preliminary searching stages, or without them. Although preliminaries of different types are related to Achievements, they are conceptually detached from the events. (Smith 1997: 31)

Here “conceptually detached” is thought to mean that a preliminary stage of achievements is not lexically specified, even though it exists in the real world, and therefore when achievements are interpreted, what the preliminary stage means is inferred from the context.

As already noted in Leech (1987), when Achievements are used in the progressive form, not the change of state itself but its prelude is interpreted to be in process or progress.

(7) ‘Event verbs’ denoting transition into a state are used with the Progressive to indicate an *approach* to the transition, rather than the transition itself: The train was arriving./ The helicopter was landing./ The old man was dying. (Leech 1987: 23)

Smith (1991) considers this kind of interpretation to be focusing on the preliminary stages, as seen in her explanation of (9):

(8) One type of viewpoint focusses on the preliminary stages of an event, rather than internal stages, as in the imperfective Achievement sentences of [(9)].

(9) a. Algernon is reaching the top.

b. Mary is winning the race.

c. We are solving the problem.

(Smith 1991: 97)

Rothstein (2004: 37) takes as a starting point the assumption that the intuition behind Smith (1991)’s statement is right, and she goes on to propose a semantic account in which preliminary stages of achievements are incorporated into abstract accomplishments. To explain the interpretation of the sentence “Mary is arriving at the station.”, she assumes the following mechanism:

- (10) We posit an aspectual type shifting operation, triggered by PROG, which raises the achievement meaning into an “abstract” or “derived” accomplishment meaning denoting a set of events e , which are the sum of an activity e_1 whose particular properties are lexically unspecified, and a culmination event e_2 which is in the denotation of the lexical achievement. [= (1)] (Rothstein 2004: 48)

She characterizes the outputs of this operation, that is, abstract accomplishments as follows:

- (11) a. Whereas the characteristics which identify the process stages of a lexical accomplishment (or activity) are determined by the meaning of the verb, the characteristics of the process stage of a derived accomplishment are not lexically specified but must be contextually determined. (Rothstein 2004: 49)
- b. The output of SHIFT is an “abstract accomplishment,” in the sense that it has the structure of an accomplishment, but it does not correspond to any lexical item. The only lexical information that we have about it is that its culmination, or telic point, is in the denotation of VP. (Rothstein 2004: 50)

Here the point to note is that Rothstein uses the term “Accomplishment” to refer to the output of this incorporation mechanism. It might seem tempting to apply the term “Accomplishment” to what Rothstein calls “abstract accomplishment”. However, the reconsideration of and the qualification to the Vendlerian aspectual classes would undermine the appropriateness of the usage of the term. We will see this in the following two sections.

3. Lexical Decomposition and Vendlerian Classes

This section expatiates on the basic theory and concept of event structure templates proposed by Rappaport Hovav and Levin (henceforth RH&L) (1998). Their theory employs a technique called “lexical decomposition”, which stems from the generative semantics tradition in 1960s and 1970s. This methodology assumes that verbs can be decomposed into a fixed set of the combinations of primitive semantic predicates (CAUSE, BECOME, BE) and their meaning can be encoded into the allocations of such predicates.¹⁾

As I have already mentioned, RH&L (1998) adopt a decompositional approach to lexical meaning of verbs. In their approach, they assume that Universal Grammar has an inventory of event structure templates that correspond to a large degree to the generally acknowledged Vendlerian event types, and they propose the following lexical semantic representations for each of Vendler’s aspectual classes:²⁾

- (12) a. [x ACT_{-MANNER-}] (activity)

- b. [x <STATE>] (state)
- c. [BECOME [x <STATE>]] (achievement)
- d. [[x ACT<MANNER>] CAUSE [BECOME [y <STATE>]]] (accomplishment)

(RH&L 1998: 108)

In the templates, [x ACT<MANNER>] and [BECOME [x <STATE>]] correspond to a process (an Activity) and a change of state (an Achievement) respectively, and an Accomplishment is represented as their combination connected by the causal predicate “CAUSE”. These templates, therefore, can be said to encode those semantic relations among Activities, Accomplishments, and Achievements which we have seen in section 1.

Using these templates as premises, they go on to introduce a mechanism that creates derived verb meanings from basic verb meanings. Their motivation behind this operation is to explain the relation between the following pair of sentences:

- (13) a. Phil swept the floor. (activity)
- b. Phil swept the floor clean. (accomplishment) (cf. RH&L 1998: 119)

In (13a), the verb “sweep” describes only a sweeping process and is an Activity in Vendler’s sense. In (13b), however, the verb “sweep” is used with an adjective phrase “clean”, and the whole sentence depicts not only a sweeping process but also the state of the floor’s being clean caused by the process. In this case, the whole verb phrase is regarded as a Vendlerian Accomplishment. This means that the addition of the adjective phrase “clean” to the verb “sweep” shifts the verb from an Activity to an Accomplishment. In other words, this additional adjective phrase derives a new Accomplishment meaning from the basic Activity meaning of the verb “sweep”.

To account for this semantic alteration, they propose an operation called Template Augmentation, which is defined as (14):

- (14) **Template Augmentation:** Event structure templates may be freely augmented up to other possible templates in the basic inventory of event structure templates. (RH&L 1998: 111)

In their system, the verb phrases in (13a) and (13b) are represented by the templates of (15a) and (15b) respectively, and they state that by the application of Template Augmentation, (15a) changes to (15b):

- (15) a. [x ACT<SWEEP> y] (activity)
- b. [[x ACT<SWEEP> y] CAUSE [BECOME [y <CLEAN>]]] (accomplishment) (RH&L 1998: 119)

- (16) For example, one potential event structure that could be derived by applying Template Augmentation to [(15a)] is [(15b)]. (RH&L 1998: 118)

Furthermore, in order to curb the proliferation of possible derivations, they impose a few restrictions (or, in their words, “well-formedness conditions”) on the syntactic realization of event structures. To put it simply, they posit a few rules that regulate how the semantic contents of event structure templates must be expressed by sentences. Among them, Subevent Identification Condition, which is enunciated as follows, is pertinent to my argument:

- (17) **Subevent Identification Condition:** Each subevent in the event structure must be identified by a lexical head (e.g., a V, an A, or a P) in the syntax. (RH&L 1998: 112)

Here the term “subevent” refers to an event within an event. (12a) (an activity template) is made up of one event, that is [x ACT-*MANNER*-] representing a process, and so this event structure has one subevent. (12c) (an achievement template) is just a change of state and this is the only subevent in it, which is notated by [BECOME [x <*STATE*>]]. On the other hand, in the case of (12b) (an accomplishment template), the whole event consists of a process and a change of state, each of which constitutes one subevent. That is, the event template has two subevents.

Having understood what the term “subevent” means, let us turn to the following corollary of Subevent Identification Condition:

- (18) If Template Augmentation contributes another subevent to an event structure previously created via a canonical realization rule, then this additional subevent must be identified by another lexical head in the syntax for the Subevent Identification Condition to be met. (RH&L 1998: 112)

Let us put the content more concretely. If an Activity template is augmented to an Accomplishment template, the number of subevents increases from one to two. This means there has to be a newly introduced lexical head (that is, a new verb, adjective, or preposition) in the sentence that verbalizes the derived event template. In (13b), the adjective “clean” plays this role.

- (19) The causing subevent [i.e. [x ACT-*SWEEP*- y]] is identified by the verb itself via the canonical realization rule pairing the constant with the activity template; the change of state subevent [i.e. [BECOME [y <*CLEAN*>]]] is identified by the adjective *clean*. (RH&L 1998: 119)

4. Shifts to “Accomplishments” and Event Structure Templates

In this section, I will demonstrate that the incorporation of preliminary stages into “abstract accomplishments” cannot be formalized by Template Augmentation, so that this mechanism works not at the event level but at a higher level and involves semantic contribution from elements

syntactically higher than verb phrases.

Let us tentatively assume that the semantic incorporation mentioned in section 2 is made by augmenting an Achievement template to an Accomplishment template. Then, the type shifting operation is invoked when we convert (20a), an Achievement in the simple non-progressive form, into (20b), its progressive version, and the concomitant aspectual shift will be explained by the application of Template Augmentation that changes (21a) to (21b).

- (20) a. Mary arrived at the station. (achievement)
 b. Mary was arriving at the station.³⁾ (“abstract” or “derived” accomplishment)
- (21) a. [BECOME [y <ARRIVED>]] (achievement)
 b. [[x ACT<MANNER> y] CAUSE [BECOME [y <ARRIVED>]]] (accomplishment)

It seems at first sight that there are no problems with this derivation. Yet a more careful perusal reveals that this explanation is fraught with the following three problems.

First, this derivation violates Subevent Identification Condition. From the comparison of (21a) and (21b), we can see that the number of subevents increases from one to two by the augmentation. Concretely speaking, (21a) has one and the only subevent, [BECOME [y <ARRIVED>]], while (21b) consists of two subevents, [x ACT<MANNER> y] and [BECOME [y <ARRIVED>]]. This means that in the case of (21b), an extra lexical head in the syntax is necessary to identify the newly introduced subevent. However, (20b) has no lexical head to identify it, since no additional lexical head is introduced by the conversion from (20a) to (20b), as seen from the fact that they have the same number of lexical heads.

Second, this augmentation is syntactically wrong. In (21b), a new argument x is introduced and it must be realized syntactically. That is, there has to be a noun phrase in (20b) which corresponds to (and denotes) this argument. However, as is evident from the fact that (20a) and (20b) have the same number of noun phrases, (20b) has no new noun phrase corresponding to x.

Third, this explanation is semantically aberrant. This derivation results in an event structure with two subevents, and a causal predicate “CAUSE” is additionally introduced to connect them. This operation, therefore, can be regarded as an example of causativization. However, (20b) does not acquire a new causative meaning, which would be one where someone does something that causes Mary to arrive at the station.

For the above-mentioned three reasons we can conclude that the incorporation of a preliminary stage is not an example of the application of Template Augmentation. This leads us ineluctably to the conclusion that the derivation of what is dubbed an “abstract accomplishment” by Rothstein cannot be represented by event structure templates à la RH&L (1998). What does this mean?

Let us now reconsider what Vendlerian aspectual classes are. Vendler himself states as follows in the beginning of his essay:

- (22) a. Indeed, as I intend to show, if we focus our attention primarily upon the time schemata presupposed by various verbs, we are able to throw light on some of the obscurities which still remain in these matters.
b. Our first task therefore will be to locate and to describe the most common time schemata implied by the use of English verbs.
c. I start with the well-known difference between verbs that possess continuous tenses and verbs that do not. (Vendler 1957: 143-144)

What these passages make clear is that Vendler himself applies his aspectual categories to verbs. However, subsequent semanticians rectify his view and apply the classification at the level of a verb phrase, that is, a verb and its arguments, as seen from the following descriptions:

- (23) The situation type of a sentence is conveyed by the verb and its arguments, the verb constellation. (Smith 1997: 17)
(24) Setting aside the effects of perfective or progressive morphology, the aspectual characteristics of events (that is, their internal structures in time) are already coded to some extent in the basic verb phrases which are the predicates on events. (Kearns 2000: 201)

Here the important point to note is that Kearns limits the classification to a verb phrase domain, excluding the effects of perfective or progressive morphology. This means that which classes verb phrases belong to is not affected by the progressive form, contrary to Rothstein's statement that Achievements are altered to "abstract accomplishments" by the progressive operator. If we fully accept the qualification that Vendlerian classification should be limited within a verb phrase level and should not be affected or determined by external elements, we cannot countenance Rothstein's aspectual type shifting operation and its resultant "abstract accomplishments". From this I draw the conclusion that "abstract accomplishments" are not true Accomplishments in a Vendlerian sense.

From these considerations, we can further suggest that what event structure templates upheld by RH&L correspond to is the verb phrase classification unsusceptible to the influences of the progressive operator. There is no wonder that "abstract accomplishments" and their derivation cannot be explained by Template Augmentation, since Template Augmentation is not employed to create "abstract accomplishments".

5. Then What is "Abstract Accomplishments"?

As I have said in the previous section, "abstract accomplishments" are not genuine Accomplishments. In terms of temporal properties, they might be similar to Accomplishments, but their event structure templates are thought to be Achievement ones. Rothstein's terminology, therefore, beclouds the understanding of the nature of these Achievements. They might be best

termed “protracted” or “process-incorporating” achievements.⁴⁾

In any case, there has to be another semantic derivation mechanism to create “abstract accomplishments”, which is not subject to any conditions that are imposed on Template Augmentation. Of course, the whole gamut of such a system is too vast and dauntingly complex to be examined in detail here. However, at least I might be able to say that it works at a level external to event structures, relying on semantic contribution from elements syntactically higher than verb phrases, such as auxiliaries, modalities, conjunctions, and so on. In the rest of this section, I take up two linguistic phenomena that are germane to the mechanism being discussed.

The first linguistic phenomenon is the English imperative form. As I mention in Demizu (2005), verbs used as imperatives have to have in their meaning a process with a manner controllable by an agent. When achievements occur in the imperative form, they are thought to be shifted to “abstract accomplishments” through an aspectual type shifting operation triggered by the imperative function. Let us look at the following example from a novel:

(25) “I have a private and personal message for you,” said Youngdahl crisply. “Let’s get out of this parking lot. *Find* some empty back street for us. I think it would be much wiser.”

(I. Wallace, *The Second Lady*: 294, Demizu 2005)

In this example, an Achievement “find” incorporates its preliminary searching process and turns into an “abstract accomplishment”, which as a result contains a process with a manner controllable by an agent.

The second phenomenon concerns Achievements in *while*-clauses. As Uchikiba (2004) states, verbs in *while*-clauses must be [+durative], that is, must contain a durative process in them. When achievements occur in *while*-clauses, they are thought to be shifted to “abstract accomplishments” through an aspectual type shifting operation triggered by the conjunctive “while”. As an explanation of the following example, Uchikiba says that the conjunction “while” makes an “aspectual expansion”, which makes instantaneous events have temporal duration and incorporate their preliminary stage.

(26) He waited for a moment and then dialled Woodrow Wilson. There was the usual interminable wait while they *found* Elizabeth.

(J. Archer, *Shall We Tell the President?*: 228, Uchikiba 2004: 82)

These two linguistic phenomena demonstrate that Achievements can be reinterpreted as “abstract accomplishments” under the influence from a modality and a conjunction respectively, which are syntactically higher than verb phrases. They corroborate the existence of some aspectual operation working outside verb phrases, since event structure templates cannot explain their accompanying aspectual shift.

6. Conclusion

Here I recapitulate the main points. The topic of this paper has been Vendlerian Achievements in the progressive. I have shown that though they are called “abstract accomplishments” by Rothstein, they are not real Accomplishments, since they cannot be derived by the operation of event structure templates, which correspond to genuine Vendlerian event classes.

Notes

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- 1) The feasibility itself of lexical decomposition is still controversial among linguists. In this paper, I tentatively assume that lexical decomposition is possible and accept this approach.
- 2) In more recent papers, such as Levin (2000) and L&RH (2003), they imply that there are no one-to-one correspondences between event structure templates and aspectual classes. However, because they do not abrogate Template Augmentation, the conclusion of this paper is not undermined by the update of their theory.
- 3) The original example in Rothstein (2004: 48) is “Mary is arriving at the station.”. Here, however, I change the tense from the present to the past in order to efface the irrelevant difference from its non-progressive version. As is well known, the simple present tense does not portray an action in the present time but a repeated or habitual action, and cannot be compared aspectually with the progressive form depicting an action in progress in the present. On the other hand, in the past tense, the difference between the progressive and the non-progressive can be sharply contrasted.
- 4) There are still discrepancies among linguists in what they call “Accomplishments”. Since the advent of Vendler’s classification, many researchers have adopted it and tailored it to meet their specific academic needs. Among the four classes, Accomplishments are semantically the most complex, and there is little wonder that subtle difference in their construal has crept among semanticists.

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