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Peculiarities of French Verbs of Motion Based on their Aspectual Characteristics of Telicity/Atelicity

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Abstract. This study outlines the importance of describing limitative and delimitative meaning of a French verb due to its particular linguistic characteristics. The paper highlights the role of analytical means in conveying aspectual meanings of telicity and atelicity of verbal actions, with a focus on French verbs of motion. In this regard, the authors have analyzed various analytical means which contribute to the expression of the category of telicity/atelicity of French verbs of motion based on their lexical, grammatical and syntactic peculiarities. The research reveals the significance of aspect and tense categories in the aspectual characteristics of verbal actions. The analysis of various syntactic constructions formed by the grammaticalization showed their influence on the telicity of the statement. Their role in the expression of the aspectual meanings of the verb is exceptionally important, as they partially compensate for formal derivational means in the French language.

Keywords: terminative/non-terminative characteristics, aspectual-temporal complex, paraphrase, temporal modalities of verbal action, bounded aspectual situation

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Дифференциация французских глаголов движения, имеющих аспектуальные характеристики терминативности/атерминативности

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Аннотация. Способы передачи глагольного действия, обладая особой функциональной нагрузкой, имеют ярко выраженную специфику во французском языке. Несмотря на обилие исследований, посвященных данному языковому явлению, проблема описания аспектуальных характеристик глагольного предиката во французском языке остается нерешенной. Настоящая работа направлена на всесторонний анализ различных средств выражения терминативности/атерминативности французских глаголов движения, с учетом их лексико-грамматических и синтаксических характеристик. В результате исследования было установлено, что грамматические категории вида и времени не только определяют временные рамки глагольного действия, но и оказывают существенное влияние на его длительность и завершенность. Анализ различных глагольных перифраз, возникших в результате грамматикализации отдельных элементов, показал, что они частично компенсируют ограниченность формальных словообразовательных показателей во французском языке, а также играют исключительную роль в реализации лимитативной аспектуальной ситуации.

Ключевые слова: терминативность/атерминативность, аспектуально-темпоральный комплекс, перифраза, временные способы глагольного действия, лимитативная аспектуальная ситуация

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Introduction

The category of telicity/atelicity of verbal action has long been firmly established in the aspectological research. It is increasingly attracting the linguists' attention and remaining one of the most complex and insufficiently explored issues. Boundedness is generally understood as a semantic property of an action or event characterized by a certain endpoint or limit, thereby stressing their completion. Conversely, unboundedness, in its turn, denotes the absence of a limit, which implies an ongoing or unrestricted progression of an action. It is noteworthy that the telicity/atelicity distinction is widely acknowledged in linguistic research as a universal category, given its presence, to certain degrees, across the vast majority of languages.

In the Romance linguistics, particularly in French, the categories of aspect and tense play an important role in the expression of telicity/atelicity of verbal action. These two categories, often analyzed through the lens of linguistic typology and grammaticalization theory, are deeply interconnected, coalescing into a unified aspectual-temporal system. This system not only reflects the temporal structure of events but also encodes their inherent aspectual nuances of verbal actions. In this regard, rather than functioning as isolated categories, tense and aspect form a cohesive framework conveying the completion, progression, habituality, or punctuality of actions. These distinctions are further modulated by the context and adverbial markers, creating a flexible systematic approach to expressing complex temporal and aspectual relationships. However, taking into account the relatively limited variety of morphological markers in the French language, the syntactic structures aimed to describe the diversity of aspectual meanings are used. This reliance on syntax, rather than morphology, highlights the adaptive strategies within the language to convey nuanced temporal and aspectual distinctions.

Therefore, the goal of this research is to investigate different analytical means of expressing telicity/atelicity of verbal action, with a focus on French verbs of motion.

Objects and methods

The object of this study is a lexical-semantic group of verbs of motion, which occupies a special place in the system of actional verbs of dynamic spatial localization in the French language.

To achieve accurate findings, a range of research methodologies is employed:

- semantic and componential analysis (examination of the meanings of French verbs of motion and their decomposition into semantic components to distinguish terminative/non-terminative markers);
- corpus-based analysis (investigation of large linguistic corpora to reveal authentic usage, frequency, and distribution of aspectual forms);
- morphosyntactic analysis (examination of the grammatical structures and temporal forms that highlight or modify aspectual properties of the verbs of motion);
- descriptive and qualitative techniques (research of the usage of verbs of motion in authentic French contexts to identify the interaction between verb semantics and grammatical constructions);
- structural-semantic modeling (analysis of the relationship between verb semantics, syntactic structures, and aspectual characteristics), etc.



Results and discussion

In current research of the evolutionary process of the language a great attention is paid to the process of grammaticalization which involves the constant transformation of lexical units into grammatical ones. It can be observed that the lexicon is widely regarded as a fundamental component of grammar, serving to reflect both the continuity and evolution of linguistic categories [Majsak, 2000]. Moreover, the process of grammaticalization, which underpins the development of syntactic structures, is closely interconnected with the phenomenon of desemanticization. According to V.G. Gak [Gak, 1965], this process occurs when one of the elements of the analytical construction diminishes its original meaning and is transformed into a functional or a semi-functional component.

Analytical structures are commonly thought of as complex descriptive word combinations of a basic word and auxiliary elements (prepositions, articles, etc.) which are semantically and functionally equivalent to a single word. These constructions, formed by means of various grammatical and semantic links often reveal the processes of grammaticalization and lexicalization, making them a valuable subject of study for linguists due to their complexity, versatility, and the rich interplay between syntax and semantics. It is important to highlight that numerous terms are used to describe such analytical forms in the French language. For instance, N.M. Shtejnberg emphasizes the syntactic complexity with the term “complex verbal constructions” [Shtejnberg, 1955], while F. Brunot stresses their semantic function as “paraphrases” [Brunot, 1966]. H.G. Schogt focuses on their temporal and aspectual roles, calling them “aspectual analytical constructions” [Schogt, 2018], and N.N. Kirillova puts them within the broader study of the fixed expressions and idiomatic phrase as “analytical phraseological units” [Kirillova, 1986]. These terms reflect diverse theoretical approaches, capturing syntactic, semantic or idiomatic dimensions of these constructions, therefore, emphasizing their complex and intricate nature.

Verbs of motion are lexical units that most often undergo grammaticalization in different languages. They are widely used in metaphorical interpretation of spatial concepts for better understanding abstract phenomena conveying physical movement onto mental, emotional, or conceptual spheres. This metaphorical usage highlights the deep connection between language, cognition, and perception, enabling speakers to designate abstract notions through familiar spatial frameworks [Lakoff, Johnson, 1980; Bulygina, Shmelev, 2000; Gooseyn-Zade, 2012].

In the French language, the beginning of an action or a new situation is associated with the concept of motion [Мойсеева, 2015]. One of the basic verbs of motion *aller* is used to denote the immediate future in the infinitive construction within the temporal verbal form *future immédiat*, for example:

Je vais descendre chercher un peu de pain [Foenkinos, 2013, p. 23].

In the extract cited above, the intention of the impending future process is expressed by the analytical construction *aller descendre*.

To talk about recent action another basic verb of motion *venir* is used in the immediate periphrastic construction of *passé immédiat* where it gets a specialized temporal function, for example,

Je viens de rentrer et je suis déjà fatiguée [Ernaux, 2016, p. 36].

In the quoted sentence, the analytical construction *venir de rentrer* constitutes both semantic and syntactic unity, describing a just-occurred bounded event.

The immediate construction with the verb *venir* accompanied by the adverb *à peine* is of great interest in terms of its structural and semantic aspects. The verb *venir* undergoes desemanticization shifting the aspectual meaning towards the adverb *à peine*:

Le brouillard vient à peine de se dissiper [Queneau, 2023, p. 31].

In the cited example, the verb *venir* with the preposition *de*, indicates the action that has just occurred, emphasizing its recentness. The periphrasis *vient à peine de* strengthens this temporal

nuance, suggesting that the dissipation of the fog occurred only a moment ago. The addition of *à peine* underscores the immediacy of the event, as a result, making a stylistically rich and temporally precise description in French.

In the constructions *sortir de + infinitive* the verb of motion draws particular attention to the final stage of the action being performed due to its inherent terminative aspect, for example:

Le cri qui sort de passer résonne dans ma tête [Jollien, 2020, p. 42].

In this phrase, the construction *sort de passer* combines several grammatical and semantic elements that contribute to its nuanced meaning. The verb *sortir* here conveys the idea of something emerging or coming out. In addition, the verb *passer* indicates the action of the cry having occurred and now being in the past. However, the use of the verbal construction *sortir de passer* adds a temporal and dynamic dimension: the cry is described as something that has recently completed its act of “passing” but still maintains a presence in the speaker’s mind.

Analytical constructions with phase verbs are also used to form the aspectual meaning of telicity/atelicity in discourse. The idea of the process identified by the speaker – its duration, development, completion (i.e., the phases of carrying out an action) is associated with the category of manners of verbal action. Manners of verbal action take a peripheral position in the functional-semantic field of aspectuality. According to P. Charaudeau, conceptual categories of aspectuality are formed: prospectivity, beginning, intra-terminality, end, momentaneity, durativity, multiplicity [Charaudeau, 1992, p. 19]. The manners of action in the French language are represented by various lexical and syntactic means including analytical verbal constructions. Analytical constructions with verbs of motion in French, such as *aller (faire qch)* (expressing intention or near future), *venir (de faire qch)* (recent past), *partir (pour faire qch)*, *entrer (pour faire qch)*, *monter (pour faire qch)*, *descendre (pour faire qch)*, *revenir (pour faire qch)*, *passer (pour faire qch)*, *se mettre en route (pour faire qch)*, *rentrer (pour faire qch)*, *terminer (de faire qch)*, etc are used to express directionality, the purpose of motion, or its temporal aspects, adding precision and expressiveness to speech.

In the analytical construction *commencer (à faire qch)* the predicate is used to denote the resultative-initiatory manner of verbal action while the infinitive serves as the actualizer of the main action which has further development, for example:

Il a commencé à errer dans les rues, perdu dans ses pensées [Pulcini, 2022, p. 75].

The detailed analysis of the analytical construction *se lancer à + infinitive* shows that the temporal grammatical markers enhance both syntactic and semantic perception of the action, for example:

Il se lance à la recherche de l'amour et de la liberté [Hugo, 2009, p. 34].

As the context suggests, the verb *se lancer* in the form of *présent de l'indicatif* in combination with the cursive verb *rechercher* denotes the beginning of the progressive movement.

The punctual temporal form *passé composé* of the phase verb (*s'est mis*) influences atelicity of the verbal lexeme, as shown in the following example:

Lorsqu'il a entendu le bruit inattendu derrière lui, il s'est mis à trembler, ressentant une peur sourde qui l'envahissait [Houellebecq, 2010, p. 78].

In the cited sentence, the beginning of the action expressed by the analytical construction *se mettre à trembler* has a meaning of telicity of the initial phase of the action. The temporal form *passé composé* brings the idea of a completed action into the verbal-infinitive construction.

The continuity of an action in French is conveyed by the analytical constructions with the phase verbs *continuer (à (de) faire qch)*, *ne pas cesser (de faire qch)*, *pas arrêter (de faire qch)*. In the following example, the continuous, unbounded movement of the subject is enclosed within the certain time frames, as indicated by the circumstantial modifier *tous les jours*:

Elle continue à écrire tous les jours [Foenkinos, 2019, p. 37].

The constructions *achever (de faire qch)*, *finir (de faire qch)*, *cesser (de faire qch)*, *s'arrêter (à faire qch)* refer to the final phase of a process (infinitiveness) expressing a resultative-infinitive manner of verbal action. The punctual tenses express a positive outcome of an action with the



meaning of resultative completion while the linear tenses indicate the duration of the final phase of an action, for example:

Après une longue carrière, elle a décidé de s'arrêter à monter et de profiter de la vie [Delacourt, 2013, p. 48].

Elle voulait que la terre cesse de tourner ... pour toujours! [George, Benjamin, 2013, p. 18].

In the first example, the usage of the verbal paraphrase *s'arrêter à monter* might be interpreted metaphorically as “to stop at the point of”. It could be understood as a figurative way of indicating that the subject decided to stop pursuing further career advancement with the focus on the terminativity of the action.

In the second example, the construction *cesse de tourner* is used to denote cessation, an unrealizable wish, highlighting the emotional state of the character and the impossibility of fulfilling this desire. The event (the Earth stopping its rotation) is presented as something hypothetical and impossible, and the mode of action emphasizes a subjective desire rather than an objective reality.

Complex verbal constructions with connotative implications can be interpreted as analytical means indicating the action's completion. These structures, due to their specific modal and aspectual nuances, serve as main tools in expressing the inherent boundedness or lack of an action, thus contributing to the broader understanding of the verbal aspect. The following verbs whose lexical meanings are retained can serve as predicates in periphrases: *accepter (de faire qch)*, *amener (à faire qch)*, *(en) arriver (à faire qch)*, *(se) décourager (de faire qch)*, *(se) décider (à faire qch)*, *(s')efforcer (de faire qch)*, *(se) laisser (de faire qch)*, *partir (à (pour) faire qch)*, *réussir (à faire qch)*, etc. These structures are of great importance to emphasize not only the action itself but also the resultant state or condition that follows, for example:

Alors il se décida à entrer, et, comme Cachelin s'était relevé, il aperçut, sur la blancheur de l'oreiller, la figure de tante Charlotte... [Maupassant, 1984, p. 84].

In the quoted sentence, the predicate *se décider à* followed by the infinitive *entrer* indicates the action that the main character has resolved to undertake. The action is seen not just as an internal decision but also as the beginning of an external, physical activity (entering). Thus, the use of the whole verbal construction can be understood as involving a resultative-inchoative manner of action.

It is worth noting that in a wide range of syntactic structures conveying limitative and delimitative meaning of a French verb there are also so-called aspectual periphrastic models. This designation emphasizes the presence of paraphrases within these constructions, which play a key role in expressing various manners of action. These constructions are used to denote different nuances of time frame, for example:

1) paraphrases conveying the inevitability of an action: *être près (de faire qch)* “to be close to doing something”, *être en passe (de faire qch)* “to be on the verge of doing something”, *être sur le point (de faire qch)* “to be about to do something”, *être à un cheveu (de faire qch)* “to be on the brink of doing something”, *être pour (de faire qch)* “to be set to do something”;

2) paraphrases designating the duration of an action: *être en cours (de faire qch)* “to be in the process of doing something”, *être en voie (de faire qch)* “to be on the way of doing something”, *être en train (de faire qch)* “to be in the middle of doing something”, *se trouver en train (de faire qch)* “to find oneself in the process of doing something”, *être engagé (dans qch)* “to be engaged in doing something”, *s'occuper (à faire qch)* “to be occupied with doing something”;

3) paraphrases denoting the habituality or the repeatability of an action: *avoir l'habitude de faire qch* “to be used to doing something”, *passer son temps à faire qch* “to spend one's time doing something”, *continuer à faire qch* “to continue doing something”, *ne cesser de faire qch* “to keep doing something”;

4) paraphrases indicating the imminence or nearing completion of an action: *être à deux doigts (de faire qch)* “to be a hair's breadth from doing something”, *être en passe de finir* “to be about to finish”, *être sur le point de terminer* “to be about to finish”, etc.

The aspectual periphrastic models possess distinct purposes and structures, offering rich material for analysis in the field of aspectual theory and verbal semantics, for example:

Il était sur le point de partir quand il a reçu un appel [Camus, 2018, p. 73].

In the cited example, the periphrasis *était sur le point* in the temporal form *imparfait* illustrates the aspectual situation of inevitability signaling that the event described (in this case, “leaving”) is on the verge of occurring. The word combination *il a reçu un appel* further reinforces the aspectual nuance of the imminent action that remains suspended because of the external factor.

The analytical structure *être en cours (de faire qch)* has a distinct aspectual value of processuality due to the prepositional-nominal group *en cours de*. The primary semantic dominant “in the course of something” [Rey-Debove, Rey, 2004, p. 410] is stressed in the phrases describing the emphasis on the action, for example:

La vie est en cours de passer devant nous, et il est essentiel de savourer chaque instant [Slimani, 2018, p. 92].

The verb patterns *être occupé (de faire qch)*, *être (à faire qch)*, *passer (à faire qch)* are linguistic variations of the general concept “being occupied with something” that denotes unbounded aspectual situation, for example:

Dans cette ville où il passait le temps à errer, il observait les gens et s'interrogeait sur leur bonheur [Perec, 2006, p. 81].

It can be observed that the French language does not have a specific grammatical progressive tense. The construction *être en train de* serves as one of the essential elements of designating the continuous and progressive aspects in French. It emphasizes the ongoing event dynamically, highlighting their temporal progression rather than their completion or endpoint, for example:

Elle était en train de courir quand elle a entendu un bruit bizarre [Barbery, 2007, p. 19].

In this example, the action described by the verbal construction *était en train de courir* in the past tense (*imparfait*) is viewed as an incomplete one, focusing on the temporal unfolding of the action. Although the verb *courir* is atelic, the broader context of the sentence (*elle a entendu un bruit bizarre*) introduces the terminative nuances, illustrating how aspectual and telic properties are interacted.

Conclusion

So, we have explored the peculiarities of French verbs of motion through the lens of their aspectual characteristics of telicity and atelicity. These aspectual differences between verbs provide insights into the cognitive processes paying attention to the concept of motion. Telicity is often associated with verbs that imply several endpoints, whereas atelic verbs tend to describe actions without a definite limit, underlying the proceeding of an action. Our findings reveal the significance of the analytical means formed as a result of the grammaticalization of components in conveying the aspectual meanings of telicity/atelicity of verbal action. These structures enhance the precision of temporal interpretation and clarify the inherent properties of actions described by French verbs of motion. Paraphrases involving auxiliary verbs, prepositional phrases, or adverbial modifiers allow speakers to specify direction, manner, or purpose, thus compensating for the relatively limited morphological system in French. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between lexical semantics, grammatical expression, and syntactic strategies in the French language. This research offers a foundation for further comparative studies across languages or within diverse linguistic contexts.

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