Stative vs dynamic

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STATIVE vs. DYNAMIC: WHAT DO THEY DISTINGUISH?

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The English verb probably enjoys the dubious distinction of having occasioned more confusing and contradictory argument than any other object of grammatical analysis. Much of the confusion and contradiction arises because grammarians have tended to dwell on usage in discourse with all its shifts and variations rather than seek out the constant elements of the verb as they exist before usage in the subconscious system of tongue. The purpose of the present paper is to discuss one such element, namely the grammatical representation of duration - here called EVENT TIME.[1] I shall try to show why event time is necessarily found in any verb and to illustrate the different ways in which this element is manifested in the use of the simple form in discourse.

We can best begin by referring to the aim of Vendler's well known treatment (1969) "Verbs and Times". In proper philosophic and scientific fashion, Vendler attempted to get beyond the individual differences exhibited by each and every use of each and every verb in English by describing the "time schemata" involved in different verbs. He concluded that there are four types of verb - ACCOMPLISHMENTS, ACHIEVEMENTS, ACTIVITIES and STATES. Of course it might be argued that the list is not complete - that HABIT, for example would constitute another type - but the point here is that Vendler is looking for something more general than particular uses: time schemata, that is, abstract representations of time which provide a frame for the individual lexeme, which impose a temporal shape or form on it.

It is this attempt at generalization which is of interest to us here. Indeed, some grammarians have gone one step further by recognizing that Vendler's first three types have something in common: they all have an action-like, developmental quality involving change. States, on the other hand, involve no change or development. And so the number of event types can be reduced to two: DYNAMIC or ACTION-LIKE and STATIVE or STATE-LIKE .[2] Even at this level of generality, however, a certain confusion is found. Some grammarians consider this to be a lexical distinction, others a grammatical distinction. That is, some speak of a particular verb as being inherently dynamic or stative by virtue of its lexeme whereas others maintain that it is a strictly grammatical matter since most any verb lexeme can be found in both

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[1] EVENT is used here to denote what is common to all verbs, that is, a lexeme grammatically represented as an entity of time. The different types discussed here are therefore all subdivisions of the general notion of 'event'.

[2] The terms DYNAMIC and STATIVE aptly designate the expressive effect of each type most commonly observed in usage. ACTION-LIKE and STATE-LIKE evoke the manner in which the event is represented (= 'represented the way an action/a state is represented') and so bring to mind the grammatical processes involved rather than their effects in discourse. Since it is the job of linguistics, like any other science based on observation, to get beyond directly observable effects to prior causal conditions, the latter terms will be adopted here.

types of event. To determine whether the distinction between action-like and state-like events is lexical or grammatical, it is necessary to push the generalization of observed types one step further to see what is the common element of which these are the two manifestations, to see what they distinguish.

Perhaps the easiest way to bring out what is common to both types and so to all uses of the simple form is to compare two often discussed examples from Vendler:

> He ran a mile.
> She reached the top at noon sharp.

The difference between these two sentences is clear: whereas running a mile takes an appreciable time to accomplish, reaching the top is so brief that some would call it "instantaneous". One may wish to consider these to be different verb types, to manifest different time schemata, as Vendler does, but our concern here is rather to discern the constant which permits the observed variation. Quite clearly, it is the time involved in the event, its duration, which varies: in the second sentence the duration is minimal, in the first, greater than minimal. A moment's reflection suggests that duration is a necessary component of any event in the sense that for anything to exist in time, its beginning must be beyond its end. Even extremely short happenings, so short that we cannot experience them, must be imagined as occupying a minimal space of time if they are to be represented as events and expressed by means of a verb (cf. Hirtle forthcoming for a discussion of this point). Thus I maintain that any verb, because it expresses an event, necessarily involves a mental representation of duration, of event time.

If this argument is valid, then, a representation of event time is a necessary component of any verb. From this it follows that some manifestation of event time will be discernible in every use of every verb but it does not follow that every form of a verb will represent event time in the same way. For example, there is a clear-cut distinction between the progressive and the simple forms in this respect. Nor does it follow that a given form will always evoke duration in exactly the same way. Thus, in the case of the simple form, action-like and state-like events are different ways of manifesting event time.

This claim can be most easily demonstrated if we begin with the simple form expressing action-like events, as in the two examples above. There we saw that, long or short, the event is evoked from beginning to end. And I would maintain that this view of the full stretch of event time is what characterizes all action-like events in the simple form and is in fact what gives rise to the impression of a "dynamic" event.[3] Thus whenever an event in the simple form is felt to be dynamic, action-like, this is the result of the speaker having represented the full length of its event time, of having imagined it from beginning to end.

How about state-like events? How is duration configured here? Consider an example such as:

> The air smells of jasmine.

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[3] Although it has been argued (cf. Vendler 1969) that the simple form expresses an indeterminate event in an example like:

> He pushed the cart.

whenever such invented examples are seen as real sentences (i.e. in a real situation), the simple form must be given its "beginning to end" interpretation, as I have shown elsewhere (cf. Hirtle forthcoming).

There is no suggestion of rapidly moving through the event from start to finish but rather of evoking some point of the event's existence. That is to say, in a state-like event only one moment somewhere in the middle of the event is represented, neither the beginning nor the end being evoked, and so there is an impression of nothing happening, of a "stative".

Here then we have two distinct ways of representing the event's duration corresponding to the two types of event expressed by the simple form: 1) a full-length, beginning-to-end view of event time which evokes the total duration of the event and gives rise to a dynamic, action-like event; 2) a momentary view of event time which evokes only one moment of the duration and gives rise to a stative event. These two views might be represented schematically as follows:

B   E

1) |————————————————▶   dynamic

2) ⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯▶⋯⋯⋯⋯   stative
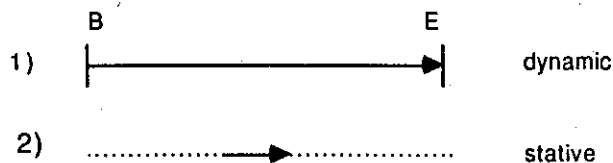
These would appear to be the "time schemata" Vendler set out to describe since one or the other is involved every time the simple form is used, be it to express habit, a performative, a future event or any of its other expressive effects (cf. Hirtle forthcoming).

This result brings out in a striking way the great advantage of examining verbs from the point of view of a constant element of grammatical meaning, their event time, rather than from the point of view of ever-changing lexical meaning. In order to bring out more adequately the role this grammatical element plays in providing a form for the lexical meaning, we shall now go on to ask what these two ways of representing event time have in common. Another way of putting the question is to ask what makes it possible for the same verbal construction, the simple form, to express two very different views of duration. That is, what is the meaning of the simple form, assuming of course that grammatical signs do have meaning? The question is important because unless we can discern a single, more fundamental meaning as the significate of the form, we shall have no alternative but to propose two separate but identical grammatical signs, two simple forms in English, to signify these two different meanings.

To reach an adequate view of the underlying or, to be more precise, potential meaning of the simple form, let us examine the relation between the lexical and the grammatical elements involved in each case: on the one hand the relation between a particular happening perceived as involving change and the beginning-to-end representation of duration, and on the other hand the relation between a non-changing, static event and the momentary representation of event time. This will reveal an identical relation between the lexical and the grammatical in the simple form, between the type of event and the particular representation of event time that "informs" it.

To experience something as developing and changing involves seeing its diverse elements or phases arising one after the other. That is to say, the different impressions constituting the lexical matter of an action-like event

arise successively and so its duration must be seen as stretching over a number of instants. By way of illustration, in the example:

He drank a cup of coffee.

the verb evokes the whole process - grasping the cup, the first sip or gulp, and so on to finally putting the empty cup down. The point is simply that these phases or impressions cannot be seen as simultaneous but must be imagined successively in time. Change involves successivity. Furthermore, to evoke all the impressions of development and change involved, one must represent the full duration of the event since every instant offers the possibility of further change. In short, to represent all that is involved in an action-like event the speaker must evoke its existence in time from beginning to end.

How about phenomena experienced as involving no development or change? The situation is very different here because just as the components of a changing phenomenon occur successively, so the components of a static phenomenon exist simultaneously. That is to say, if any part of our experience strikes us as a state, it is because its constituent elements are seen to co-exist in time. For example in:

She seems a bit tired.

the various impressions that go to make up the event are represented by the speaker as existing at the moment of speech. By definition, there can be no successivity between the impressions that constitute the lexeme because this would introduce an element of change. Thus in order to represent all that is involved in a state-like event, the speaker need evoke only one moment of its existence in time.

These considerations bring out clearly the link between the two time schemata and the dynamic vs. stative uses of the simple form observed in discourse. Each type of event can, of course, give rise to different expressive effects depending on other elements in the experience the speaker is representing, especially those expressed by the lexeme of the verb and by the subject. Vendler, for example, has shown clearly how the duration of action-like events can vary in length by distinguishing between accomplishments and achievements. State-like events can also suggest variable durations, especially in the light of the subject, as in:

The Earth is round.

The bubble is round.

However since variations such as these ("eternal truths" as opposed to a short-lived state in these two examples) can be traced back to factors other than the representation of event time, we shall not pursue them further here but rather get back to the question of the potential meaning of the simple form in English.

We have seen that the simple form can represent temporally the impressions constituting the notion of the verb in two ways, successively over a stretch of time and simultaneously in a single moment. These two ways of representing the temporality of the lexeme have this in common: both provide the time required to order, to arrange in time all the impressions involved in the notion. In other words, the role of the simple form is to represent the time necessary to "inform" the lexeme as a whole and so to make of it an event. And

since, as Guillaume often pointed out[4], the only way we can represent time is by means of spatial features, it is not surprising that we should find it depicted here either as a point or as a line. This, then, is the role of the simple form: to satisfy the formal requirements for making a set of impressions into a temporal entity, an event, so that it can then be situated in time by means of the system of tense. And since it can fulfill this role in two ways, we must postulate that the simple form in tongue is an operator, a mechanism for producing a representation of duration as either a moment or a stretch of time. It is this representational possibility that constitutes the potential meaning of the simple form, a potential permitting it to produce the two actual meanings observed in discourse.

   Viewing the simple in this way as a form providing a representation of enough duration to situate the notion as a whole in time is based on the assumption that all events have duration which is grammatically depicted in the verb. This clarifies the distinction made in Hirtle 1967 between the simple form as a PERFECTIVE which situates all the elements of the lexeme in time and the progressive as an IMPERFECTIVE which situates only part of these notional impressions in time (and so cannot express a state-like event). Furthermore it shows how the simple form with its one potential meaning in tongue can give rise in discourse to two distinct time schemata which, in combination with the verb's lexeme and other parts of the sentence, helps produce an extraordinary range and variety of expressive effect.

   Space does not permit me to show how this analysis elucidates many problems of usage of the simple form (cf. Hirtle and Curat 1986 for one such problem) nor to bring out the contrast with each of the compound forms of the verb and ultimately to clarify the systems of voice and aspect, all on the basis of event time. Rather let me finish by stressing the main point of these remarks: because we cannot experience or conceive anything without some duration, when we wish to represent something as a verb, as a temporal entity, we must include as a *sine qua non* of its grammatical make-up a representation of duration. As a consequence, any adequate analysis of the verb as a grammatical form must take into account this necessary element of grammatical meaning, and any adequate analysis of the simple form in English must tell us whether the various impressions constituting the lexeme have all been represented as coexisting in one moment of the event's duration or whether they have been represented as arising successively over the total duration of the event.

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[4] For example in Guillaume 1984 (p. 6): "the human mind is so made that it has the experience of time, but has no representation of it (it must, therefore, invent this representation, which will be a spatialization, representability being a property of space, and of space alone)."

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