

## Quasi-telic perfective aspect in Dëne Sų́łíné (Chipewyan)

Dëne Sų́łíné (short: Dëne), a Northern Athapaskan language spoken in the Northwest of Canada, shows an unusual patterning of situation type, the lexical aspectual meaning of a verb (and its complements), and viewpoint aspect. The perfective, one of the two obligatory viewpoint aspects of Dëne, imposes situation-type telic meaning on predicates, thus obliterating the theoretical distinction between viewpoint and situation type aspect.

Much of linguistic theory distinguishes four situation types: states, activities, accomplishments and achievements (Vendler 1967, Dowty 1979, Smith 1991, etc.). Of these, accomplishments (and achievements) are telic, denoting situations which have an inherent endpoint/change of state, e.g., English *write a letter*. Activities (and states) are atelic, denoting situations without an inherent endpoint/change of state, such as English *laugh*. Viewpoint aspects present a situation from a certain perspective, either “from within” (imperfective viewpoints) or in its totality (perfective viewpoints). While viewpoints operate on situations, crucially they do not alter situation type (e.g., Comrie 1976, Smith 1991). For example, the distinction between telic and atelic predicates is usually maintained in perfective viewpoint (cf. Smith 1991): Telic perfective predicates, which contain an inherent endpoint/change of state, denote a situation or event which has been completed, (1a). Atelic perfective predicates, which lack an inherent endpoint/change of state, denote a situation which has not been completed but has simply ended, (1b).

However, in Dëne *all* perfective sentences denote, by entailment, a completed situation, irrespective of situation type. For example, *ya-ł-ti* ‘talk/pray’ in (2b) is incompatible with a clause cancelling event completion. It thus seems as if the Dëne perfective imposes telicity, effectively obscuring the distinction between the two aspectual levels of viewpoint and situation type.

- (1) a. # She baked a cake but she did not finish baking it. TELIC (accompl.)  
 b. √ She prayed but she did not finish praying (the entire prayer). ATELIC (activity)
- (2) a. # tthidziné k'e bér thiłbes kúlú ʔanasdhën-íle TELIC (accompl.)  
 tthidziné k'e bér the-i-ł-bes kúlú ʔanasdhën ʔíle  
 yesterday meat perf-1s-cl-boil O but 1s.finish.perf not  
 ('yesterday I boiled some meat but I'm not finished it')
- b. # yaghiłti kúlú ʔanast'e-íle ATELIC (activity)  
 ya-ghe-i-ł-ti kúlú ʔanast'e ʔíle  
 th-perf-1s-talk/pray but 1s.finish not  
 ('I prayed/talked but I'm not finished')

The unusual constellation of viewpoint and situation type aspect in Dëne is accounted for—without abandoning the distinction between the viewpoint and situation type aspectual levels—in the following way. First, I show that lexical situation type is independent of perfective viewpoint. A common aspectual test, the interpretation of ‘almost’ (e.g., Dowty 1979), shows a clear difference between perfective accomplishments and activities. Only the former show an event completion interpretation with ‘almost’, the latter only show an event onset interpretation.

- (3) a. k'ájëne bér thiłbes TELIC (accompl.)  
 k'ájëne bér the-i-ł-bes  
 almost meat perf-1s-cl-boil O  
 ‘I'm almost done cooking it by boiling, I'm almost finished boiling it’
- b. k'ájëne yaghiłti sį ATELIC (activity)  
 k'ájëne ya-ghe-i-ł-ti sį  
 almost th-perf-1s-cl-stem assert  
 ‘I was going to speak but I didn't (I didn't get a chance to make my speech)’

Second, the unusual, quasi-telic meaning of the perfective finds a simple and elegant account in the theory of Klein (1995) by including a *posttime* into the reference or topic time represented by the Dëne perfective.

The semantics of standard perfective viewpoints can be accounted for by having two times, the time of the situation (TSit) and the reference or topic time (TT), which is the time denoted by a viewpoint aspect. The TT represented by a perfective viewpoint includes TSit (while in an imperfective viewpoint, TSit includes TT):

- (4) Unmarked perfective viewpoint (Klein 1995, cf. also Smith 1991)  
 -----[TT[TSit-----]]----->

This general schema is inadequate for the meaning of the Dëne perfective, which has the effect of representing every situation as completed. The unusual meaning of the Dëne perfective is accounted for by including not only TSit, but also the posttime into TT, (5). The posttime of a situation is the time “after” the situation (based on Klein 1995).

- (5) Dëne perfective viewpoint  
 -----[TT[TSit-----][TPost-----]]----->

Through including the posttime into TT, every perfective predicate denotes a change of state, namely from  $\phi$  (denoted by the lexical verb; true in TSit), to  $\neg\phi$  (true in the posttime; part of the denotation of the perfective verb). This change of state (from  $\phi$  to  $\neg\phi$ ), which is characteristic of telicity, derives the quasi-telic, completive meaning of the Dëne perfective.

The posttime analysis is supported by the semantics and morphology of positional stative verbs. Positional statives in the imperfective form are morphologically perfective (prefix *the-* and perfective stem *-da*, cf. (4a)), and denote the result state of a completed sitting-down event. The presence of the posttime is even more apparent in the perfective (really a perfective of a perfective) stative form, (4b), which denotes that the subject argument was, but is no more in a state of sitting.

- (4) a. **thida** ‘I am sitting’ (‘I sat down and am now sitting’)      IMPF  
**the-i-Ø-da**  
 perf-1s-cl-stem:sg sit
- b. **ghidá** ‘I sat/was sitting (now I don’t anymore)’      PERF  
**ghe-i-Ø-dá**  
 perf-1s-cl-stem:sg sit

The analysis of the Dëne perfective in terms of a posttime is successful in deriving the marked quasi-telic properties of this viewpoint aspect without manipulating the situation aspect of the predicate (TSit). Besides being theoretically desirable, this also corresponds to the Dëne facts: As shown through aspectual tests, perfective predicates can be distinguished into telic and atelic ones (cf. (3) above). However, the telicity distinction is a purely semantic one in Dëne, and does not have grammatical correlates.

This last fact sheds new light on the controversial status of telicity in Dëne and related Athapaskan languages (cf. Smith 1991, 1996, Midgette 1996, Rice 2000). The perfective viewpoint, which covers much of the functions of telicity in Dëne, provides a motivation for the view that telicity is not grammaticized in these languages.

## References

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