

THE SEMANTICS OF ASPECTUALIZERS IN ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

The paper gives an analysis of the semantic value of aspectualizers within the presupposition and consequences approach, represented mainly by A. Freed (1979). This approach takes as basics the term presupposition (referring to the prior initiation of the event) and consequence (the subsequent occurrence of the event). In order to illustrate the close relation between these terms and the aspectual nature of the aspectualizers, the theory makes use of the temporal structure of an event, that may consist of an onset, nucleus and coda (*the onset is a temporal segment prior to the nucleus of an event-that is, before the event (or the action) is actually initiated (Freed 1979); the nucleus is the time segment during which the activity is in progress (without reference to its beginning or end); it can consist of subphases (initial, middle and final segments). Finally, coda brings an event to its definite close.*) There is a strong connection between the temporal structure of an event and the possibility vs. impossibility of a certain aspectualizer to appear with eventuality types. Thus, aspectualizers have a restricted use with achievements which is due to the temporal structure of achievements. Achievements cannot be segmented into onset, nucleus and coda but they rather express the transition from one state to the other. As such, only those achievements can appear with aspectualizers that are related to an activity (i.e. *'They started to find their way out of the forest after a 2-hour walk'* presupposes that they were looking for the way) (Freed 1979). When used with aspectualizers, achievements may acquire a series reading. The following example *'He started losing his glasses'* refers to the onset of a series of events (losing one's glasses). Besides presenting the main lines of Freed's analysis of aspectualizers, other interpretations of aspectualizers, like those of Brinton (1991), Dowty (1979), and Newmeyer (1975) are also presented. A rather detailed analysis is given of the aspectualizers expressing initiation (*begin* and *start*), continuity (*continue, keep, resume and repeat*), interruption or cessation (*stop, quit, cease*) and termination (*finish, end and complete*). The aspectualizers are presented in a comparative analysis which makes it possible to present the subtle semantic differences among the aspectualizers expressing either initiation, continuity or termination. The paper is based on the idea that the differences or on the contrary similarities concerning the syntactic context of aspectualizers are motivated by their semantic value: the syntactic properties of aspectualizers can be explained by their semantics.

2. The Semantics of Aspectualizers

Brinton (1991) states that considering their semantics aspectualizers can be considered "clausal operators" (operating over a semantic structure). The semantic analysis of aspectualizers was dealt with in literature in terms of "change-of-state calculus" approach (Von Wright's approach) abstract predicate approach (represented mainly by Dowty 1979), presupposition and consequences approach (A. Freed 1979).

3. Begin and Start Compared

Begin and Start have several properties in common: they both presuppose the prior non-existence of the event and eventually refer to its initiation. Concerning their appearance with complement types, we can say, that they can both appear both sentential complements under the form of *toV* and *V-ing* complements (s. 1, 2), as well as with nominals (derived nominals and primitive concrete nouns) (s.3)

1) *It began to rain / raining. It started to snow. / It started snowing.*

2) *I began to write/ writing a letter. / I started to write/ writing a letter.*

3) *The preacher began / started the sermon.*

Example 4) shows that the use of begin with a nominal alone is not always felicitous; begin allows for a simple nominal complement only if this complement names situations which take place in time (Freed 1979), consider

4) *He started the car. / *He began the car. / He began driving the car.*

Newmeyer (1975) claims that *start* and *begin* can only appear with objects that can be objects of a definable class of verbs (continuing activity verbs- C.A. verbs, like eat, cook etc., in addition *start* shows syntactic properties with another class of verbs, called motion verbs (dance, run, walk etc.)

Start and *begin* rarely appear in the progressive as they usually denote punctual situations: in case they are used in the progressive form they indicate that the beginning (or ending in the case of *finish* and *end*) is approaching. Then they can be followed only by the *toV* form, as the sentences 5) and 6) show:

5) *She is beginning/ starting to accept the situation.*

6) **She is beginning/ starting accepting the situation.*

Concerning the ability of aspectualizers to appear with eventuality types, it can be stated, that both *begin* and *start* appear with activity verbs (ex. 1)), accomplishments (s.2)), but are infelicitous with achievements (sentences 7,8), unless we have an unspecified plural subject of direct object, in which case the sentence has an iterative (series) reading. Thus, while '*John began to arrive*' (sentence 7) is incorrect (as it is a punctual situation), '*The guests began to arrive*' is correct since there are more persons involved here and the event of arriving gets an iterative (series) reading. Aspectualizers may also occur with certain state predicates (sentences 9, 10) (the *toV* form is usually considered to be more natural with states (the *-ing* form in 9) is strange) but sometimes *V-ing* form can also occur (sentence 10)

7) **John began to arrive. / The guests began to arrive. / *John started to arrive / The guests started to arrive.*

8) **I began to notice/ noticing him. / *I started to notice / noticing him.*

9) *I began to feel good / *to be feeling good. / I started to feel / *to be feeling good.*

10) *She started / began hating him for his selfishness*

These and other differences between *start* and *begin* can be explained by the different relations *start* and *begin* have with respect to the temporal structure of the sentence: while *start* refers to the onset of an event, *begin* refers to the first temporal segment of the nucleus. This difference between *begin* and *start* may result in different consequence relations: thus, *begin* always entails subsequent occurrence of the event, but *start* may also entail non-occurrence (one can start something and then not do it). This explains why sentence 11) and also 12) are incorrect with *begin* but correct with *start*.

11) **She began to sneeze but then she didn't sneeze. / She started to sneeze but then she didn't sneeze.*

12) *She began to work but then she didn't work. / She started to work but then she didn't work

Start has altogether a larger use than *begin*. This is due to the fact, that although both *start* and *begin* are marked for causality (they bring about an event) so that it is possible to say both '*He began the lecture*' and '*He started the lecture*' *start* has an additional feature of causality which is missing from *begin*. Because *begin* does not have this additional causality, sentences with objects that do not express temporality need the specification of the complement verb to express the temporality of the sentence. This may explain why sentence 14b) is ungrammatical but 13b) isn't.

13a) *I started to walk towards the door.*

13b) *I started towards the door.*

14a) *I began to walk towards the door.*

14b) **I began towards the door.*

The causality feature of *start* is also shown by the sentence below (15) as well as its paraphrase. *Begin* does not allow for such structures (s. 16))

15) *He started me thinking about the problem. /He got me started thinking/caused me to start thinking about the problem.*

16) **He began me thinking about the problem.*

As to the question whether these aspectualizers presuppose intentional causality the answers in literature vary: while Dowty states that they can be marked both for intentional and non-intentional causation (Tobin 1993), Freed (1979) argues that both *begin* and *start* are unspecified regarding the active attempt of the subject: she states that an event being marked for causality does not necessarily presuppose an "intention" interpretation, but rather that there was something/someone which was the cause of the event, consider sentence 17) where important is that someone/something caused the flowers to wilt.

17) *The flowers began/ started to wilt.*

Because of its causality, *start* can also be used in contexts when it refers not only the temporality of the sentence but the initiating activity of the event as well. *Begin*, on the contrary, cannot be used in such contexts:

18) *He started a fight. / * He began a fight. /He started the fire. /* He began the fire.*

19) *The flood started our trouble. /*The flood began our trouble.*

4. Continuative Aspectualizers: Continue, Keep, Resume and Repeat

Besides the Progressive Aspect, continuative aspectualizers with *continue*, *keep*, *resume* and *repeat* can be considered another important means of expressing continuity in English. Brinton (1991) states that continuative aspectualizers behave similarly to progressive *be* by imperfectivizing the eventuality type they are operating on. Also, similarly to the progressive operator *be+ ing*, their meaning is dependent on the aktionsart of the complement verb: with verbs expressing states, accomplishments and continuous activities this meaning is "continuative", with verb expressing achievements, iterative activities or series, the meaning is "iterative", sentences (20, 21) and respectively (22,23)

20) *She continues to own a large car/ he keeps loving her (continuative reading)*

21) *I kept/continued painting pictures to pass the time (iterative meaning)*

22) *He is painting/writing a letter (continuative reading)*

23) *He is writing letters/ The dog is barking (iterative reading)*

4.1. Continue and Keep Compared

Dowty (1979) includes both *continue* and *keep* in the group of activities, and this points to an important similarity between *keep* and *continue*, that is they are both imperfectivizers, referring to the nucleus of an event.

Concerning the possibility of appearing with complement forms it can be stated that *continue* has a larger use than *keep*. While *continue* can appear both with sentential complements under the form of *V-ing* (*continued talking*) and *toV* (*continued to talk*), primitive nouns (*continue the discussion*), *keep* can neither appear with *toV* complement forms nor with primitive nouns (**keep to talk*, **keep the discussion*) (constructions with *keep* do not allow for complements without a verb form-when a verb form is present the structure is well-formed (*continued having the discussion*)).

Despite the fact they are both imperfectivizers, *continue* and *keep* show subtle semantic differences. One important difference between them is that they express different presupposition and consequence relations: thus, while *continue* always implies as presupposition that the event in question has taken place before, this is a consequence and not a presupposition for *keep*. In fact, in case *keep* operates on series (a category introduced by Freed, resulting from the use of achievements with plural NPs) there is often neither a presupposition nor a consequence about the prior occurrence of the event.

Sentence 24) does not presuppose that the slamming of the door has taken place before, sentence 25) with *continue* however does.

24) *Someone kept slamming the door all night.*

25) *Someone continued slamming the door all night.*

The different uses of aspectual *keep* is referred to by Newmeyer (1975) as the factual and non-factual use of *keep* (a predicate is factive, if it presupposes the truth of its complement, otherwise it is non-factive). Another difference between *keep* and *continue* has to do with the causative feature of causality; *continue* on the other hand is not marked for causality. The causative feature of *keep* is shown by the possibility of *keep* sentences to appear in structures like 26) and also in causative structures like 27) that is a paraphrase of sentence 26). Such structures are impossible for *continue*.

26) *They kept the audience waiting. /* They continued the audience waiting*

27) *They caused/ made the audience wait.*

Also, *keep* can occur in sentences, where the subject of the matrix sentence and the complement sentence is different, as in 28).

28) *I kept John hitting Paul.*

Another difference between *continue* and *keep* has to do with their appearance with eventuality types, specifically their occurrence with accomplishments: while *continue* can appear with accomplishment verbs that express a single event, *keep* allows only for multiple events as its complement, consider

29) *He continued writing a letter/the letter/letters.*

30) **He kept writing a letter /the letter. / He kept writing letters.*

4.2. Resume compared to Continue and Keep

Resume can appear with sentential complements under the form of *V-ing* and also derived nominals, but do not usually appear with primitive nouns

31) *He resumed discussing the problem/the discussion of the problem.*

Concerning its presupposition and consequences relations it can be stated, that *resume* has different presuppositions and consequences from *continue* or *keep*. *Resume* presupposes the prior initiation and cessation of the event in its complement (*continue* only implicitly implies as consequence the interruption of the event). The consequence of sentences with *resume* is that the activity is begun but not started again (that is it is started from the onset, not from the nucleus). *Resume* has in common with *keep* that it is also marked for causality. Freed (1979) however states, that unlike the causality of *keep*, which is not specified for intentionality, *resume* is marked for a causality that expresses intentionality. *Resume* is more restrictive than *continue* and *keep*: it cannot appear with durative adverbials (for adverbials) (sentence 32) and can neither appear with accomplishments and achievements (sentences 33, 34)

32) **The two sides resumed negotiating for two hours. / at 10 AM*

33) **He resumed painting the portrait*

34) **He resumed catching the dog.*

4.3. Repeat:

Of all the continuative aspectualizers mentioned here *repeat* has the most restrictive use: all arguments of *repeat* are derived nominals, primitive nouns or pronouns. *Repeat* also lacks the causative reading shared by many aspectualizers (*start*, *keep*, *stop* etc.) Though its meaning is similar to *resume*, *repeat* has different presupposition and consequence relations, so that unlike *resume*, which presupposes only the prior cessation of the event, *repeat* has as presupposition the prior completion of the event, so that sentence 35) can only have as presupposition that she already asked the question before repeating it.

35) *She repeated the question*

An interesting fact about *repeat* is that, when a context does not specify it (by the presence of a frequency adverbial in the sentence, like *twice*, *four times* etc.) we have the feeling that *repeat* implies a single repetition of the event expressed, and as such, it can be considered perfective.

5. Stop, Quit and Cease compared:

This group of aspectualizers refers to the nucleus of the event. They are different from the other aspectualizers in referring to the interruption, cessation or termination of the event in question. Despite this similarity between them there are also some differences between these aspectualizers concerning their syntactic and semantic value.

5.1. Stop and Quit compared:

Stop and *quit* appear in similar syntactic contexts. That is, they appear with sentential complements under the form of *V-ing* (s.36), but cannot appear with *toV* complement forms (s.37)

36) *He stopped/quit worrying about the problem.*

37) **He stopped/ *quit to worry about the problem.*

Concerning their semantic properties they show some similarities but also differences. Both *stop* and *quit* presuppose that the action was in progress before we stopped or quit doing it. There is however a difference between the consequences implied by *stop* and *quit*. Thus, *stop* besides

indicating an interruption in the activity named in its complement can also imply a possible resumption of the activity in question, consider

38) *He stopped smoking for a while.* (the activity of smoking may still continue-here *stop* refers to the suspension of the event in question rather than its termination). On the contrary, the contexts that *quit* appears in point to a more complete or even a final cessation of the event named in its complement. While *stop* may imply a possible resumption of the event referring to the suspension of the activity named in the complement, *quit* can only refer to the final termination of the event in question. There are also other differences between *stop* and *quit*. There is a difference between them concerning their ability to appear with eventuality types: while *stop* can freely occur with activities and accomplishments (although with a clear difference in meaning- the use of an accomplishment verb with *stop* does not imply that the whole event took place-*He stopped painting the portrait* does not mean he painted the portrait), *quit* appears awkwardly with activities when they are understood temporarily, sentence 39)

39) *He quit eating when the phone rang* ????? is awkward since eating can only be imagined to be stopped temporarily in this case (the sentence becomes well-formed if eating is not understood temporarily, like in 40)

40) *He quit eating peanut butter after he returned home.*

Then, *quit* implies a sense of intentionality, also shown by the fact that *quit* occurs awkwardly with inanimate subjects, consider

41) **The sun quit shining* (this sentence would be well-formed with *stop* which does not imply intentionality))

Another difference between *stop* and *quit* is that *stop* but not *quit* appears in middle constructions (which points to the causative feature of *stop*)

42) *The water stopped dripping. /The dripping of the water stopped.*

43) *The child quit crying. / *The child's crying quit.*

The causality feature of *stop* is also shown by the fact that sentence 42) above can be paraphrased as 44) *We caused the dripping of the water to stop.*

Quit, on the contrary, is not marked for causality. Yet, it is marked for intentionality, shown by the fact, that it requires an agentive subject. (the ungrammaticality of sentence 41))

Quit and *stop* can appear with all eventuality types, except for achievements: neither *quit* nor *stop* can appear with achievements, which explains the ungrammaticality of sentence 45). Exceptions are cases when achievements are recategorized as series, sentence 46)

45) **He quit / *stopped realizing what he meant.*

46) *He stopped identifying pictures for the FBI.*

Stop has some common characteristics with *start*: they are both marked for causality, thus sentence 47)

47) *He started/ stopped the car* can be paraphrased as:

48) *He made/caused the car the car to start/stop.*

Despite this similarity between *stop* and *start*, *stop* has a more restrictive use with primitive nouns than *start*. There are cases when *start* can freely occur with a noun complement alone but *stop* cannot, consider:

49) *He started the paper. / *He stopped the paper.* (yet, adding a verb complement the sentence becomes grammatical: *He stopped reading the paper*)

5.2. Stop and Cease

The most striking difference between *stop* and *cease* is that *cease* can take as argument either the *toV* or the *V-ing* form

50) *He ceased to remembe my name/ calling him a fool.*

Both *stop* and *cease* have as presupposition that the event named in the argument has taken place before. A main difference between the two is that while *stop* implies only a suspension of the event with a possible resumption of it, with *cease* the cessation of the complement is definitive (the same as by quit).

Stop cannot have the permanent effect on an event that is created by *cease*. This means that while we can not cease something for a while then resume it –this is what sentence 51) would imply and that is why it is unnatural, consider

51) *They ceased discussing the matter until the president arrived. ????*

Just like *stop*, *cease* is also marked for causality, shown by its possiblity to appear in middle constructions, sentence 52)

52) *Peter ceased working. Peter's work ceased.*

6. *End, Finish and Complete compared*

This part of the paper focuses especially on the comparison between *end* and *finish*, and additionally compares *finish* and *complete*.

Concerning the syntactic contexts of these aspectualizers, we can say that while *end* and *complete* can appear only with nominalizations (complete may sometimes allow for sentential complements) *finish* appears both with nominals and sentential complements, consider

53) *They finished their conversation. / having their conversation.*

54) *They ended their conversation. / *having their conversation.*

Both *end* and *finish* have a similar presupposition: a prior event has been brought to a close, thus both sentence 53) and 54) imply that a discussion had taken place. While, however sentence 55) implies that the event is over but not necessarily completed, sentence 56) has as a consequence that the dicussion is completely over, consider:

55) *They ended the discussion.*

56) *They finished the discussion.*

This difference between *end* and *finish* can be explained by the fact that *end* and *finish* have different relationships in relation to the temporal structure of the event: unlike *end* which refers to the last temporal segment of the nucleus, *finish* refers to the coda of the event named in the complement. This implies different consequences for sentences with *end* and *finish*: *end* denoting that the event is put an end to but not completed, *finish* that the event is over and completed. As *finish* refers to the coda of the event this allows *finish* to refer not only to the temporality of the event but to the completion of the activity itself (i.e.: in sentence 56) it is the event of discussion that is completed); on the contrary, in sentences with *end* it is usually the time of the discussion that is brought to a close. *Finish* requires a bound event as its complement, and as such it usually appears with accomplishments; its appearance with homogeneous events, like activities is only possible if that event is thought of as being bound, consider sentences 57a) and 57b)

57a) *He finished writing the letter. / b) ? He finished running*

Another difference between *end* and *finish* is that *end* is marked for causality, *finish*, on the contrary, is not (as sentence 60) shows *finish* cannot co-occur with accidentally or purposely)). *Finish* requires that the subject has some role in the completion of the event (be agentive), end

however doesn't. This difference between *end* and *finish* leads to a different interpretation of the sentences below (58) and 59)):

58) *They ended Peter's and Mary's argument.*

59) *They finished Peter's and Mary's argument.*

60) *He *accidentally/purposely finished the conversation.*

While sentence 58) has the interpretation that they put an end to Peter's and Mary's argument without taking part in it (caused the argument to end), sentence 59) has as consequence that they took part actively in the argument (the subjects have participated in the argument). The lack of an agentive subject with *finish* makes the sentence ungrammatical (sentence 61)). As sentences 62a) and 62b) show the subject of *finish* may be animate or inanimate:

61) **Her teeth finished decaying*

62a) *He finished his work and went home. / b) The leaves finished falling last week.*

End occurs freely with inanimate subjects; in such cases the sentences usually have a causative reading, leaving the active participation of the subject in the prior-occurrence of the event unspecified:

63) *The war ended. / The program ended. (Someone caused the war and the program to end)*

64) ** The war finished. / * The program finished.*

In some cases the meaning of *end* and *finish* is very close (sentence 65); according to Freed this is due to the aspectual nature of the object (nouns expressing spatial and temporal beginnings and endings).

65) *He ended/ finished the letter.*

7. Finish and Complete compared:

Complete will be compared with *finish* since the two aspectualizers are very close in meaning. Just like *finish*, *complete* presupposes that the event in question was in progress and finally it was carried out to completion.

66) *They finished the project in time.*

67) *They completed the project in time.*

Sentences 68) and 69) show that despite the similarities between them *finish* and *complete* may express slightly different aspectual meanings:

68) *He finished/ completed the lesson 5 minutes early.*

69) *He finished/ *completed 5 minutes early.*

While sentence 68) is possible, the lack of the direct object in sentence 69) with *complete* is not felicitous. The ungrammaticality of this sentence can be accounted for if we realize that unlike *finish*, *complete* has a non-temporal reading in addition to its temporal one; in such cases its object must be specified. In other words, *complete* is not a temporal aspectualizer in all contexts, but may refer to the physical part carried out in an event (Freed 1979). That *complete* has an additional non-temporal reading is also shown by the examples below, with a possible reading for *complete*, but an impossible reading for *finish*:

70) *The transaction completed the deal.*

71) ** The transaction finished the deal.*

8. Conclusion:

The analysis of the aspectualizers has shown that despite the similarities that exist within a group of aspectualizers expressing either initiation (*start* and *begin*), continuity (*continue, keep, resume*) or interruption, cessation of an event (*stop, quit, cease*), and finally termination (*finish, end, complete*) there are also some subtle semantic differences between them. The paper points to an interesting parallel between *begin* and *end* on the one hand, and between *start* and *finish* on the other hand. We have seen that *start* can be considered prior to *begin*, just as *end* to *finish*. While *begin* and *end* refer to some unspecifiable temporal segments of an event, *start* and *finish* refer to the very first part (onset-*start*) or on the contrary, to the last temporal segment of the event (coda-*finish*). This interesting parallel is also shown by expressions, like from *start to finish* (and not end) and *from the beginning to the end* (and not finish).

A final question to answer is if there is a difference in meaning between the *V-ing* and the *toV* complement forms of these aspectualizers (between i.e. *start to talk, start talking, begin to smile, begin smiling*). Freed (1979) states that the choice between them cannot be a stylistic matter, since they may imply different meanings. Unlike the *toV* complement which leads to a generic reading, the *-ing* operator adds iterativity and durativity to the event expressed in the complement of the aspectualizer. Taking *start* and *begin* as examples, in the presence of a *V-ing* complement the temporal distinction between them disappears consider the ungrammaticality of sentence 72)

72) **She started / began sneezing but then she didn't sneeze*

This can be explained by the fact that *-ing* is an imperfectivizing operator lending a durative aspect to any form it operates on so that in this case the total non-occurrence of the event is not possible. The sentence would allow only for *start* and a *toV* complement in this case.

This distinction is also present by the other aspectualizers, for example by *cease*, where the *toV* complement form (*cease to remember*) also results in a generic meaning (that is why, with the *toV* complement form a state verb is preferred), with *V-ing form*, the event in question is understood at the time or until the time of the cessation of the event.

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