Telic predicates and achievements in Malagasy: Evidence from number neutrality

It has long been acknowledged that noun phrase interpretation has an effect on aspectual interpretation (Verkuyl 1972, Dowty 1979, and many others). For example, in English bare plurals and mass nouns are only compatible with atelic readings.

(1) Jamie ate apples *in an hour/for an hour.

In languages with number neutrality, such as Japanese, bare nouns are interpreted as singular in telic contexts. Malagasy is a number neutral language like Japanese but bare nouns are compatible with plural indefinite readings in telic contexts. We argue that the unexpected plural readings are a result of the particular properties of telic predicates in Malagasy.
    Consider first the English pattern. Bare plurals are incompatible with telic verbs, such as 'eat up' and force the counterfactual reading of 'almost'.

(2) a. * Alex ate up cookies.
    b.   Alex almost ate cookies. (=she didn't start; ≠she didn't finish)

Consider now languages with number neutrality: unmarked nouns can be interpreted as singular or plural. As reported by de Swart (2010), in languages with number neutral nouns, telic contexts impose a singular reading of the bare noun, illustrated by the Japanese example in (3).

(3) Taro-ga   matci-o   (*gofunkan)   su-tta   [telic]
    T.-nom   match-acc for.five.minutes   strike-past
    'Taro struck a match (*for five minutes).'

Finally consider Malagasy, where nouns are number neutral, like Japanese. Applying de Swart's criteria, we expect Malagasy to pattern like Japanese. But in fact, a different picture emerges. As shown in (4), the bare noun complement *trano* 'house' of a telic verb (marked with the prefix *aha-*) remains number neutral and can be interpreted as singular or plural.

(4) Nahafongana   trano ny fahavalo.
    PST.AHA.destroy   house DET enemy
    'The enemy destroyed some house/s.'

Why does Malagasy differ in this way from Japanese?
    We propose that the difference lies in the aspectual properties of predicates in Malagasy. As noted by Rajaona (1972), Phillips (2000), Travis (2010), the neutral forms of verbs in Malagasy are all atelic. Thus the following sentence is grammatical.

(5) Nanaraka   anao aho   fa tsy   naharaka.
    PST.AT.follow 2   1SG(NOM) C NEG   PST.AHA.follow
    'I followed you but I wasn't able to.'

In order to overtly mark telicity, specific verbal prefixes must be used (or the bare root): *aha-*, *voa-*, *tafa-*. Travis (2010) proposes that all telic predicates are in fact achievements (rather than

accomplishments). However, when modified by *saika* 'almost', the only reading is scalar; (6) means that the woman started, but did not finish building a house (or houses).

(6)   Saika nahorina   trano io   vehivavy io.
       almost PST.AHA.build house DEM woman   DEM
       'This woman almost built a house/houses.'

We suggest, however, that Travis' intuition is partially correct: telic predicates in Malagasy resemble achievements in that they are inherently atomic. As noted by Rothstein (2010), inherently atomic predicates (achievements in English) are not affected by their internal argument.

(7) The message reached listeners in an instant.

According to Rothstein, a predicate is telic if it denotes a set of countable events (atomicity). Achievements are inherently atomic and therefore the properties of the internal argument do not affect telicity.

    Thus by analysing Malagasy telic predicates as inherently atomic, it is possible to account for the availability of the number neutral reading.

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