

Stages of Events in the Semantics of the Progressive

Introduction. In this paper I discuss certain, to my knowledge until now unnoticed, shortcomings of Landman's (1992) modal theory of the English progressive form, and propose an amendment for them. The shortcomings include conceptual problems and empirical inadequacies, and are shown all to stem from the particular way stages of events are defined in this theory. I also show how the original theory laid out in Dowty (1979) fares better with respect to these difficulties, and propose a way how to incorporate its advantages into a Landman type theory.

Landman (1992). In Landman's theory of the progressive, motivation for the introduction of the reasonableness principle comes from the consideration of sentences like the following:

- (1) Mary was crossing the street.
- (2) Mary was crossing the Atlantic.

On scenarios where Mary gets hit by a truck for the sentence (1), and where she drowns for the sentence (2), there are equally no chances for the events in the scope of the progressive to take place, or, stated in Dowty's terms, there are no possible inertia worlds in which they happen, and, yet, (1) is judged true, and (2) false. In order to explain the difference, the theory restricts the set of facts on the base of which is determined whether an event e can develop into the event designated by the predicate in the scope of the progressive. Instead of looking at the whole world, we base our calculations for the chances for an event to develop a particular way solely on the inherent properties of the event itself. Consequently, since it is reasonable to expect that Mary would drown before crossing the Atlantic, and since it is reasonable that Mary would cross the street if external factors were excluded, the sentence (1) is true, and (2) false. The idea of reasonableness is built into the definition of continuation branch to secure that Mary never crosses the Atlantic: every new world to which we jump to follow continuation of e has to be reasonable with respect to what is inherent to e – accordingly, in each of them Mary gets drowned. However, for the actual world the question of whether it is reasonable does not arise, and on a scenario where Mary gets divine help to cross the Atlantic the sentence (2) is true. The problem for this account arises in cases of events which are both (externally) interrupted and unreasonable, like (3).

- (3) With superhuman strength got from Poseidon, Mary was easily crossing the Atlantic when jealous Zeus struck her dead with a flesh of lightning.

Since the continuation stretch of e stops in the actual world, we go to the closest world where it does not stop, if that world is reasonable. However, there is no reasonable world in which e could be continued enough for Mary to get across the Atlantic. Therefore, we cannot satisfy truth conditions for the progressive, and (2) comes out false on scenario (3). But this does not correspond to our intuitions.

Second objection concerns the example of a hijacked flight. It states that I was on a flight to Boston, but the plane got hijacked and landed in Bismarck. The question is where I was flying before the hijacking. According to Landman, a possible answer is that I was flying to Boston. In the time before the hijacking there was a flying stage e which got interrupted, but which, if it continued instead, would have developed into a complete flight to Boston in some possible world on the continuation branch of e . However, as one event can be a stage of different events in different worlds, we could argue that, in some world, e could have continued, say, into a flight to Chicago (as it continued into a flight to Boston in the other possible world). For that reason, it would be also possible to say truthfully that I was flying to Chicago. Since both the flight to Boston and the flight to Chicago are not actual events, and since they are equally reasonable, there are no grounds in the theory on which to select one over the other. But this is in sharp contrast to our intuitions, which allow only that I was flying to Boston.

Discussion. The reason for these undesirable consequences lies in a too loose definition of event stages as events that could develop into different events of possibly incompatible descriptions. In particular, in this theory, the progressive relates a stage to an event type only after we followed its continuation branch and arrived to an event that realizes the given event type. Dowty's theory is different in that (because it takes event structure into account) the progressive of accomplishment

predicates involves operator BECOME under the scope of PROG. Since the definition of the BECOME-sentence requires that it be true only of the smallest interval over which the change takes place, this secures that a progressive accomplishment sentence is not true before this smallest interval had began. That is, the PROG-sentence entails that some part of the change is realized, and the identity of that part is given by the descriptive content of the base predicate. Similarly, for progressive sentences Parsons (1990) postulates the existence of events of the type of the base predicate's, although they are incomplete events. That there is plausibility to the view that progressive events already possess properties of the complete events they are possible stages of is confirmed by the widely acknowledged fact that we use progressive sentences when we have available evidence that the events referred to display properties which identify them as of a specific kind, or when they have subjects intentionally acting towards a goal specified by their base predicates.

Based on examples like (6), Landman argues that gradualness is not a necessary aspect of process of creation, and that the object of creation may come into existence in a flash at the end of a process. His semantics of the progressive is adjusted to such cases, and hence it does not posit more than the requirement that the completed continuation stretch of an event be *P*. However, there is a class of predicates whose event structure can be characterized exactly this way, but which resist formation of the progressive form. The examples of the class, dubbed *durative achievements* in Kearns (2003), include *break a promise*, *miscount*, and *cure the patient*. Take this example:

(4) John realized his dream to become a cop in a year./It took John a year to realize his dream.

(5) #John was realizing his dream to become a cop.

The base predicate in (4) and (5) entails different actions of John's during one year, but the achievement it names obtains as a result of the actions' meeting some conventional criterion, and is not directly caused by its subservient activities in a way that progression in activities would entail advancement in the realization of the result state of the accomplishment predicate. However, on Landman's theory, these verbs are expected to form good progressives since whether result states come into existence gradually or not is not relevant for the calculation of the truth of a progressive sentence. [The verb *create* may be a member of this class, too, so, for us, his example (6) should be taken as exceptional or misleading because we expect the same judgement for it as in (5). And, indeed, for most people the preparatory work of God's would be better referred to by some other predicate, say, *prepare the creation of a unicorn*, while (6), if it were to receive a grammatical interpretation, would entail that at least something of a unicorn had come into existence.]

(6) God was creating the unicorn when he changed his mind.

The proposal. The above discussion shows that when a predicate of change is in the progressive form, it is the very change that is in progression, and not just some subsidiary activity thereof. Then, progressive accomplishments *do* entail that some change took place, e.g., (2) entails that Mary crossed a part of the Atlantic. I postulate (7) to capture this fact about the progressive.

(7) If a part *e* of an event *f* is a stage of the event *f*, then *e* is an (incomplete) realization of the same event type *P* of which the event *f* is a (complete) realization.

Provision of such a property of a stage of an event gives solution for the reported problems. The bigger a stage is, the more salient characteristics of its event type are, and the more willing the speaker is to use the particular description. Accordingly, we do not have a problem calling Mary's swimming *crossing of the Atlantic*, particularly in its advanced stages, even if it never gets completed. Also, since every stage is of some type *P*, it cannot be described by any predicate incompatible with *P*, so one event cannot be both a flight to Boston, and a flight to Chicago. In cases where, seemingly, contradictory descriptions are attributed, I argue that either two different stages are involved, or one stage is referred to under different perspectives.

References. Dowty, David: 1979, *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*, Kluwer, Dordrecht. Kearns, Kate: 2003, Durative achievements and individual-level predicates on events, *Linguistics and Philosophy* 26: 595-635. Landman, Fred: 1992, The progressive, *Natural Language Semantics*, 1: 1-32.