ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATELICITY AND PARTITIVITY THE CASE OF ROMANIAN

Ilinca Crăiniceanu

Abstract: The aim of the paper is that of analyzing the induced atelic property on Romanian verb phrases with classes of verbs that may select theme arguments preceded by partitive prepositions (e.g., *din*/lit. from, *la*/lit. at, and *prin*/lit. through/across). The paper identifies the classes of verbs that may occur with partitive noun phrases and also discusses three possible means of achieving atelicity in Romanian. The two possible partitive constructions in Romanian (i.e., the bare partitive construction and the full partitive construction) are unambiguously two distinct structures in point of their VP aspectuality: in the bare partitive construction the VP is atelic while in the full partitive construction the VP is telic. An attempt at explaining this aspectual contrast is offered.

Keywords: partitivity, (a)telicity, partitive prepositions, "measured" direct objects, incrementally homogeneous direct objects

1. Introduction

Both in Romance and Germanic languages, telicity and atelicity are aspectual properties that are compositionally computed at the level of VP/IP (cf. Krifka 1992, Filip 2008, Rothstein 2008).

The aim of the paper is that of analyzing the induced atelic property on Romanian verb phrases with classes of verbs that may select theme arguments preceded by partitive prepositions such as: *din*/lit. from, *la*/lit. at, and *prin*/lit. through/across.

1.1 Two important insights in the domain of aspectual (a)telicity

There are two breakthrough insights that are important for the domain of aspectual (a)telicity:

(i) It was believed (Parsons 1990) that temporal boundedness or culmination (i.e., telicity) is a property of events: *Cul(e, t)* is a relation between an event *e* and a time *t* at which *e* culminates. Krifka (1998) argues that events per se never culminate. This is because events cannot be directly measured as they have no measurable dimention as part of their ontological make up. The contribution of the theme argument that must be "a gradual Patient" (Krifka 1992) or "an Incremental Theme" (Dowty 1991) is crucial as the event denoted by the verb applies or does not apply to the argument in a part-by-part way. This assumption led Krifka (1992) to formulating the *Rule of Aspectual Composition*: an episodic verb combined with a quantized incremental theme argument yields a quantized verbal predicate, as in (1a), while a cumulative incremental theme argument yields a cumulative verbal predicate, as in (1b), provided the whole sentence expresses a statement about single eventualities:

(1) a. Mary ate an apple/three apples in an hour (telic predicates)
b. Mary ate apples for hours (atelic predicate)

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

(ii) The second important remark is that the distinction between telicity/quantization and atelicity/cumulativity does not lie in the object described but in the description applied to the object (Krifka 1992).

2. Outline of the aspectual contrast between the two possible partitive constructions in Romanian

In theory, we would expect the combination of gradable predicates with non-quantized partitive DPs to always produce atelic predications, following Krifka's (1992) *Rule of Aspectual Composition*. These predications should be compatible only with homogeneous *for*-phrases. However, things are not so clear-cut and Romanian data do not bear out this prediction. First, Romanian, different from other Romance languages, has enclitic definite articles, as in (2), and lacks partitive determiners of the French *du, de la, des* type.

(2) Rom: măr(u)**l** Fr: **la** pomme

There are two possible partitive constructions in Romanian: the bare partitive construction (where the theme direct object occurs without a quantifier) and the full partitive construction (which contains a theme direct object with a quantifier). They are unambiguously two distinct constructions also in point of their VP aspectuality. Consider the examples in 3 (a, b):

(3) a. Am mâncat din (această bucată de) pâine o oră *bare partitive (atelic) VP*
Have (I) eaten *from* (this piece of) bread for an hour
'I ate of this piece of bread for an hour'
b. Am mâncat mult/puțin din (această bucată de) pâine într-o oră *full partitive (telic) VP*
Have (I) eaten a lot of (much)/(a) little *from* (this piece of) bread in an hour
'I ate a lot of (much)/(a) little of this piece of bread in an hour'

This aspectual contrast is unexpected if we interpret the two partitive DPs in the composition of the respective VPs in (3a, b) as meaning "an undetermined quantity of a determined entity".

In what follows we also glimpse at the atelicity property shared by bare partitive VPs and indefinite VPs in Romanian. We explain the atelicity property of Romanian VPs in terms of the property of "incremental homogeneity" enjoyed by activity VPs, following Landman and Rothstein (forthcoming).

On the other hand, all noun phrases that contain an indefinite quantitative determiner form quantized/telic VPs in spite of the non-quantized property of the theme direct object. We claim, following Rothstein (2008) and Landman and Rothstein (forthcoming) that the telicity of such VPs should be explained in terms of the co-occurrence of accomplishment verbs with "measured" direct objects.

3. Classes of Romanian verbs that may occur with partitive noun phrases

In Romanian, with the exception of state, achievement and semelfactive verbs, all classes of verbs that describe events which involve a change in degree of a gradable property

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

of their object occur with partitive noun phrases. This is different from French where only fragmentative verbs such as *a lua* 'take', *a mânca* 'eat', *a bea* 'drink' can occur with partitive noun phrases. The classes of Romanian verbs are:
(i) strictly incremental verbs: *a mânca* 'eat', *a construe* 'build', *a compune* 'compose';
(ii) incremental verbs: *a citi* 'read', *a spăla* 'wash', *a mătura* 'sweep', *a bea* 'drink', *a lua* 'take', *a examina* 'examine';
(iii) scalar verbs as a whole class: *a topi* 'melt', *a goli* 'empty', *a seca* 'dry' as illustrated in (4a-d):

(4) a. Au demolat din clădiri în acest cartier ani la rând
Have (they) demolished *from* buildings in this district years on end
'They demolished part of the buildings in this district years on end'
b. Am citit Soniei din "Prinț şi Cerşetor" două ore
Have (I) read to Sonia *from* "Prince and Pauper" for two hours
'I read Sonia "Prince and Pauper" for two hours'
c. A secat din lac în lunile de vară
Has dried *from* lake during the months of summer
'The lake dried partially during the months of summer'
d. Maria a băut din cafea câteva minute
Mary has drunk *from* coffee for a couple of minutes
'Mary drank of the coffee for a couple of minutes'

The data are all mine. To my knowledge, a couple of linguists have studied the partitive constructions in Romanian but I know of nobody to have taken a look at the relation between atelicity and partitivity in Romanian.

4. Means of achieving atelicity in Romanian

In Romanian and other Romance languages, atelicity is achieved by three means. A first such means is by the application of the imperfective aspectual operator, as in (5a, b), i.e., grammatical aspect, signaled by specific tense morphology on the verb in the present or the imperfect tenses:

(5). a. Mănânc (Pres) un măr (atelic predication)
Am (I) eating an apple
'I am eating'
b. Mâncam (Imp) un măr (atelic predication)
Was (I) eating an apple
'I was eating'

The imperfective viewpoint operator is used to focus on some internal parts of the eventuality and contributes the partitivity condition yielding *partial* states, processes or events (Filip 2000, Caudal 2005).

The second means of achieving atelicity is the presence of a mass noun or a bare plural direct object of eventive verbs in the imperfect tense or the *perfect compus* tense, as in (6a, b):

(6) a. Maria mânca (Imp) mere / pâine de o oră
Mary had been eating apples / bread for an hour

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

b. Maria a mâncat (PC) mere / pâine o oră
Mary ate apples / bread for an hour

The occurrence of *for*-phrases with a homogeneous eventuality α is taken as diagnostic test for verifying atelicity. *α for an hour* is defined as in (7) following Landman and Rothstein (forthcoming):

(7) α for an hour = λe. α(e) & LENGTH(τ(e)) = <1, HOUR>

As far as the third means of obtaining atelicity is concerned, we contend that it is achieved in structures that contain a partitive preposition preceding either a non-quantified count noun or a mass noun (i.e., bare partitives) in co-occurrence with a verb in the imperfect or the perfect compus. We focus particularly on predications in the perfect compus with partitive noun phrases, as in (8a-d):

(8) a. Am lucrat la casă două veri
Have (I) worked *at* house for two summers
'I worked on building part of the house for two summers'
b. Am ales din cărți toată după amiaza
Have (I) chosen *from* books all the afternoon
'I spent the whole afternoon choosing of the books'
c. Am mâncat din brânză două zile
Have (I) eaten *from* cheese for two days
'I ate of the cheese for two days'
d. Am măturat *prin* curte două ore
(where *prin curte* is interpreted as a measured path)
Have (I) swept *across* courtyard for two hours
'I kept sweeping across parts of the courtyard for two hours'

We interpret the partitivity property of Romanian nominals in (8a-d) as a linguistic means of inducing atelicity at the level of the whole VP.

As made conspicuous in the glosses of the examples in (8a-d) in Romanian partitive noun phrases the definite article does not surface. Romanian, different from other Romance languages such as French or Italian lacks prenominal "partitive articles" and it has a suffixal definite article (e.g., *măr(u)**l** / **la** pomme*). When the noun in the bare partitive noun phrase is preceded by a preposition, as in the examples in (8a-d), the article drop has been explained in terms of a process of incorporation (cf. Mardale 2006). The complement of the preposition is however a DP, a property proved by the occurrence of the noun with demonstrative determiners. The sentences in (9) sketch the Romanian-French contrast:

(9) a. (Ea) a mâncat din (această) prăjitură / din (această) tartă / din (aceşti) biscuiți o oră
(She) has eaten *from* (this) cake / *from* (this) tarte / *from* (these) biscuits for an hour
'She ate of this cake / of this tarte / of these biscuits'
a'. Elle a mangé du gâteau/de ce gâteau / de la tarte/de cette tarte / des/de ces biscuits pendant une heure

We do not intend an in depth account of the contrast between French and Romanian but a few remarks are in order.

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

Romanian bare partitive noun phrases are not ambiguous between a partitive reading and an indefinite reading as acknowledged in much of the literature on the French *du, de la, des* constructions.

In Romanian, the partitive reading is formally expressed by a partitive preposition and an articleless noun with the meaning ”an undetermined quantity of a determined entity”. The indefinite interpretation of the French preposition *de* preceding the object noun of a fragmentative verb with the meaning ”an undetermined quantity of an undetermined entity” is formally expressed in Romanian by a bare noun as in (10):

(10) (Ea) a mâncat prăjitură / tartă / biscuiți o oră
(She) has eaten cake / tarte / biscuits for an hour

Both sets of structures in (9) and (10) contain atelic VPs. (See also Storto 2003 where the interpretive properties of bare partitives in Italian are analyzed as parallel to the properties displayed by bare nouns).

In analyzing Romanian partitive constructions we follow the standard Partitive Constraint and adopt an analysis à la Cardinaletti and Giusti (2002) or Nedelcu (2009) who assume the structure in (11) for the partitive construction:

(11) Am băut (mult/puțin)$_{\text{IndefDet1}}$ [vin / Ø] din$_{\text{PartPrep}}$ (acest)$_{\text{Det2}}$ vin într-o oră
Have (I) drunk (a lot of/much / (a)little) $_{\text{IndefDet1}}$ [wine / Ø] of$_{\text{PartPrep}}$ (this) $_{\text{Det2}}$ wine in an hour
’I drank (a lot of/much / (a)little) $_{\text{IndefDet1}}$ [wine / Ø] of$_{\text{PartPrep}}$ (this) $_{\text{Det2}}$ wine in an hour’

In Romanian, there is a clear contrast with respect to the VP aspectuality between structures that contain full partitive DPs and those that contain bare partitive DPs, as in (12a, b):

(12) a. Am mâncat mult / puțin din brânză în câteva minute
Have (I) eaten a lot of/much / (a)little *from* cheese in a couple of minutes
’I ate a lot of/much / (a)little of the cheese in a couple of minutes’
b. Am mâncat din brânză câteva minute
Have (I) eaten *from* cheese for a couple of minutes
’I ate of the cheese for a couple of minutes’

The predication in (12a) with a full partitive DP is telic and compatible only with *in*-phrases. The bare partitive VP in (12b) is atelic and compatible only with *for*-phrases.

5. Towards an explanation of the VP aspectual properties in (12a, b)

The atelicity property of the Romanian VPs that contain bare partitive noun phrases as (12b) befits an analysis in terms of the predicate’s “degree of change” argument d on a volume/extent scale, following Kennedy (2002). On Kennedy’s approach the telicity/atelicity property of all verbs of gradable change (i.e., verbs of creation/consumption, verbs of directed motion, degree achievements) is given by the relation established between the semantics of gradual change verbs and the quantized/non-quantized property of the degree argument d.

The generalization Kennedy arrives at is that whether a predicate is telic or atelic is strictly a function of the scalar properties of the degree of change, interpreted as a measure function.

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

On this account, Romanian verbs that may select bare partitive noun phrases form atelic VPs, where the partitive noun phrase expresses both the affected argument and the non-quantized measure argument d.

Yet, this type of account does not explain the telic property of the VP in (12a) with a full partitive DP. Alongside the determiners in (12a) there are other elements that function as non-quantized determiners such as: *o parte din* 'a part of', *un strop din* 'a drop of', *un sfert din* 'a quarter of', *un vârf de cuțit din* 'a tip of knife of' on a par with the English similar measure phrases such as *a bit of, a part of* or *a quantity of* (Kennedy 2002). All these measure arguments are non-quantized but the whole VP turns out as quantized and the predications do not stand the verifying test of occurring with homogeneous *for*-phrases as in (13a), taken from (Kennedy 2002). In the same way, the Romanian predications in (13b, c) come out as telic:

(13) a. Kim drank a quantity of milk ?for 30 minutes/in 30 minutes
a'. Kim a băut o cantitate de lapte *?30 de minute/în 30 de minute
b. Am scris un sfert din teză în 2 luni
Have (I) written a quarter of the dissertation in 2 months
'I wrote a quarter of the dissertation in 2 months'
c. Am zugrăvit o parte din perete în 2 ore
Have (I) painted a part of the wall in 2 hours
'I painted a part of the wall in 2 hours'

These predications are of twigs, sequences and quantities type-sentences analyzed in Zucchi and White (2001) as quantized maximal events.

Contra Zucchi and White (2001), Rothstein (2008) and Landman and Rothstein (forthcoming) cease characterizing telicity in terms of quantization and propose instead defining telicity of accomplishment verbs in terms of their occurrence with a "measured" direct object. The expression of quantity rendered by the direct object need not be a precise measure as long as a criterion of individuation or atomic measure can be determined in the linguistic context.

On Landman and Rothstein's (2008) account the predications in (13) come out as non-homogeneous/telic since part of an entity is a "measured entity". In their framework, the onset of these events is not of the same type as the events themselves and so the event type of these eventualities is not preserved along growing initial subintervals.

It seems that what blocks modification of the predications in (13) by aspectual *for*-phrases is the presence of a determiner as shown in the generalization given in (14) due to Landman and Rothstein (forthcoming); the generalization holds for both English and Romanian:

(14) a. John ate DET apple(s) in α time / *for α time
b. John ate a lot of / a little apple in α time / *for α time

As far as the atelicity property of the VPs in (12b) above is concerned, we contend that in Landman and Rothstein's (2008) framework it is the notion of "incremental homogeneity" that explains their atelicity property.

The stages of the eventuality are not qualitatively different and they enjoy the incremental homogeneity property defined as "incremental preservation of cross-temporal identity of an event and of its event type between the running time of the initial subinterval (the onset) of the event and the running time of the event itself" (Landman and Rothstein forthcoming).

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

6. Conclusion

We believe the two atelic verbal frames that can be identified in Romanian are of the forms given in (15a, b):

(15) a. verb in the PC + partitive noun phrase + for α time
b. verb in the Pres/Imp + quantized noun phrase/partitive noun phrase + for α time.

Ilinca Crainiceanu
"Spiru Haret" University, Bucharest, Romania
icrainiceanu@hotmail.com

References

Cardinaletti, A. and Giusti, G. 2002. The syntax of quantified phrases and quantitative clitics. Ms., Ca' Foscari University, Venice.

Caudal, P. 2005. Stage structure and stage salience for event semantics. In P. Kempchinsky and R. Slabakova (eds.), *Aspectual Inquiries*, 239-264. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Dowty, D. 1991. Thematic roles and argument selection. *Language* 67: 547-619.

Filip, H. 2000. The quantization puzzle. In J. Pustejovsky and C. Tenny (eds.), *Events as Grammatical Objects, from the Combined Perspectives of Lexical Semantics and Syntax*, 3-60. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Filip, H. 2008. Events and maximalization: The case of telicity and perfectivity. In S. Rothstein (ed.), *Theoretical and Crosslinguistic Approaches to the Semantics of Aspect*, 217-256. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Kennedy, C. 2002. Telicity corresponds to degree of change. Ms.

Krifka, M. 1992. Thematic relations as links between nominal reference and temporal constitution. In I. Sag and A. Szabolsci (eds.), *Lexical Matters*, 29-53. Stanford, CA: CSLI.

Krifka, M. 1998. The origins of telicity. In S. Rothstein (ed.), *Events and Grammar*, 197-235. Kluwer: Dordrecht.

Landman, F. and Rothstein, S. forthcoming. Incremental homogeneity in the semantics of aspectual *for*-phrases. Mardale, A. 2006. The definite article with prepositions in Romanian: A type of incorporation? Ms.

Nedelcu, I. 2009. *Categoria partitivului în limba română*. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române.

Parsons, T. 1990. *Events in the Semantics of English*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Rothstein, S. 2008. Telicity, atomicity and the Vendlerian classification of verbs. In S. Rothstein (ed.), *Theoretical and Crosslinguistic Approaches to the Semantics of Aspect*, 275-314. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Storto, G. 2003. On the status of the partitive determiner in Italian. In J. Quer, J. Schroten, M. Scorretti, P. Sleeman and E. Verheugd (eds.), *Romance Languages and Linguistic Theory 2001: Selected Papers from Going Romance 2001*, 315-330, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Zucchi, S. and White, M. 2001. Twigs, sequences and the temporal constitution of predicates. In *Linguistics and Philosophy* 24: 187-222.

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)

BDD-A9822 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:12 UTC)