ASPECTUAL MISMATCHES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF IDIOMS: THE VIEW FROM ASPP

Imola-Ágnes Farkas[*]

Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to uncover some of the (syntactic) properties of idioms that present aspectual mismatches between their literal and idiomatic interpretation. The novelty value of the proposal lies in its syntactic rather than semantic or cognitive approach: whereas most accounts in the literature deal with this conundrum from a semantic and cognitive point of view, the present analysis provides a syntactic aspectual account by relying on AspP.

Keywords: idiom, telic, atelic, aspectual mismatch, aspect phrase (AspP)

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that whereas some idioms are aspectually identical to their non-idiomatic counterpart, others are not. In this sense, Marantz (1997) and McGinnis (2002, 2005) argue that the aspectual class of most VPs is the same on their idiomatic and non-idiomatic interpretation, which means that the aspectual property of the idiomatic expression is derived compositionally. Some examples are:

(1) a. saw logs [lit.] – atelic[1]
b. saw logs [id.] ('to sleep, to snore') – atelic
(2) a. kick the bucket [lit.] – telic
b. kick the bucket [id.] ('to die') – telic

In these cases, the VP has the same aspectual property both under the literal (a) and the idiomatic reading (b). In such and similar cases, the idiom has the same aspectual property as its non-idiomatic counterpart.

But there are several idioms that are problematic for McGinnis's claim that the aspectual interpretation on the idiomatic and non-idiomatic use of a predicate coincides. As revealed by more recent accounts such as Glasbey (2003, 2007), Mateu and Espinal (2007, 2013) and Espinal and Mateu (2010), in a number of cases the aspectual class of a VP is not the same on its idiomatic and non-idiomatic interpretation, which means that in these cases the aspectual property of the idiomatic expression is derived non-compositionally. This leads to what is generally known as the aspectual mismatch between the telic literal and the atelic non-literal interpretation of these idioms.

As opposed to the previous examples, in (3) to (8) the same VP does not display the same aspectual behaviour under the two interpretations:

[*] Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Letters, email: farkas_imola_agnes@yahoo.com.
[1] Throughout the paper, the abbreviation "lit." means 'literal' and "id." stands for 'idiomatic'.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

(3) a. hit the books [lit.] – telic (no repetitive interpretation)
b. hit the books [id.] ('to study hard') – atelic
(4) a. bite your tongue [lit.] – telic
b. bite your tongue [id.] ('to avoid talking') – atelic
(5) a. shoot the enemy [lit.] – telic
b. shoot the breeze [id.] ('to talk, to gossip, to chat') – atelic
(6) a. drown one's rats [lit.] – telic
b. drown one's sorrows [id.] ('to hide one's feelings, seek escape from sadness by drinking alcohol') – atelic
(7) a. paint the town red [lit.] – telic
b. paint the town red [id.] ('to go out, enjoy oneself, drink a lot and dance') – atelic
(8) a. drive one's pigs to market [lit.] – telic
b. drive one's pigs to market [id.] ('to snore') – atelic

In (3) and (4), I illustrate the aspectual mismatch with one and the same VP that can have two different aspectual properties depending on the type of interpretation. The reason why in (5) and (6) I exemplify the dichotomy between the telic literal and atelic non-literal reading with a structurally similar but slightly altered VP is that the literal counterpart of the idiomatic VP in (5b) and (6b) would sound pragmatically quite infelicitous. Finally, in the last two examples I illustrate the aspectual mismatch with two secondary predicate structures: a resultative construction (7) and a goal-of-motion structure (8).

My aim in this paper is two-fold. First, I take a close look at two types of verbal idioms: (i) the ones where it is the internal argument that delimits the event of V (3 to 6); and (ii) the ones where it is the secondary predicate (the result phrase or goal PP) that delimits the event of V (7 and 8). Second, I intend to give a syntactic rather than semantic account of aspectual mismatches in idioms.

The paper unfolds as follows: Section 2 is meant to give a background on aspectuality and familiarize the readers with the most important mechanisms that turn an eventuality telic or atelic. In order to attain this goal, a discussion about the presence and nature of the internal argument and the shape of the secondary predicate is necessary. In Section 3, I describe in outline the most representative accounts of aspectual mismatches. As we will see, and quite surprisingly, the linguistic curiosity in this phenomenon is in sharp contrast to the small number of studies dedicated to it. Section 4 tries to syntactically encode the aspectual mismatch by resorting to the functional category of aspect phrase (AspP). As this phenomenon has not been dealt with more exhaustively and more profoundly, the present paper attempts to fill in some of the gaps left by previous studies. Section 5 is both a conclusion and an outlook for future research. Though I am only taking the first tentative steps and the proposal is far from being complete, I hope that these few pages do contribute to a better understanding of aspectual mismatches in idioms[2].

[2] One important caveat is in order here: the very few studies from the literature focus (almost) exclusively on one type of mismatch, namely the one where the telicity of the literal interpretation does not correspond to the

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

2. Telicity versus atelicity

A predicate describing an event as having an endpoint is said to be telic, whereas a predicate describing an event as lacking such an endpoint is said to be atelic.[3] Furthermore, a predicate that varies between a telic and an atelic interpretation is said to be aspectually ambiguous. A predicate (i.e. not the lexical verb alone but the verb and its objects and/or complements, that is, the entire VP) describes an event, and the event it describes can be interpreted as having a subevent structure which can be understood in terms of endpoints. For instance, the sentence in (9a) describes an event without any inherent endpoint. It is not that an event such as eating sandwiches lacks an endpoint but it is rather the agent who decides upon this point, as it is virtually possible for this event to go on indefinitely. In such a case, the predicate is considered atelic and it is only compatible with the *for*-time adverbial. The sentence in (9b), however, describes an event that is interpreted as having a (clear) endpoint, which corresponds to the moment when the three sandwiches are eaten. To put it differently, when the three sandwiches are eaten and there are no sandwiches left, the eating event ends. Thus, in this case the predicate is considered telic and it is only compatible with the *in*-time adverbial.

(9) a. Mary ate sandwiches for hours.
b. Mary ate three sandwiches in one hour.

In this section, I take a look both at the contribution of the internal argument and at the import of the secondary phrase to the aspectual interpretation of the entire predicate. The syntactic motivation behind this divided interest is that these two building blocks of VPs, although they interact in some way and can have an effect on each other, show distinct aspectual effects.

2.1 The internal argument

It has been known at least since Verkuyl (1972) that aspect can be considered a structural phenomenon expressed in the form of information scattered over certain constituents of the sentence (especially the verb and its internal argument). As such, whereas an intransitive VP such as *run* is atelic, a transitive VP such as *run a mile* is telic. That is, whereas the absence of the internal argument leads to an atelic reading in the

atelicity of the idiomatic interpretation. Much to my surprise, no attention has been dedicated to the other type of aspectual discrepancy, where the atelicity of the literal meaning contrasts with the telicity of the non-literal interpretation. As confirmed by some of the authors of the above accounts (e.g. electronic letters exchanged with Sheila Glasbey and Evangelia Leivada), there seems to be no explanation why this type of shift has not been discussed so far. I have also noticed that it is more difficult to find idioms presenting this latter type of mismatch. This might be only a superficial detail but for the moment, I do not have an explanation for this incongruity, if indeed it truly exists, between the two types of mismatches. Whether these are accidental or suggest the need for a different approach remains to be seen. Also, I am not sure if and how the syntactic approach taken in this paper could be extended to explain the aspectual mismatch in those idioms as well.

[3] The terms telic/atelic have also been referred to as: delimited/non-delimited, quantized/cumulative, bound(ed)/unbound(ed), terminative/durative, etc. According to some accounts, (a)telicity is not a (perfect) synonym for (un)boundedness. This does not affect the conclusions reached here, so I ignore it completely.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

former case, the presence of the internal argument in the latter case induces a telic interpretation on the predicate. But as shown by the contrast between a transitive VP such as *run a mile* and a transitive VP such as *run miles*, there is more to the different aspectual readings of VPs than the mere presence versus absence of the internal argument. The aspectual difference between these two transitive VPs cannot be attributed to the presence versus absence of the internal argument but must be attributed to a difference in the nature of the internal argument itself. This means that the [±q] feature of the internal argument affects to a great degree the interpretation of the event described by the verb. To put it differently, if the internal argument is quantized ([+q]) and denotes a specific/well-defined quantity (i.e. it is expressed by a definite noun or it appears with a numerical/possessive determiner), it provides the necessary boundary/endpoint required for a telic reading. But if the internal argument is non-quantized ([–q]) and does not denote a specific/well-defined quantity (i.e. it is expressed by an indefinite bare plural or a mass noun that has a vague denotation and does not denote a delimited entity), then it does not provide the necessary boundary/ endpoint required for a telic reading, and the predicate is atelic.

The following pairs of examples also demonstrate that an atelic predicate is only compatible with the *for*-time adverbial but a telic predicate is only compatible with the *in*-time adverbial:

(10) a. saw logs (for hours) [lit.] – atelic
b. saw this piece of log (in a minute) [lit.] – telic
(11) a. kick the bucket (in two seconds) [lit.] – telic
b. kick buckets (for hours) [lit.] – atelic
(12) a. hit the books (in one second) [lit.] – telic
b. hit books (for five minutes) [lit.] – atelic

The presence of a [–q] internal argument makes the predicate atelic (see 10a, 11b and 12b) but the presence of a [+q] internal argument makes the predicate telic (see 10b, 11a, 12a). Naturally, in all these three cases the idiomatic reading would not be available in the examples in (b) because the idiom is a frozen pattern of language and involves either a [–q] noun (*logs* in 10a) or a [+q] noun (*the bucket* in 11a) and *the books* in (12a).

Of particular importance to the present discussion is that Verkuyl's (1972) mechanism for turning an eventuality telic or atelic through, for instance, quantized or non-quantized internal arguments only applies to the literal reading. Contra McGinnis (2002, 2005), hence, aspectual compositionality between the verb and its internal argument is a property exclusively of the literal VP but not of the idiomatic VP.

2.2 The secondary predicate (result and goal phrases)

We have seen so far that the nature of the internal argument plays a major role in the telic/atelic interpretation of a phrase. But not only do we need to know something about the internal argument, we also need to know something about the other arguments of the verb such as the result predicate and the goal phrase. The two types of secondary

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

predicates are assumed to be generated in the same syntactic position (at least in English) and their [±telic] feature can also affect the telicity of a VP (see also Tenny 1994).

Whereas the VP in (13a) is ambiguous between a telic and an atelic interpretation as it does not necessarily entail that a final state has been/is going to be reached, the same phrase is converted or recategorized into an unambiguously telic VP by the addition of the AP predicate *red* (13b). That the VP *paint the town red* is compatible with the *in*-time adverbial should come as no surprise since this is a canonical resultative construction which, under a literal interpretation, points towards reaching a final endpoint ('the town ends up being red as a direct result of having been painted'). We should also bear in mind that the same VP is compatible with the *for*-time adverbial as well but only when it is interpreted idiomatically (13c). Once the shape of the secondary predicate is altered (13d), it influences the aspectual nature of the entire construction, which is again interpreted as atelic. More importantly, in this latter case the idiomatic reading is no longer available as the idiom is fixed and allows little (if any) variation in the form of the predicate.

(13) a. paint the town (in/for two months) – telic-atelic
b. paint the town red [lit.] (in two months) – telic
c. paint the town red [id.] (for two hours) – atelic
d. paint the town redder and redder [lit.] (for two hours) – atelic

A similar phenomenon is to be found in goal-of-motion constructions. A VP such as (14a) is atelic as the action of the verb does not move to or towards any final destination, and it is not a configuration that could be interpreted as reaching any telos. It is not that the activity of driving one's pigs lacks an endpoint but it is rather the agent who decides upon this point, as it is virtually possible for this event to go on indefinitely. As opposed to this, a VP such as (14b) is turned into a telic structure with the addition of the PP *to market*. The telic/atelic interpretation of the structure *drive one's pigs to market* is reflected in the compatibility of the structure both with the *in*- and with the *for*-time adverbial (14b and 14c). The last two examples shed light on the fact that it is not only the presence of a goal PP that makes the event telic but also the shape of that PP, which is determined both by the head and the complement of the head: if the head is telic but the complement denotes a non-quantized entity, the entire phrase is atelic (14d); and if the head itself is not telic, the entire phrase is not telic (14e). In syntactic terms, there must be an Agree relation between the [+telic] head and the [+q] complement of the head; if not, the entire structure is interpreted as atelic.

(14) a. drive one's pigs (for two hours) – atelic
b. drive one's pigs to market [lit.] (in half an hour) – telic
c. drive one's pigs to market [id.] (for half an hour) – atelic
d. drive one's pigs to markets [lit.] (for half an hour) – atelic
e. drive one's pigs towards the market [lit.] (for half an hour) – atelic

As expected, the idiomatic reading is available neither in (14d) nor in (14e) as the idiom is fixed and involves the predicate *to market*.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

What we have seen so far is that with the addition of a result AP (*red* in 13b) or a telic goal PP (*to market* in 14b) to a verb phrase, the interpretation of the VP changes from atelic (or aspectually ambiguous telic-atelic) to unambiguously telic.

2.3 Summary

It appears that several factors – such as the internal argument and some other arguments as well – determine the aspectual interpretation of the verb phrase. Similarly to the [±q] feature of the internal argument, the [±telic] quality of the secondary predicate can alter the telicity of the predicate but only in the literal VP. In other words, the aspectual compositionality between the verb, its internal argument and the sentence-final secondary predicate is a property only of the literal but not of the idiomatic VP.

3. Aspectual mismatches: previous accounts

It is argued first in Marantz (1997) and later in McGinnis (2002, 2005) that the aspectual class of a VP is the same on its idiomatic and non-idiomatic interpretation. To put this in the latter author's terms, "any aspectual classification of non-idiomatic VPs also applies to idiomatic VPs" (2002: 669). This leads to the proposal that the aspectual properties of idiomatic expressions are derived compositionally. However, more recent research has shed light on some aspectual mismatches between the literal and idiomatic interpretations of some VPs. More precisely, Glasbey (2003, 2007), Mateu and Espinal (2007, 2013) and Espinal and Mateu (2010) provide examples where the aspectual properties of some idiomatic expressions are not derived compositionally. This aspectual non-compositionality entails that the same aspectual properties do not hold for identical syntactic structures, where one involves the idiomatic meaning and the other, the non-idiomatic meaning. In this section of the paper, I look into some of the analyses put forth to account for aspectual mismatches in idioms.

3.1 McGinnis (2002, 2005)

The fundamental claim in McGinnis (2002) is that the meaning of phrasal idioms is compositional; where compositional means that the idiom combines the aspectual properties of its syntactic constituents in the usual way. Building her arguments on the Vendlerian classes of verbs, the author argues that the same four classes can be identified in idiomatic VPs, which show the same characteristics. That is, the aspectual behaviour displayed by non-idiomatic states matches that of idiomatic states with respect to the vast array of tests identified in the literature to distinguish between different verb classes (i.e. they are only compatible with the *for*-time adverbial but cannot occur in the progressive, etc.). According to her, it should not be surprising that one and the same VP maintains the same aspectuality associated to its interpretation, irrespective of the type of reading (literal or idiomatic). Moreover, in her reply to Glasbey (2003), McGinnis (2005: 9) claims that the aspectual difference found by this author between non-idiomatic and idiomatic readings is only "accidental and pragmatic, not a difference in principle".

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

3.2 Glasbey (2003, 2007)

A contrasting point is made in Glasbey (2003, 2007), where the author is in favour of the non-compositional approach to idiom interpretation. That is, whereas it is true that in some cases the non-idiomatic interpretation is completely parallel to the idiomatic one, it is also true that in others it is not. In *paint the town red*, there is not only a literal eventuality with a natural endpoint (the activity of painting is over when the town becomes completely red or the state of complete redness is achieved) but also an idiomatic eventuality with no corresponding natural endpoint (under this interpretation, the town does not end up red as a direct consequence of having been painted). Furthermore, not only does the literal eventuality have a natural endpoint but, as claimed by Glasbey, it also has Krifka's (1992) so-called "gradual patient" property (sometimes referred to as "incremental theme"). This means that there is a correspondence between the progress of the eventuality and the gradual or incremental change in the state of the (in this case) direct object *the town*: as the painting proceeds, the town gets progressively redder. But whereas in the literal *paint the town red* the progress of the eventuality corresponds to a gradual change in the state of the direct object, there is no corresponding gradual patient property in the case of the idiomatic eventuality.

3.3 Leivada (2010)

Leivada (2010) takes steps in the right direction and opens the gates for future research. Her analysis of Greek idioms is from the viewpoint of lexical aspect versus inner/grammatical aspect, and the argumentation is roughly the following: whereas in literal VPs, lexical aspect (conveyed only by the inherent aspectual property of the verb) does not equal inner aspect (conveyed by the verb and the internal argument/result predicate) because the latter can influence the aspectual property inherent in the verb; in idiomatic VPs, lexical aspect equals inner aspect and both are conveyed by the entire VP.

3.4 Mateu and Espinal (2007, 2013), Espinal and Mateu (2010)

These articles show that metaphors can change the aspectual interpretation compatible with their syntactic structure. The discussion is mostly based on fake resultatives of the type *talk one's head off*, which focus on the intensity/excessiveness of the activity of the verb, denote metaphorical changes of state/location and, surprisingly or not, are also atelic. The authors show that metaphors can constrain aspect and that a compositional analysis (related to the literal meaning of the source domain) and a non-compositional one (related to that of the target domain) are involved in the semantic/conceptual representation of these resultatives. Starting from Lakoff and Johnson's (1980, 1999) complex metaphor *an intense activity is an excessive caused change of location/state*, Mateu and Espinal (2013: 292) argue that "the excessive change of location structured by a bounded path is mapped onto the target domain as a more abstract unbounded intensity component". These idioms are also conceived of as triggers of conceptual metaphors that introduce a relationship between a source domain and a target domain.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

3.5 Bellavia (2012)

One of the most recent accounts of aspectual mismatches in idioms has been put forward in Bellavia (2012). This is a dynamic Cognitive Grammar approach to aspect in idiomatic contexts, which is viewed as an interaction of high-level cognitive operations involved in the figurative meaning construction and in the conceptual interpretation of aspect. The similarity to Espinal and Mateu (2010) lies not only in the theoretical framework of the analysis but also in the type of constructions that are inspected here (*laugh somebody out of the office, laugh one's head off*). The analysis of English and Italian idiomatic expressions denoting intensive actions by means of a figurative displacement or breaking of a body part is meant to show how some classes of idioms may involve aspectual shift with respect to a literal reading of a VP.

3.6 Summary

All these analyses couched in different frameworks offer slightly different explanations for aspectual mismatches in the interpretation of idioms. With the exception of McGinnis (2002) – which claims that aspect is a structural component of meaning and the structural component of meaning interacts with syntax – the views presented above claim neither explicitly nor implicitly that syntax would play any role in aspectual composition and hence it would explain the aspectual mismatch found in idioms. The above approaches all deal with this type of aspectual shift from a cognitive or (purely) semantic point of view. And there is nothing surprising in this because, as a topic, aspect is more suitable for the domain of semantics than for the field of syntax. But in view of the fact that aspect can be and should be syntactically encoded, the semantic notion of telicity has dramatic effects on syntax (different functional projections are capable of encoding aspectual information; for instance, syntax encodes the endpoint of an event), and there are cases when syntax and aspect interact, I suggest we look at aspectual mismatches through a syntactician's eyes. What I hope to prove in the next section is that this linguistic alternation can be syntactically approached if we rely on the syntactic representation of aspect in aspect phrase (AspP), which is implicated in the aspectual interpretation of a predicate.

4. Aspectual mismatches: the present account

In order to be able to give a taste of the flavour of aspectual mismatches, let us take a look at aspect phrase first. Along with the introduction of different functional categories and projections in the verbal domain (see, for instance, mood phrase, modality phrase, perfect phrase, progressive phrase, voice phrase and result phrase), serious proposals have been made for the introduction of what is widely known as aspectual phrase (AspP) (Travis 1991, 2010, Ramchand 1993, Ritter and Rosen 1998, Sanz 1999, 2000, van Hout 2000, 2004, Borer 2005, MacDonald 2008, a.o.). Although this projection is usually implicated in the aspectual interpretation of a predicate and aspect is unanimously assumed to be a category in its own right, which projects its own X-bar structure, its introduction brings several debates over its correct position: some argue that it is base-generated between T and VP or between *v*P and VP, others say that it is within *v*P, and still others support the idea that it is in fact within VP. Irrespective of its precise location

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

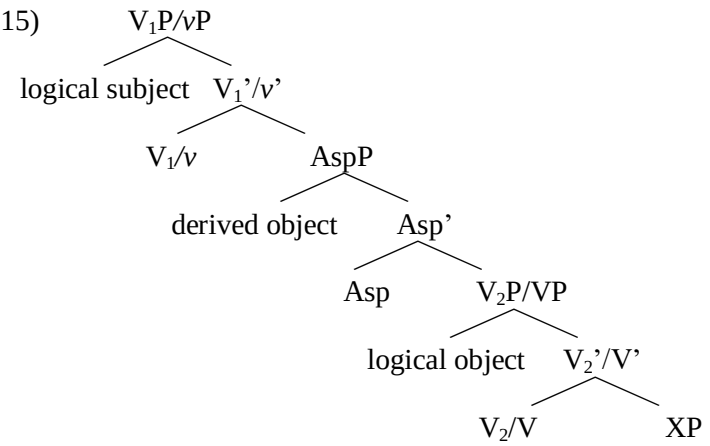
and position, AspP defines that portion of the syntactic space within which elements must appear in order to contribute to the aspectual interpretation of the predicate. One important consequence of the existence of this projection is a domain of aspectual interpretation: only elements within the domain of aspectual interpretation can contribute to the aspectual interpretation of the predicate[4].

As before, the discussion will take place in two subsections as the contribution of the [±q] internal argument and the addition of the [±telic] predicate to aspectual interpretation are two independent properties, with distinct aspectual effects. Though the present proposal is the subject of ongoing research and much more work needs to be done before any claim can be made with certainty, I would like to believe that the aspectual mismatches presented in the previous sections can be accounted for not only from a semantic or Cognitive Grammar perspective but also from a syntactic point of view.

4.1 The internal argument

Travis (1991, 2010) and MacDonald (2008) claim that inner aspect – which concerns the inherent boundaries of an event – is captured within syntax by means of an aspectual phrase base-generated between *v*P and VP, which gives rise to an articulated VP structure (see the tree diagram below). Thus, there is an aspectual phrase inside the verbal domain, the specifier position of which serves as the landing site for derived objects or nominals affecting the structure of the event. The argument contributing to the aspectual interpretation of the predicate (i.e. the internal argument) is said to move from the specifier of VP (the logical object position) to the specifier of AspP (the derived object position) and by so doing to modify the telicity of the predicate. That is, nominals affecting the structure of the event are merged in the lower specifier position but they move to the higher specifier position if they modify the telicity of the predicate and induce a telic interpretation on it.

(15)



(Travis 2010: 34)[5]

[4] In this section, I ignore the structural differences and technical details between the different aspectual proposals such as MacDonald (2008) and Travis (2010) as they are not crucial to the present discussion. Also, I am less interested in the exact location of AspP in the (universal) sequence of functional projections.

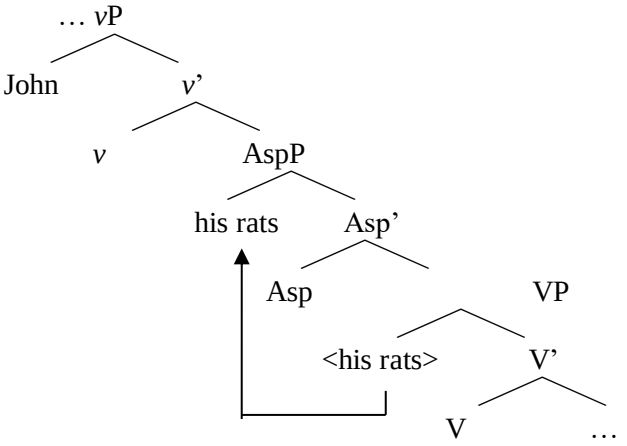
[5] Throughout the paper, instead of V_1P I use *v*P, and V_2P will be referred to as VP. This does not influence the arguments exposed here.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

Translated into more concrete terms, the above statement means that in a literal VP such as *drown one's rats*, the [+q] internal argument *one's rats* is merged in the lower specifier position ([Spec, VP]) but moves to the higher specifier position ([Spec, AspP]), delimits the event of the verb and induces a telic reading on it. In this sense, the telic sentence in (16) should be illustrated as in (17) below:

(16) John drowned his rats (*for two hours/in two hours).

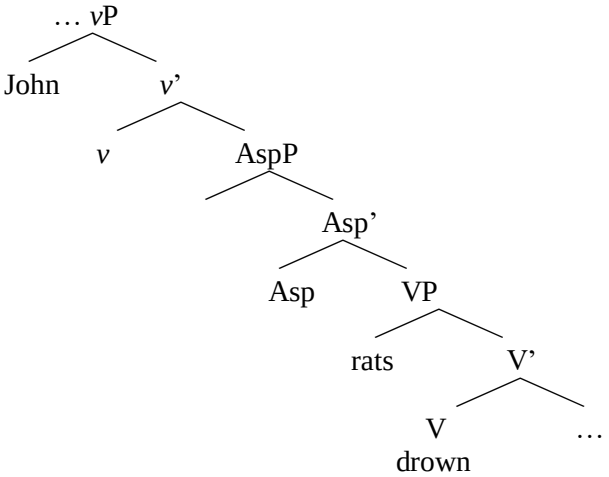
(17)



As opposed to this, in a literal VP such as *drown rats*, the [–q] internal argument *rats* does not move from the lower specifier position ([Spec, VP]) to the higher specifier position ([Spec, AspP]), does not delimit the event of the verb and does not induce a telic reading. In this sense, the atelic sentence in (18) should be illustrated as in (19):

(18) John drowned rats (for two hours/*in two hours).

(19)



The difference between *drown one's rats* and *drown rats* is visible in the two different aspectual syntactic structures.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

With this difference and the above aspectual theory in mind, I can only assume that as far as the idiom *drown one's sorrows* is concerned, its syntactic behaviour is similar to that of *drown rats* rather than *drown one's rats*. In the idiomatic interpretation, the post-verbal nominal does not move to [Spec, AspP], it does not delimit the event of the verb and it does not induce a telic reading on the predicate. The VP is atelic, hence, only the *for*-time adverbial is compatible with it:

(20) Fred drowned his sorrows (for two hours/*in two hours).

In view of the fact that the post-verbal nominal *one's sorrows* can hardly be counted as an affected theme/Undergoer/internal argument and therefore its syntactic status is also highly debatable, the question arises not only as to whether or not it moves to the higher derived object position but also as to whether or not its merged position is in the lower logical object position. Based on the evidence I have discussed so far, the analyses put forth in Travis (1991, 2010) and MacDonald (2008) can only account for literal VPs with [+q] or [–q] internal arguments. When the same VPs are interpreted idiomatically, the syntactic operations of Merge and Move no longer apply (or apply in a different way), irrespective of the shape or nature of the post-verbal nominal outside the idiom.

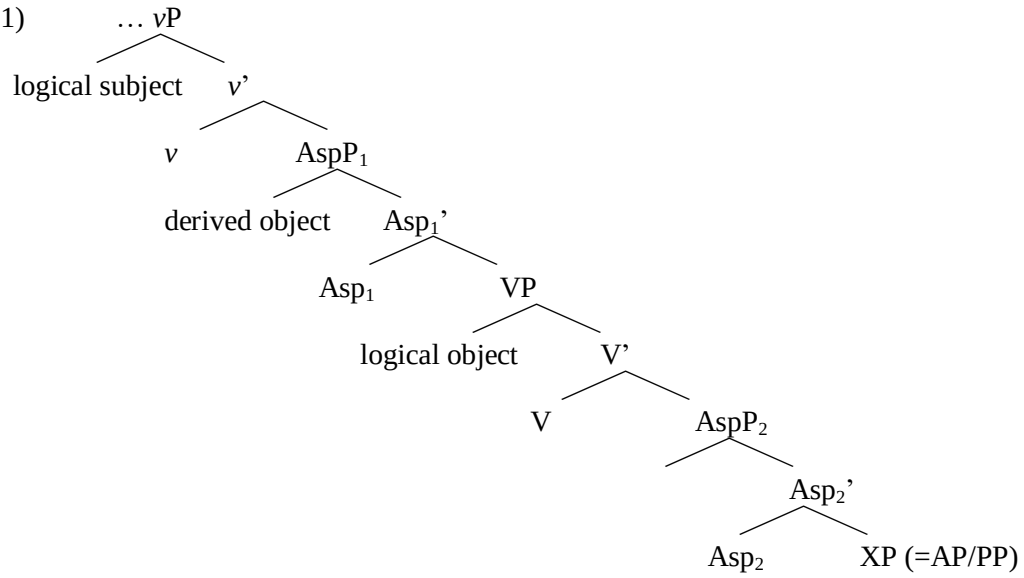
4.2 The secondary predicate (result and goal phrases)

In Travis (2010), a variety of elements (the verb, the internal argument and the goal/result XP) are said to contribute to the specification of the telic feature on AspP. Moreover, the author, dedicating one separate chapter to endpoints, proposes that language variations can be captured by placing endpoints at different positions in the phrase structure. Unfortunately, it is not clear how the structure in (15) accounts for secondary predicates (i.e. result and goal phrases); see also MacDonald's (2008) remark that "the contributions of an NP and a goal PP to aspectual interpretation were not the same. It is not clear that Travis's system allows for this. […] several distinct elements can contribute to the specification of the telic feature on AspP […] this includes the NP participating in the OTE mapping as well as a goal PP, although exactly how a goal PP does so is not clear" (2008: 26).

One possible extension of her VP would be the one illustrated below, where, similarly to the internal argument which moves to [Spec, Asp] in order to measure out an event and provide an endpoint, result and goal predicates – which are assumed to be generated in the same syntactic position – move to or agree with Asp_2 in case they measure out an event and provide an endpoint. To put this in very simple terms, under a literal interpretation the [+telic] predicate (*red, to market*) moves to/agrees with Asp_2, delimits the event of the verb and induces a telic reading on the predicate. In case the predicate is [–telic] under a literal reading (*redder and redder, to markets/towards the market*), it does not move to/agree with Asp_2, does not delimit the event of the verb and does not induce a telic reading. The phenomenon would be the same under an idiomatic interpretation, where the predicate does not move to/does not agree with Asp_2, does not delimit the event of the verb and does not induce a telic reading.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

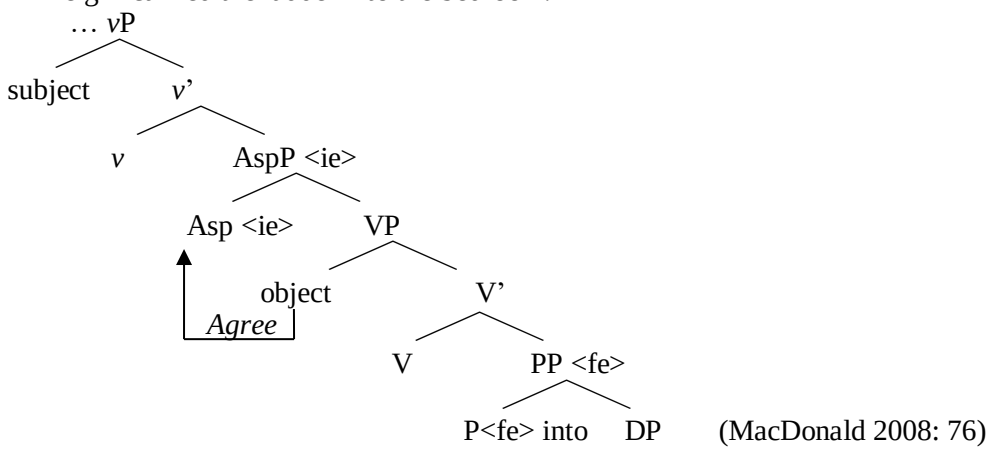
(21)



Such a proposal is in fact found in MacDonald (2008), where event features are interpretable features and are introduced on different heads. More precisely, when a predicate describes an event interpreted as having a beginning, AspP <ie> is projected; and when a predicate describes an event interpreted as having an end, an <fe> feature is present on the predicate. Although when exploring the syntactic properties of (inner) aspect the author draws a clear distinction between the contribution of the internal argument and the secondary phrase to the aspectual interpretation of the predicate, one single aspect projection is argued to be implicated in the aspectual interpretation of the entire predicate. As claimed by the author himself, "the multiple functional projection approaches can be reduced to a single projection approach […] ultimately there is only one projection involved in the determination of the (a)telicity of the predicate" (MacDonald 2008: 9). In this sense, a sentence such as (22) is illustrated as in (23) below:

(22) The girl carried the ladder into the bedroom.

(23)



(MacDonald 2008: 76)

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

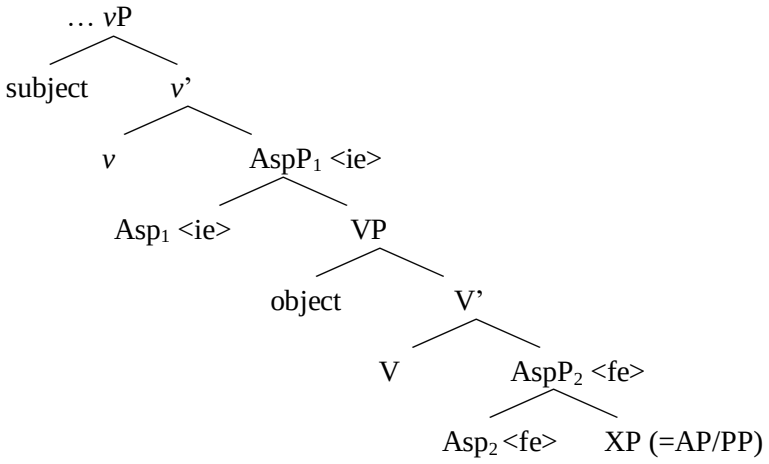
Despite its attractive simplicity, the theory fails to provide a principled and unitary account of both result and goal phrases. Although the Path prepositions *to* and *into* may enter the derivation bearing an <fe> feature, it is not clear how the same would be true for AP result predicates such as *red*. Therefore, I would introduce an amendment to the above syntactic tree, which would include a second AspP, and where <ie> and <fe> would be introduced not simply on different heads but on different AspP heads. But before I turn to the syntactic and aspectual consequences of this statement, let me highlight the importance of this second AspP as I am aware that this proposal is clearly not without problems and further issues need to be taken into account.

In order to measure out an event and thereby provide an endpoint, a [+q] argument must move to [Spec, Asp] from its original, base-generated position. If such an argument stays in its merged position in the structure, it does not measure out the event. In other words, the argument measures out the event once it moves to the higher specifier position. Translated into syntactic terms, this implies that it is not simply the presence of an internal argument that makes an eventuality telic but the movement of that argument to the higher derived object position. To put it differently, the syntactic consequence of the presence of such an argument is its movement to the derived object position. I assume that a similar Move (and/or Agree) operation needs to take place in case of result and goal phrases. Again, it is not the presence of a sentence-final XP phrase (*red*) that makes an eventuality telic but rather its movement to (and/or Agree with) an aspect phrase.

Also, let us not forget that not all sentence-final XP predicates are result phrases and not all of them provide an endpoint to the event; for instance, *harvest the tomatoes red*, which means 'harvest the tomatoes when they are completely red' (depictive/ descriptive reading) rather than 'harvest the tomatoes and, as a result, they turn completely red' (resultative interpretation).

I suggest that the above tree diagram be amended in the following way, where $AspP_2$ takes the role of Ramchand's (2008) *res*P, which encodes the semantics of 'result' or 'become'. With this, the XP predicate would denote not the state of the internal argument throughout the duration of the action of the verb but the state achieved by that argument as a direct result or consequence of the event described by the verb.

(24)



BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

On the one hand, in the literal *paint the town red* and *drive one's pigs to market* the <ie> and <fe> features are both present (the event described by the predicate has both a beginning and an end), both aspect phrases are projected, the predicates *red* and *to market* delimit the event of the verb and induce a telic reading. To put this in Glasbey's (2003, 2007) terms, the eventuality has a natural endpoint: the state of complete redness and the final destination. Translated into syntactic terms, this means that there is a second $AspP_2$ <fe> in the structure, which makes the eventuality telic.

On the other hand, in the idiomatic *paint the town red* and *drive one's pigs to market* the <fe> feature is not present (the event described by the predicate has no endpoint), the lower aspect phrase is not projected, the predicate does not delimit the event of the verb and does not induce a telic reading. In view of the fact that *red* and *to market* can hardly be counted as predicates denoting result state/goal, the idiomatic eventuality has no corresponding natural endpoint. Translated into syntactic terms, this means that there is no $AspP_2$ <fe> in the structure.

Based on the evidence from the theory put forth in MacDonald (2008) for the existence of interpretable event features that enter the syntax on certain heads and which express whether the event has a beginning and/or an end (the emphasis here was laid more on the final subevent feature <fe> that enters the syntax on PP or $AspP_2$), I conclude that when a VP is interpreted literally, the interpretable features do enter the syntax on one of these heads and there is some sort of movement to or agree relation with the head. However, when the same VP is interpreted idiomatically, we cannot talk about such features or such syntactic operations as Move or Agree.

4.2 Summary

The two most important points made in this section are the following: (i) the contribution of the [±q] internal argument does not equal the contribution of the [±telic] predicate and (ii) the presence of interpretable features on PP or $AspP_2$ is valid only in the case of literally interpreted VPs.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to show that aspectual mismatches in idioms can be syntactically approached and explained. I started the discussion with the topic of aspectuality and I provided a brief review of the most influential approaches to aspectual shifts. The basic premise of the argument was that the internal argument and the secondary predicate contribute to aspectual interpretation in two distinct and independent ways. As far as the former is concerned, I based my analysis on the theory put forth in Travis (1991, 2010) and MacDonald (2008), where the authors argue for the existence of an AspP projection within the VP, whose specifier position serves as the landing site for derived objects. As far as the latter is concerned, in the last part of the paper I proposed a more articulated structure of the right periphery; I introduced the distinction between

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

$AspP_1$ and $AspP_2$. The general conclusion of my tentative proposal is that the syntactic phenomena identified in literal VPs (merging the internal argument in the lower specifier position, the [+q] internal argument undergoing movement to the higher specifier position, the presence of the <fe> feature on PP or $AspP_2$, the presence of the operations Move and/or Agree) are not to be identified when the same VPs are interpreted idiomatically. Once again, the analyses put forth in Travis (1991, 2010) and MacDonald (2008) (with or without the amendments proposed here) can only account for literally interpreted VPs.

References

Bellavia, A. 2012. Detelicization processes in idiomatic constructions: A cognitive grammar approach. In B. Surányi and D. Varga (eds.), *Proceedings of the First Central European Conference in Linguistics for Postgraduate Students*, 26-45. Budapest: Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

Borer, H. 2005. *Structuring Sense II: The Normal Course of Events*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Espinal, T. M., Mateu, J. 2010. Classes of idioms and their interpretation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 1397-1411.

Glasbey, S. 2003. Let's paint the town red for a few hours: Composition of aspect in idioms. In A. M. Wallington (ed.), *Proceedings of the ACL 2003 Workshop on the Lexicon and Figurative Language*, 42-48.

Glasbey, S. 2007. Aspectual composition in idioms. In L. de Saussure, J. Moeschler and G. Puskás (eds.), *Recent Advances in the Syntax and Semantics of Tense, Aspect and Modality*, 71-87. Berlin · New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

van Hout, A. 2000. Projection based on event structure. In P. Coopmans, M. Everaert and J. Grimshaw (eds.), *Lexical Specification and Insertion*, 403-427. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

van Hout, A. 2004. Unaccusativity as telicity checking. In A. Alexiadou, E. Anagnostopoulou and M. Everaert (eds.), *The Unaccusativity Puzzle. Explorations of the Syntax-Lexicon Interface*, 60-83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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

Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G., Johnson, M. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh.* New York: Basic Books.

Leivada, E. 2010. (Lexical and inner) aspect in Greek idioms. Paper presented at *ConSOLE XVIII*, University of Barcelona.

MacDonald, J. E. 2008. *The Syntactic Nature of Inner Aspect. A Minimalist Perspective*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Marantz, A. 1997. No escape from syntax. Don't try morphological analysis in the privacy of your own lexicon. *UPenn Working Papers in Linguistics* 4: 201-225.

Mateu, J., Espinal, M. T. 2007. Argument structure and compositionality in idiomatic constructions. *The Linguistic Review* 24: 33-59.

Mateu, J., Espinal, M. T. 2013. Laughing our heads off: When metaphor constrains aspect. In T. Crane, O. David, D. Fenton, H. J. Haynie, S. Katseff, R. Lee-Goldman, R. Rouvier, D. Yu (eds.), *Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, General Session*, 284-294. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistics Society.

McGinnis, M. 2002. On the systematic aspect of idioms. *Linguistic Inquiry* 33: 665-672.

McGinnis, M. 2005. Painting the wall red for a few hours: A reply to Glasbey (2003). *Snippets* 10: 9-10.

Ramchand, G. 1993. Aspect phrase in modern Scottish Gaelic. In A. Schafer (ed.), *Proceedings of the he North East Linguistic Society 23*, 415-429. Amherst, MA: GLSA.

Ramchand, G. 2008.*Verb Meaning and the Lexicon. A First-Phase Syntax.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)

Ritter, E., Rosen, S. 1998. Delimiting events in syntax. In M. Butt and W. Geuder (eds.), *The Projection of Arguments: Lexical and Compositional Factors*, 135-164. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
Sanz, M. 1999. Aktionsart and transitive phrases. In E. Treviño and J. Lema (eds.), *Semantic Issues in Romance Syntax*, 247-261. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Sanz, M. 2000. *Events and Predication: A New Approach to Syntactic Processing in English and Spanish*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Tenny, C. 1994. *Aspectual Roles and the Syntax-Semantics Interface*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
Travis, L. 1991. Inner aspect and the structure of VP. Ms., McGill University.
Travis, L. 2010. *Inner Aspect. The Articulation of VP*. Dordrecht: Springer.
Verkuyl, H. 1972. *On the Compositional Nature of the Aspects*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

BDD-A26098 © 2016 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-11-01 12:06:16 UTC)