

FERENC KIEFER

AKTIONSARTEN IN HUNGARIAN

1. *The notion on aktionsart*

In European (esp. German and Slavic) linguistic tradition the notions of aspect and *aktionsart* are normally kept apart, which does not mean that these two notions have always been defined in a clear-cut way. The *Duden-Grammatik*, for example, defines *Aktionsart* in the following way: “The Aktionsarten...say something about the way the state [*Sein*] or occurrence develops [*sich vollzieht*]. It is in particular a question especially of the temporal manner of the process of a state of occurrence, of the degree, the intensity of an occurrence.” (Grebe 1966:71) Consequently, the *Aktionsarten* include the perfective, with two subspecies: (1) inchoative or ingressive verbs having to do with the moment of entering into a state (*erlassen* ‘turn pale’), and (2) resultative verbs (*erschlagen* ‘kill’), the imperfective or durative, and iteratives, but also intensive verbs indicating the intensity of the action (*schnitzen* ‘carve’ is glossed as *kräftig schneiden* ‘to cut strongly’).

It is apparent that the category of intensive has little if anything to do with aspect but the main motivation for including intensity under the heading of *Aktionsarten* would seem to be the lexical relationship exhibited by members of such pairs as *lieben* ‘love’ and *liebeln* ‘love superficially’, and *lachen* ‘laugh’ and *lächeln* ‘smile’.

Note that the majority of examples mentioned in the *Duden-Grammatik* are morphologically complex: *er-blass-en*, *er-schlag-en*, *lieb-el-n*, *läch-el-n*.

However, it is not always clear whether the notion of *aktionsart* should be defined morphologically or semantically. One of the most influential German grammar books, for example, defines *aktionsarten* thus: «By an aktionsart of a verb we understand the way in which an occurrence develops (*Verlaufsweise des Geschehens*) and the gradation (*Abstufung*) of the occurrence expressed by the verb. The differentiation of the occurrence is made according to the *temporal* development (termination, accomplishment; beginning, transition, end) and according to the *content* [*inhaltlich*] of this development (occasioning, intensity, repetition, diminution)». (Helbig-Buscha 1988:72) Superficially, this definition seems to be rather similar to the one given by the *Duden-Grammatik*, but the examples provided as illustrations for the various *aktionsarten* make it clear that the definition is meant as a semantic one. Morphology is considered to be accidental rather than essential. This means that the durativity of the Hungarian

verbs *dolgozik* ‘work’, *virágzik* ‘bloom’, *eszik* ‘eat’, *fut* ‘run’, *alszik* ‘sleep’, the repetitive meaning of *lélegzik* ‘breathe’, *kavar* ‘stir’, *vakar* ‘scratch’ and the intensity of *ordít* ‘shout, yell’, *vedel* ‘drink to excess’, *száguld* ‘run at top speed’ count as *aktionsarten* according to this definition.

The semantic definition of *aktionsarten*, however, is inadequate for at least three reasons.

(a) Let us assume that the *aktionsart* of intensity is a lexical property of some simplex verbs. One would thus claim that the verb *ordít* ‘shout’ stands in opposition to the verb *beszél* ‘speak’, the verb *vedel* ‘drink to excess’ to the verb *iszik* ‘drink’, and finally the verb *száguld* ‘run at top speed’ to the verb *megy* ‘go’. However, intensity as a lexical semantic property of simplex verbs does not define a binary opposition but is rather a matter of degree, as can easily be seen by comparing verbs such as *megy* ‘go’ - *fut* ‘run’; *rohan* ‘run/race along’ - *száguld* ‘run at top speed’; *suttog* ‘whisper’ - *beszél* ‘speak’ - *kiabál* ‘shout’ - *ordít* ‘yell’ - *üvölt* ‘scream’. Any two successive verbs in these series can be said to differ in intensity. Moreover, it is anything but clear how many degrees must be distinguished. And even worse, there is no reliable test on which the distinctions could be based.

(b) Lexical meaning is quite often underspecified. Thus, for example, the verb *fut* ‘run’ does not contain the feature ‘fast’. In an unmarked context the two verbs *megy* ‘go’ and *fut* ‘run’ may have the same denotation. This is why the phrase *lassan fut* ‘run slowly’ is not a contradiction and the phrase *gyorsan fut* ‘run fast’ is not redundant. In marked contexts, however, there will be a difference in intensity between the two verbs. For example, *Ne sétálj, hanem fuss!* ‘Don’t walk, run!’. In such a contrastive context, the verb *fut* ‘run’ receives the feature ‘fast’. This means that intensity need not be a lexical property, it can very well be derived on the basis of an appropriate context.

(c) Lexical meaning can be overridden in quite a few cases. For example, the verb *köhög* ‘cough’ has a semelfactive (momentary event) meaning in the following sentence:

- (1) *Pisti köhögött.*

‘Pisti coughed’

However, when we add the temporal adverbial ‘for several minutes’ to (1) we get an iterative meaning.

- (2) *Pisti több percen át köhögött.*

‘Pisti coughed for several minutes’

Or, to take another example, the verb *lélegzik* ‘breathe’ expresses an iterative process. However, sentence (3) is semelfactive:

- (3) *Pisti egyet lélegzett.*

Pisti one-Acc breathe-Past

‘Pisti took a breath’

Such changes are not possible with morphologically expressed *aktionsarten*. Thus the meaning of *nyitogat* ‘open repeatedly’ with the iterative suffix *-(o)gat* can in no way be turned into a semelfactive.

The problems mentioned above do not arise if the definition of *aktionsarten* takes into consideration morphology as well. The definition to be proposed below is partly based on some ideas in Slavic aspectology (esp. Isachenko 1962) and on work on Finno-Ugric *aktionsarten* (e.g. Schlachter 1968).

A semantic opposition between two verbs V_1 and V_2 - in order to qualify as an *aktionsart* - must fulfill two conditions.

(i) One of the verbs must be morphologically more complex. This is the case if one of the verbs is a simplex verb and the other contains an affix, or if from two affixed verbs one verb contains at least one more affix than the other.

(ii) The affix only modifies the meaning of the verb base or the underlying verb in the sense that it adds a further feature to this meaning. The meaning change which comes about by affixation can only be accidental and never essential. This accidental semantic feature is taken from a universally definable set of semantic features, which include Iterativity, Resultativity, Diminution, Intensity, etc.

By taking (i) and (ii) into consideration the notion of *aktionsart* can be defined in the following fashion.

(4) *An aktionsart is an accidental semantic property brought about by affixation.*

Aktionsart-formation thus becomes a (word-formation-like) morphological rule.

2. Some further properties of *aktionsarten*

2.1. Argument structure

In the case of *aktionsart*-formation the argument structure of the underlying verb and that of the derived verb are identical. This entails that the two verbs are interchangeable without loss of grammaticality. That is, the verb *nyit* ‘open’ can be replaced in any context by *nyitogat* ‘open repeatedly’ and vice versa. There is one notable exception to this general rule. Prefixed verbs very often require an overt object whereas such an object is dispensable in the case of the corresponding underlying verb. Consider

- (5) a. *Péter ír.*
‘Peter is writing’
- b. **Péter megír.*
Peter Pref-write
- c. *Péter megír egy levelet.*
‘Peter is going to write a letter’
- d. *Péter megírja (a levelet).*
‘Peter is going to write (the letter)’

Note that (5b) is ungrammatical, the (indefinite) verb requires obligatorily an object. (5d), on the other hand, can only be interpreted elliptically, the definite

object in parenthesis must be recoverable from the context. Note furthermore that the verb *ír* ‘write’ is an activity verb and *megír* ‘write’ an accomplishment verb. In other words, the prefixed verb expresses the *aktionsart* of resultativity (in addition to perfectivity).

Notice that the simplex verb *ír* ‘write’ takes optionally an object argument. It thus suffices if we require that the two verbs be substitutable except in contexts where the object argument is obligatory. In other words, we must slightly modify the requirement of identical argument structure (hence substitutability): the argument structure of the base verb and that of the derived verb must be identical except for obligatoriness.

2.2. Selection restrictions

It follows from what was said above that two verbs which differ from each other in *aktionsart* must have identical selection restrictions. The existence of different selection restrictions is an indication of different lexical meaning, hence of two different lexical entries. The verbs *mos* ‘wash’ and *mosogat* ‘wash up’ differ from each other morphologically: the latter verb contains the iterative suffix *-(o)gat*. However, *mosogat* is not an iterative verb. The two verbs have different selection restrictions: *mos* can be used with any physical object, *mosogat*, on the other hand, is restricted to dishes. A similar pair is *töröl* ‘wipe’ and *törölget* (again with the iterative suffix *-get*) ‘dust, dry’. Again, the former can be used with any physical object, the latter, on the other hand, has a more restricted use: it can only be used when one wants to say that one is removing dust from something or one is drying dishes. Consequently, *mos* and *mosogat* as well as *töröl* and *törölget* are separate lexical entries. The difference between the respective pairs has nothing to do with *aktionsarten*.

2.3. Productivity

Aktionsart-formation is a morphological operation which takes place in the lexicon and is closely related to word formation. Rule-governed morphological operations are by definition productive, which means that if *aktionsarten* are brought about by morphological rules we must assume that we have to do with productive processes.

The main test of productivity is the possibility of applying the morphological rule to new items. Since the output must have a transparent meaning it need not be listed in the lexicon.

In view of the fact that productivity is an essential feature of *aktionsarten*, when describing the *aktionsarten* of a language we don’t have to take into consideration lexicalized and unproductive formations.

To take an example, consider the following verbs: *mér* ‘measure, weigh’ and *elmér* ‘measure sg out wrong, get the weight wrong’, and *szab* ‘cut’ and *elszab* ‘make a bad fit, cut badly’. In principle, it would be possible to claim that *mér* -

elmér as well as *szab - elszab* differ in an *aktionsart*, which can roughly be characterized as ‘doing something wrong’. However, this alleged *aktionsart* would only be represented by two verbs in Hungarian. The verbs *eltol* and *elfuserál*, both with the meaning ‘make a bungle of sg, bungle sg, mess up’, cannot be contrasted with the corresponding unprefixed verbs *tol* ‘push’ and *fuserál* ‘botch, bungle’ for semantic reasons. In other words, the meaning of the prefixed verbs cannot compositionally be derived from the meaning of the base verb and the *aktionsart* of ‘do sg wrong’. Moreover, new verbs cannot productively be formed with such a meaning. Consequently, we must exclude ‘do sg wrong’ from the potential *aktionsarten* in Hungarian.

3. What is not an *aktionsart* in Hungarian?

In the previous section we already saw that nonproductive formations cannot be considered *aktionsarten* even if the definition would fit. In this section we are going to examine further alleged cases of *aktionsarten*.

3.1. Aspectual pairs

Very often the only function of the verbal prefix is to render the verb perfective. This is particularly so when the prefixed verb is not accompanied by an object noun phrase. This qualification is necessary because in the presence of an object noun phrase, perfectivity may be associated with resultativity.

The perfectivizing function of the prefix can be observed in the following examples.

- (6) a. *Pisti megmosdik és megfésülködik.*
Steve Pref-wash and Pref-comb
‘Steve will wash and he will comb’
- b. *Anna megfőzött és kitakarított.*
Anna Pref-cook-Past and Pref-tidy-Past
‘Anna has prepared food and she has tidied up’

(6a,b) contain perfective verbs. (6a) predicts that under normal circumstances there will be a state in the future when Steve will be washed and combed and (6b) carries the presupposition that a new state of the world has been brought about in which Ann’s cooking and tidying up activities have been completed. The corresponding imperfective verbs in (6a,b) do not suggest anything about the termination of the activity, they refer to unbounded processes.

The verbs *mosdik-megmosdik* ‘wash’, *fésülködik-megfésülködik* ‘comb’, *főz-megfőz* ‘prepare food, cook’, and *takarít-kitakarít* ‘tidy up’ are pairs whose first member is imperfective and second member perfective. And this is the only difference between these verbs; the prefix does not introduce any additional meaning. In this case we have to do with genuine aspectual pairs. Note incidentally that the above-mentioned perfective verbs do not require obligatorily an object noun phrase.

Verb pairs which exhibit aspectual differences only do not come under the heading of *aktionsarten*. If, however, a perfective verb also expresses resultativity or the like the prefix can be said to introduce a complex meaning: it perfectivizes the base verb and at the same time brings about an *aktionsart*-meaning. In Hungarian, this state of affairs is more usual than pure perfectivization. For example, the prefixed verbs *megír* ‘write up’, *elolvash* ‘read through’, *felépít* ‘build’, *kijavít* ‘correct’ are perfective as well as resultative. Note that none of these verbs can be used without an overt object. The result of the activity at hand refers to this very object: the letter has been written, the newspaper has been read, the house has been built, the paper has been corrected.

3.2. Change of state verbs

The coming about of an emotional, perceptual or cognitive state is often expressed by prefixed verbs. Most often these verbs contain the prefix *meg-*. For example, *tud* ‘know’ - *megtud* ‘realize, come to know’, *szeret* ‘love’ - *megszeret* ‘become fond of, come to like’, *lát* ‘see’ - *meglát* ‘catch sight of’. One might be tempted to consider the prefixed verbs as expressing the inceptive or ingressive *aktionsart*. Note, however, that the prefix does not introduce an accidental property leaving the meaning of the base verb unchanged, rather it expresses the fact that the state denoted by the base verb comes about. Furthermore, the verb *megszeret* ‘become fond, come to like’ can also be used to express the gradual coming about of the state of ‘love’, cf. *majd megszereti* ‘he/she will little by little come to like it’. This means that the prefix does not modify the state in question hence it cannot express an *aktionsart*.

The same holds for the change of state verb *elalszik* ‘fall asleep’. Once again, a new state is brought about, the state of sleeping. The verb does not express an accidental modification of an already existing state.

The conclusion is evident: state of change verbs which express complementary states cannot come under the heading of *aktionsarten*.

3.3. Quasi-compounds

Verbal prefixes are an unstable category. In Hungarian none of them are completely grammaticalized, they are more like particles in German. They can occupy various positions in the sentence, i.e. they are movable. Semantically some of them have completely lost their original meaning (such as *meg-*, and in some cases *el-*, *ki-*, *fel-*, *be-*). On the other hand, quite a few prefixes do have full lexical meaning. Moreover, they can function as independent words, as adverbs or postpositions. Such is the case with (i) *túlbecsül* ‘overestimate’, *túlméretez* ‘oversize’, *túlfizet* ‘overpay’, (ii) *továbbtanul* ‘continue to study’, *továbbbalszik* ‘continue to sleep’, *továbbdolgozik* ‘continue to work’, (iii) *utánamegy* ‘go after’, *utánanéz* ‘look after’, *utánnavisz* ‘carry after’, (iv) *visszaakaszt* ‘put back’, *visszadob* ‘throw back’, *visszafelel* ‘answer back’. In all these cases the prefixed

verbs look very much like compounds. The meaning of the compound verb is compositionally composed of the meaning of the prefix and of the meaning of the base verb. In this respect there is no difference between the verbs listed above and verbs of motion where the prefix indicates the direction of the motion. E.g. *kimegy* ‘go out’, *bejön* ‘come in’, *visszafut* ‘run back’. In none of these cases do we have to do with *aktionsarten* which are expressed - in Hungarian as well as in many other languages - by means of grammaticalized affixes (Kiefer 1997).

4. Aktionsarten in Hungarian

In view of the above discussion in Hungarian the following *aktionsarten* can be found.

4.1. Iterativity

Meaning: the activity is more or less regularly repeated.

Morphology: the suffix *-gat/-get*.

Paraphrase: ‘do sg repeatedly, do sg several times’.

Examples: *csókolgat* ‘kiss repeatedly’, *ölelget* ‘embrace, hug repeatedly’, *integet* ‘wave repeatedly’, *kóstolgat* ‘keep tasting’, *nyitogat* ‘open repeatedly’, *ütöget* ‘keep hitting/beating’.

4.2. Diminution

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Meaning: the action is performed with diminished intensity.

Morphology: *-gat/-get*.

Paraphrase: ‘do sg leisurely, slowly’.

Examples: *dolgozgat* ‘go on working slowly, work in easy stages’, *olvasgat* ‘read off and on’, *sétálgat* ‘walk around’, *eszeget* ‘eat slowly’, *lépeget* ‘amble along’.

Note that iteration and diminution are expressed by means of the same suffix. The interpretation of the derived verb depends to a considerable extent on the meaning of the base verb. The rule of thumb is this: if an activity is a matter of yes or no, if it is not gradable, we get the iterative reading; if, on the other hand, the activity is gradable, we get the diminutive reading. Gradability can be tested by means of the adverbs *sokat* ‘much’, *keveset* ‘little’ though the results are not always conclusive.

4.3. Saturation

Meaning: the activity or process reaches the saturation point, the process or activity leads to full satisfaction.

Morphology: the prefix *ki-* together with the reflexive pronoun *magát* ‘itself-Acc’.

Paraphrase: ‘have enough of sg’.

Examples: *kialussza magát* ‘have enough sleep’, *kipiheni magát* ‘relax oneself completely’, *kiordítja magát* ‘scream one’s head off’, *kidolgozza magát* ‘overwork oneself’, *kisírja magát* ‘have a hearty weep’, *kibeszéli magát* ‘have a long talk’.

4.4. Continuity

Meaning: the prolongation of a durative activity or process.

Morphology: the prefix *el-*.

Paraphrase: ‘fill in the time with sg’.

Examples: *elábrándozik* ‘be lost in reveries’, *elhever* ‘lie lazily’, *eljátszadozik* ‘play for a time’, *elszórakoztat* ‘keep sb amused’, *elbetegekedik* ‘be ill for a long time’.

4.5. Resultativity

Meaning: the activity or process is completed and/or it brings about a result.

Morphology: *meg-*, *el-*, *fel-*, *ki-*, *be-*, *le-*.

Paraphrase: ‘finish doing sg, be ready with sg’.

Examples: *megír* ‘be ready with writing sg’, *elolvás* ‘finish reading sg’, *felépít* ‘complete the building of sg’, *kinyomoz* ‘find out’, *bealkonyodik* ‘turn dark’, *lerövidít* ‘make short’.

The distribution of the various prefixes depends to some extent on the meaning of the base verb and is thus in certain cases predictable.

4.6. The semelfactive

Meaning: a momentary or punctual event.

Morphology: typically *meg-*. The base is normally a durative verb.

Paraphrase: ‘do sg/happen suddenly or once’.

Examples: *megcsúszik* ‘have a slide’, *meginog* ‘wobble, shake once’, *meghúz* ‘give a pull’, *megráz* ‘give sg a good shaking’, *megfacsar* ‘wring once’.

4.7. Frequency

Meaning: irregular repetition of an activity, process or event.

Morphology: reduplication of the verbal prefix.

Paraphrase: ‘do sg from time to time, do occasionally, happen occasionally’.

Examples: *el-elovás* ‘read from time to time’, *meg-megcsúszik* ‘have a slide from time to time’, *el-elábrándozik* ‘be lost in reveries from time to time’, *meg-meglátogat* ‘visit from time to time’, *be-benéz* ‘look in from time to time’.

4.8. Ingressivity

Meaning: the beginning of a process, activity or event.

Morphology: the prefixes *el-*, *fel-*, or *meg-*.

Paraphrase: 'it starts Ving'.

Examples: (i) *felbüg* 'begin to boom', *felharsan* 'ring out, blare forth', *felragyog* 'begin to shine, sparkle, flash'; (ii) *megcsendül* 'ring', *megkondul* 'begin to toll', *megdördüll* 'begin to roar/boom/thunder'; (iii) *elámul* 'gape in astonishment', *elborzad* 'be horrified', *elcsodálkozik* 'be astonished'.

In sum, then, Hungarian seems to have eight *aktionsarten*. All of them are productive. In the case where the same *aktionsart* is expressed by several morphological means, the distribution of the affixes is largely, though not wholly, determined by the meaning of the base verb.

5. Some typological conclusions

As we saw above, Hungarian is a language which has morphological *aktionsarten*. This need not be the case in all languages. English, French and Italian, for example, are extremely poor in morphological means to express *aktionsarten*. German, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages fare much better in this respect but they don't even come close to Hungarian. Among the Indo-European languages the richest system of *aktionsarten* can be found in Slavic. In Russian, for example, the number of *aktionsarten* is estimated to be close to twenty. (The exact number depends on how the various *aktionsarten* are defined.) This means, then, that Hungarian lies between Germanic and Slavic as to the number of morphological *aktionsarten*.

Other Finno-Ugric languages, too, seem to have a relatively rich system of *aktionsarten*. Their exact number, however, cannot be determined due to the scarcity of the really reliable material. A preliminary count, however, seems to indicate that Ostyak has at least four (the Iterative, the Ingressive, the Semelfactive and the Diminutive, all expressed by suffixation), Zyrian at least eight (the Delimitative, the Diminutive, the Semelfactive, the Ingressive, the Resultative, the Iterative, the Durative, the Diminutive-Iterative, again all expressed by suffixation) *aktionsarten*.

There is a clear relationship between aspect and *aktionsart*. All *aktionsarten* which affect temporal structure bear on aspect. However, not all *aktionsarten* are temporal. From among the Hungarian *aktionsarten*, the diminutive, the saturative and the resultative are not aspectual.

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