The Nature of Termination
The case of the Romance Simple Past

Olga Borik & *Maarten Janssen*
CLUNL, Lisbon   IULA, Barcelona

1. Introduction

The difference between telic and atelic sentences was introduced to formally distinguish between the interpretation of sentences in the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* in French (Garvey, 1957), the idea being that where the first type of sentences expresses fulfilled, whereas the second type of sentences does not.

The telic/atelic distinction has subsequently been silently assumed to also play an important role in (morphologically) similar tenses in other Romance languages, including the Spanish *preterito indefinido* and Portuguese *pretérito perfeito*. In this paper, we will loosely refer to this group of morphologically similar tenses as the Romance Simple Past (RSP).

In this paper, we will show that this is an inherently incorrect treatment for most of the other Romance languages. Although termination is strongly associated with these tenses, it is not logically entailed by it. We will introduce an alternative interpretation for sentences in these tenses, in which termination is pragmatically suggested, but not formally entailed.

This paper consists of three parts. Section 2 sketches the traditional treatment of the RSP in terms of telicity, section 3 shows data that prove that this traditional treatment is strictly speaking incorrect in all languages but French. And section 4 introduces the alternative representation for theses tenses.

2. Telicity and the Passé Simple

In the early studies on the French system of tense and aspect, it was noted that there is a difference in the truth-conditional interpretation of a sentence like (1) in the passé simple, and a sentence like (2) in the imparfait.

(1) Anne traversa la rue – Anne crossed (passé simple) the street
(2) Anne traversait la rue - Anne crossed (imperfait) the street

Where the first sentence entails that Anne reached the other side of the street, (2) does not: when Anne got run over by a bus while crossing, the truth conditions of the two sentences diverge: the first sentence sides with the interpretation of the English *Anne crossed the street,* the second with *Anne was crossing the street.*

A second observation was that in discourse, the effects of these two tenses are also different. When a passé simple is used in a narrative discourse as in (3), the

interpretation is a sequential one: Anne was sad after and because George resigned. But the imparfait in (4) does not have such a sequential reading – the fact that Anne was sad might have something to do with the resignation of George, but it does not have to.

    (3) George annonça sa resignation. Anne fut triste.
    (4) George annonça sa resignation. Anne était triste.

The common explanation for these two effects was that the passé simple presents the event described with an explicit boundary at the end, telic sentences entail an endpoint, meaning that the endpoint of the crossing of the street is entailed by (1) but not by (2), and in narration, the default interpretation is that the next sentences will be after the endpoint of the telic event, driving a sequential reading.

The most widely accepted definition of telicity is in terms of homogeneity: telic sentences are not divisible in smaller parts of the same type, in the same sense that count nouns are not: a part of a chair is not a chair, but merely a part of a chair, whereas a part of a lump of gold is still gold. Part of a telic event is not the same type of event, blocking the entailment in (5), whereas part of an atelic event is, expressed by the entailment in (6).

    (5) John read a book from 3 to 5 =/=> John read a book from 3 to 4
    (6) John walked from 3 to 5 => John walked from 3 to 4

Because of the interpretation of the passé simple, and other RSP tenses in terms of telicity, it was implicitly assumed that RSP would display all the properties of telicity. It is only recently that people have observed that this is not the case. Cipria & Roberts (2000) show that sentences in the preterito indefinido in Spanish do allow division, as show in (7).

    (7) Jaimito corrió de 4 a 5 => Jaimito corrió de 4 a 4:30

This means that RSP sentences in Spanish are not strongly heterogeneous, and hence not telic. That in turn means that the analysis of telicity cannot account for the boundedness of RSP sentences, and the entailment of the endpoint has to be accounted for in an independent way.

In the solution that Cipria & Roberts propose, the termination is hard-coded into the interpretation of the preterito indefinido (display full example). Other analyses have adopted a similar strategy to account for the termination of RSP sentences.

3. Boundedness revoked

In the analysis by Cipria & Roberts, the end-point entailment of RSP sentences is hard-coded into the semantic representation of the sentence, and introduced the by tense. Since it is part of the semantic representation, the entailment should be

hard, that is, the application of sentences in RSP in which the end-point is not reached should be infelicitous, as is indeed observed in French by the unacceptability of (8) in an interpretation in which she was run over by a bus *while* crossing the street.

(8) Anne traversa la rue. *Elle était tué par un autobus.

In traditional grammar books in for instance Portuguese, you indeed find statements that sentences in the pretérito perfeito do indeed necessarily refer to a completed event, as in (9).

(9) O João correu muito rápido.

When asked, all speakers will agree that the running expressed by (9) has to have terminated.