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Remarks on semelfactive verbs in English and Hungarian

Abstract

It is known that English and Hungarian have semelfactive verbs, similar to Russian, but there is only an occasional mention of the exact types of these verbs in the literature and their role in the overall system of English and Hungarian aspect. This paper challenges an analysis of semelfactive verbs in English and Hungarian describing semantic and morphological characteristics associated with these verbs. The exact classification of semelfactive verbs in both languages is another goal of this study. In English, the term “semelfactive” for punctual events is adopted for general use by Smith (1991) and Verkuyl (1993), among other writers. It will be argued that punctual events are not all semelfactive in Smith’s (1991) sense.

Keywords: semelfactive, punctual, durative events, instantaneous

1 Introduction

Dynamic verbs across languages can be classified into a number of types based on the semantic distinctions durative/punctual and telic/atelic (cf. Smith 1991). These different verb types correlate to different dynamic event types. The first distinction is between durative and punctual events: durative, applying to verbs which describe a situation or process which lasts for a period of time, and punctual, which describes an event that seems so instantaneous that it involves virtually no time. Thus, punctual events do not have any duration, not even duration of a very short period and they do not have internal structure either. A typical example of punctual events in English is the verb *cough*. In Slavic linguistics, the equivalent of verbs like *cough* are called “semelfactive verbs”, after the Latin word *semel*, ‘once’. This term is adopted for general use by Smith (1991) and Verkuyl (1993), among other writers.

Semelfactive verbs represent perhaps the least studied event types class in English. Dowty (1979), similar to Vendler (1967), does not distinguish semelfactive verbs as a class different from Activities and, in many cases, from that of Achievements. Although Smith (1991) recognizes the separate class of semelfactive verbs, her classification of these verbs is not totally correct. Thus, it seems plausible to examine if the semelfactive class of verbs can be treated as the class distinct from the above-mentioned classes and, then, on the basis of their features, to establish the exact semantic (sub)classes of the class of semelfactive verbs. The example sentences for the analysis below have been compiled by the author of this study (in some cases collected from online sources) and have been subject to native speakers’ judgements on acceptability.

2 Classification of semelfactive verbs in English

Semelfactives are single-stage events that occur very quickly with no result or outcome (Smith 1997: 29). Smith's semelfactive punctual events imply neither preceding nor subsequent state.¹ They have the features [+ dynamic], [+ atelic], [+ instantaneous]. The sentence *Jane knocked at the door* is a typical example of a semelfactive event. Semelfactives are the simplest type of event, consisting only in the occurrence. Since they are single-stage events, semelfactives are intrinsically bounded. Smith (1997) uses this term for atelic instantaneous events. The Semelfactive event may involve a discernible period of time. When a person coughs, or a bird flaps a wing, the events take some fraction of a second to occur. The semelfactive event indicates that there is only one 'stroke' of a normally iterative event, e.g. a single knock at the door. It indicates that a normally durative or multi-stage event occurs "all at once".

Semelfactives and activities are known to be related. Semelfactive verbs generally pattern with activity verbs in terms of grammatical properties that might have their source in event structure. Many semelfactive verbs also allow for activity interpretations when the events they describe occur in repetitive sequences. For instance, the verb *cough* is semelfactive when it describes 'one cough', but an activity when it describes 'one cough' a sequence or series of coughs. Such sequences are multiple-event activities. Thus the sentence *Jane was knocking at the door* can refer only to an Activity event for a number of reasons: (i) the progressive is incompatible with semelfactives; however, if there is a sentence with a semelfactive verb and durative features, the sentence is not ungrammatical, but it has a shifted interpretation: it is taken as a multiple-event activity; (ii) there is not a single *knock* described by the event in the sentence above, but a series of knocks. The sentence cannot mean that Jane was engaged in the preliminary stages of giving a single knock; (iii) The multiple – event reading of the activity event can be triggered by a temporal adverbial 'for X time' as in *Jane was knocking at the door for five minutes*, or *Jane knocked for an hour*, but a true semelfactive verb does not allow for such an interpretation, i.e. semelfactive verbs are limited in distribution, they do not appear in sentences with the imperfective viewpoint, durative adverbials and different expressions of duration. However, in many instances the multiple event seems to be just as basic as the single-stage event. For instance, *blinking*, *coughing*, *knocking* tend to occur in sequences, but they can of course happen as single instantaneous events (Smith 1997: 29-30).

Now let us see how semelfactive verbs differ from achievements.²

Semelfactives are punctual events which have no result state, e.g. *The lights blinked*; *Mary coughed*; *Simon tapped on the desk*; *John glimpsed at Susan*. Generally semelfactives differ from achievements in lacking a result state, and this is seen in their inability to be used as adjectival modifiers expressing a result state, e.g. *the shattered window* vs. **the flashed light*. In some cases, however, this condition does not hold since there should be distinguished a class of semelfactive verbs that do lead to a change of state and thus can be used as modifiers

¹ However, we disagree with Smith (1997) that none of the semelfactive punctual events may have a subsequent state. Kiefer (2006: 301) showed that in Hungarian the punctual events like *felrobban* 'explode' and *talál* 'find' induce a change of state. Following Kiefer (2006), in this study we argue that there should be at least one class of semelfactive events distinguished in English that consist in a single occurrence and yet result in a change of state and imply a subsequent state.

² The discussion and analysis of the class of semelfactive events is based on the ideas of the author of this paper. The major theoretical background comes from Smith (1997), Olsen (1997) for English and Kiefer (2006) for Hungarian.

(e.g. *the exploded house, a broken vase*). But still in the majority of cases, it is the subject of an achievement that undergoes a change of state and cannot undergo it again, thus a different referent is required for the action to repeat, whereas the subject of a semelfactive verb does not undergo a change of state, it can repeat the action yielding an iterative reading of the activity event. Like achievements, when semelfactives are iterated they behave like activity verbs, but unlike achievements, they do not require a plural subject for an iterative interpretation, e.g. *the bell is ringing* (semelfactive) vs. **the firecracker is popping* (cf. the firecrackers are popping) (achievement).

Adverbials that imply duration such as *quickly, rapidly* and *slowly* can occur with events involving temporal duration, regardless of whether they involve dynamic action. But with achievements, these adverbs indicate a relatively slow process, e.g. *John slowly realized his mistakes; The snow is melting slowly*; whereas these adverbials are only marginally possible with Semelfactives and can only yield ingressive reading, e.g. *John slowly coughed* may mean that John was slow to cough (although the sentence may have a multiple-event reading in which the coughs followed each other at a slow rate). Moreover, adding ‘once’ to the sentence with a semelfactive verb and any of the adverbials above would render the sentence unacceptable, e.g. **John slowly coughed once*. But semelfactives need a delimiting mechanism and they can be intensified by some modifiers, such as *suddenly, instantly, once, on one occasion only*, e.g. ***Instantly*** *the girl leaped from the cart and ran away* (source: The Legends of Jenny Jump, <http://www.goes.com/hfplinfo/jennyjump.html>) and very often it is the context that helps to identify the semelfactive verb, e.g. *I felt like my throat was going to rip apart when I sneezed* (source: <http://www.steadyhealth.com> >...> Throat disorders).

On the basis of the above-mentioned facts, it is possible to conclude that semelfactive verbs represent a class distinct from both activities and achievements.

In English we can set up the following semantic (sub)classes of the class of semelfactive verbs based on their features:

1. Bodily events: *blink, cough, burp, sneeze, wink, glimpse, jump, skip, spring, jerk, fart*
2. Internal events: *flicker, flash (lights), gleam, ring, spurt, squirt, spew*
3. Punctual actions involving movement: *tap, peck, scratch, kick, hammer a nail (once), pound on the table (once), pop (the gun), hit, slap, thump, thwack, smack, clap, shake, knock*
4. Punctual verbs of perception: *cry out (in pain), call out, shout out*³
5. Punctual verbs implying a subsequent state: *explode, find, break, break in, cave in, crack, split, smash, close*

In this paper we use the term “semelfactive verb” to refer to a verb which describes a single occurrence of the event, thus there is probably only a limited number of punctual verbs in the above subclasses. There can be more verbs similar in meaning that may belong to these subclasses (e.g. *batter, beat, honk, buzz, glitter, glister, shine, beep*, etc.) but since the majority of these verbs denote durative events, they are basically activities. The verbs in the above subclasses differ as to whether they are basically semelfactives or both semelfactives

³ Note that the particle *out* in these combinations conveys the meaning of ‘openness and intensity’ which does not necessarily imply completeness (Kennedy 1920: 24)

and derived activities.⁴ Here we claim that the countable instances of the above bodily events, internal events and actions involving movement convey the semelfactive event, while uncountable reduplication of these events conveys the corresponding derived activity.

Many of the verbs in the above subclasses often occur in repetitive sequences which take the form of progressive, e.g. *She is sneezing* refers to a series of sneezes (not a single sneeze in the process of unfolding). Let us see some more examples how a typical point-like semelfactive event can receive a derived activity reading through repetitions.

- (1) a. *John winked at Mary only once.*
 b. *John is openly winking at Mary for a while because he fancies her.*
- (2) a. *John skipped down the stairs so suddenly that his mother almost choked on her coffee.*
 b. *John was skipping down the stairs instead of walking.*
- (3) a. *Suddenly, the church steeple bell rang twice.* (source:
<http://www.acesmylibrary.com>, Journal of Church and State, September 22, 1999,
 Owen, Christopher H.)
 b. *The church steeple bell was ringing for five minutes.*
- (4) a. *John tapped Susan on the shoulder to get her attention.*
 b. *I felt that someone was tapping on my shoulder.*
- (5) a. *John scratched his nearly-bald head and suddenly uttered in a high pitched voice.*
 b. *John was scratching his head until he drew blood.*

The sentences (1a) through (5a) contain semelfactive events from the three subclasses. It can be observed that in some cases the occurrence of a semelfactive event can be identified by adverbials like *once*, *twice*, *suddenly*, and not infrequently the usage of the semelfactive verbs becomes apparent from the context. The sentences denote single (countable) punctual events. While sentences (1b) through (5b) express a series of punctual events. The iterative reading of these events is imposed by temporal adverbials like *for five minutes*, *for a while*, *until X time*, and, of course, by the context. In these latter cases we have multiple-event activities or activities derived from punctual semelfactive verbs.

⁴ Although the majority of semelfactive verbs can have an iterative interpretation and be used in progressive, not all of them can. For instance, verbs of internal events like *spew*, *spurt* and *squirt*, which are usually referred to as verbs of substance emission (Levin 1993), do not admit temporal adverbials, consequently cannot get an iterative meaning and occur in repetitive sequences, e.g. **The blood was spurting out of arteries for two hours*. Semantically these verbs code the meaning “to emit a sudden and abundant flow”. Similarly, among the verbs of the third subclass we can find momentary events that do not have iterative readings either, or can be marginally possible in progressive depending on the context; these are *pop* (*the gun*), *hammer a nail* and *pound on the table*. Punctual verbs of perception such as *cry out*, *shout out* and *call out*, similarly to the punctual verbs *blink*, *cough*, *tap*, *scratch*, *sneeze*, etc., denote events which do not presuppose any preceding process and do not lead to a resultant state, but unlike these events, they cannot be iterated, thus they are incompatible with progressive and durative adverbials (e.g. **He was crying out (in pain) for two hours*). Finally, punctual verbs that imply a subsequent change (i.e., inducing a change of state), similarly to the events above, cannot be used in the progressive form and take temporal adverbials either. Consider: **The window was smashing/smashed into pieces for ten minutes*.

One question that may arise regarding semelfactive verbs is whether they can mark telicity. Since semelfactive verbs are atelic and incompatible with the concept of completion, to speak of telicity marking in their case is irrelevant. As is seen from the subclasses above, semelfactives are formed via lexical entries of simple verbs excepting punctual verbs of perception which are formed with the help of the particle *out*, but the particle in these cases does not render completion. These verbs encode instantaneous atelic events which do not imply any subsequent state. Some semelfactive verbs can be modified with the help of particles when they are used as derived activities. In these cases, the verbs can be turned into accomplishments or achievements, e.g. in the following sentences *John jumped up; John kicked down the door; Susie scratched out his eyes; The lights blinked out for a moment*; the addition of particles to semelfactive verbs with the activity readings converts them into accomplishment verbs or achievement verbs (cf. *blink out*, a punctual verb with a preceding process of ‘blinking’ and a subsequent state of ‘blinking out’), yielding telic readings of the events. The particle in each of these examples denotes an endpoint or goal of the events.

3 Classification of semelfactive verbs in Hungarian

Most of the English semelfactive classes of verbs have corresponding classes in Hungarian:⁵

1. Bodily events: *tüsszent* ‘sneeze’, *pislog* ‘blink’, *köhög* ‘cough’, *kacsint* ‘wink’, *fel(ugrik)* ‘jump’, *megpillant* ‘glimpse’, *megborzong* ‘shiver/shudder (with cold)’, *megrázkódik* ‘jerk’, *(fel)böfög* ‘burp’
2. Internal events: *(fel)villan* (a fény) ‘(the light) flashes’, *(fel)lobban* ‘flicker’, *megcsendül* ‘ring’, *kitör, kifröccsen* (pl. vér hirtelen, nagy mennyiségben) ‘spurt’, *(ki)lövell* (folyadék) ‘squirt’
3. Punctual actions involving movement: *megüt* ‘hit, slap’, *kopog* ‘knock’, *megcsíp* (vmt, pl. csőrrel) ‘peck’, *megkapar* ‘scratch’, *megkavar* ‘stir’, *megsimogat* ‘fondle’, *megnyom* ‘press/push’, *megcsavar* ‘screw’, *meztapsol* ‘clap’, *megráz* ‘shake’, *megvakar* ‘scratch’, *megcsókol* ‘kiss’, *megcsóvál* ‘wag’
4. Punctual verbs of perception: *feljajdul* ‘cry out (in pain)’, *felkiált* ‘shout out/call out’, *felnevet* ‘laugh out’, *felnyög* ‘groan loudly (once)’
5. Punctual verbs implying a subsequent state: *felrobban, felrobbant* ‘explode’, *talál* ‘find’, *beomlik* ‘cave in’, *letör, letörik* ‘break (down)’, *betör* ‘break in’, *bezár* ‘close’

Similar to English, the subclasses in Hungarian contain members which are verbs that have semelfactive reading only and verbs with both semelfactive and derived activity readings. The verbs of the first subclass such as *tüsszent* ‘sneeze’, *pislog* ‘blink’, *köhög* ‘cough’, *kacsint* ‘wink’, *böfög* ‘burp’, etc. may denote single punctual events but can also express the series of punctual events. However, the situation is further complicated in Hungarian when different derivatives are formed from the same verbal root, e.g. *pislant* ‘blink’ (purely semelfactive) – *pislog* ‘blink’ (semelfactive and activity verb), *köhint* ‘cough’ (purely semelfactive) – *köhög* ‘cough’ (semelfactive and activity verb), *tüsszent* ‘sneeze’ (semelfactive and activity verb) – *tüsszög* ‘sneeze’ (semelfactive and activity verb). Purely semelfactive verbs cannot take time

⁵ The classification of semelfactive verbs in Hungarian has been set up on the basis of English and with the account of the features of semelfactive verbs described by Kiefer (2006: 296- 304).

adverbial phrases of duration. Consider: **Sokáig pislantott* vs. *Sokáig pislogott* ‘S(he) blinked for a long time’. Since the Hungarian verbs have no progressive form, the occurrence of these events can be identified by means of time point adverbials (e.g. *két órákor* ‘at two o’clock’) which identify the time of the punctual event and temporal adverbials (e.g. *két órán át* ‘for X time’), denoting the length of an ongoing event (Kiefer 2009: 250).

Consider the following sentences:

- (6) a. *Két órákor kacsintott.*
She winked at two o’clock’.
 b. *Két órán át kacsintgatott.*
‘She was winking for two hours’.
- (7) a. *Zoltán egy órákor köhögött.*
‘Zoltán coughed at one o’clock’.
 b. *Zoltán egy órán át köhögött.*
‘Zoltán was coughing for an hour’.

Sentences (6a) and (7a) denote single punctual events of winking and coughing while those in (6b) and (7b) convey the iterative reading of these events.

In this subclass, however, we can find verbs which are not compatible with a temporal adverbial ‘for X time’, e.g. the punctual verb *megpillant* ‘glimpse’. Compare:

- (8) a. *Zsuzsi megpillantotta Zolit négy órákor.*
‘Zsuzsi glimpsed Zoli at four o’clock’.
 b. **Zsuzsi négy órán át megpillantotta Zolit.*
**‘Zsuzsi glimpsed Zoli for four hours’.*

As can be observed, the punctual verb *megpillant* ‘glimpse’ is not compatible with a temporal adverbial of duration, thus it cannot be iterated. This semelfactive verb does not receive an activity reading.

Most of the verbs of the second subclass behave as true semelfactive events. Consider:

- (9) a. *A harang halkán megcsendült négy órákor.*
‘The bell rang quietly at four o’clock’.
 b. **A harang halkán megcsendült két órán át.*
**‘The bell rang quietly for two hours’.*

The verb *megcsendül* ‘ring’ in Hungarian is not compatible with temporal adverbials and cannot get an iterative meaning either.

All semelfactive verbs (with the exception of *kopog* ‘knock’) in the third subclass are formed compositionally – the perfectivizing particle *meg-* is added to activity verbs.⁶ The punctual reading, which is brought about by the verbal particle *meg-* in Hungarian, is rendered into English by the simple verb and the adverb ‘once’. Consider the following examples:

⁶ Note that Semelfactive Aktionsart is also formed this way in Hungarian.

- (10) a. *Zsuzsi megkavarta a levest öt órákor.*
 ‘Zsuzsi stirred the soup at five o’clock’.
 b. **Zsuzsi megkavarta a levest öt órán át.*
 ‘Zsuzsi stirred the soup for five hours’.

In English the above semelfactive reading is expressed by the simple past form of a verb. Consider:

- (11) *Susan stirred the soup once (at five o’clock).*

Again, the incompatibility of the verb with the durative adverbial in Hungarian implies that it cannot get an activity reading (like any other verb of this subclass).

The verbs of the fourth subclass, similar to the above subclass, are punctual verbs and are compatible only with a time point adverbial, thus do not get an iterative meaning (e.g. *Négy órákor felkiáltott* ‘She shouted out at four o’clock’, but **Négy órán át felkiáltott* ‘*She shouted out for four hours’).

Finally, the fifth subclass of verbs differs from the previous semelfactive verbal subclasses in that while the verbs of the first four subclasses do not presuppose a preceding state and do not imply a subsequent state, the verbs of the last subclass are all punctual events with a subsequent state. These verbs are also incompatible with a temporal adverbial of duration, e.g. **A híd órákon át felrobbant* ‘*The bridge exploded for hours’.⁷

As the above analysis shows, in English, more semelfactive verbs can receive both a semelfactive and a derived activity reading than in Hungarian. This is perhaps due to the fact that in Hungarian the majority of semelfactive verbs are formed compositionally, with the help of the perfectivizing particle *meg-*, in which case the iterative (activity) meaning disappears.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed semelfactive verbs in English and Hungarian describing their semantic features and defining the (sub)classes of the class of semelfactive verbs. I have shown that semelfactive verbs introduce punctual events lexically in English. When semelfactive verbs are used in the progressive form, they express a series of punctual events and receive a derived activity reading. Used as derived activity verbs, they can be further modified by verbal particles. I have argued that punctual events are not all semelfactive in Smith’s (1991) sense, there is at least one subclass of semelfactive events to be distinguished, the verbs of which are the change of state verbs and yet not achievements. In Hungarian, compositionality plays an important role in the formation of semelfactive verbs, and though in

⁷ Kiefer (2006: 301) mentions that most of Dowty’s (1979) tests used to distinguish achievements apply well in the case of *felrobban* ‘explode’ and *talál* ‘find’ verbs excepting the test with the time adverbial *alatt* ‘in X time’. However, the phrase *X idő alatt felrobban* ‘explode in X time’ refers to the time until the onset of the event and not to the temporal duration of the event itself; the same holds for the expression *egy nap alatt talál vmit* ‘find smth in a day’. The verbs mentioned thus have to be distinguished from typical achievement verbs.

a number of instances semelfactive events can be introduced lexically, still in the majority of cases the verbal particle *meg-* expresses the punctual reading of the semelfactive event.

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