

# Building Event Interpretations: is watching goals harder than scoring them?

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Since the initial classification of linguistic events into activities, achievements or accomplishments (Table 1) by Vendler (1957), linguists have investigated lexical (or situation) aspect in a wide variety of ways, and from a range of perspectives (Verkuyl, 1972, 1993; Dowty, 1979; Tenny, 1987, 1994; Krifka, 1992; Van Hout, 1996, 2000; Rothstein, 2004; Borer, 2005; MacDonald, 2008; *inter alia*). Psycholinguistic investigations of how aspectual interpretations are computed are both considerably more recent, and have focused on a much narrower range of phenomena. With few exceptions, the investigation of the processing of aspect has focused on contrasts such as the one in (1).

Lexical Aspect	+/- telic	+/- duration	example
activity	-	+	run
accomplishment	+	+	drown
achievement	+	-	win

Table 1: Vendler’s Classification for Lexical Aspect

- (1) a. The insect hopped effortlessly until it reached the other side of the garden.  
b. The insect glided effortlessly until it reached the other side of the garden.

While *glided* in (1-b) is compatible with a durative event modifier like *until*, *hopped* in (1-a) is not. Successfully interpreting a sentence like (1-a) requires the comprehender to coerce the telic *hopped* into an iterated event interpretation (the insect hopped repeatedly). Using a variety of experimental paradigms and sentence structures, researchers have consistently found that sentences like (1-a) are associated with increased processing demands (Piñango et al 1999, 2006; Todorova et al 2000, Brennan & Pylkkänen, 2008).

However, although these experiments confirm the not very surprising fact that aspectual interpretation is done rapidly enough to cause processing difficulties when the aspect of the event described by a VP is incompatible with the aspectual requirements of a temporal modifier, they do little to tell us how those interpretations are generated, or how the mismatch is actually resolved.

I will describe a series of experiments that address both these issues using self-paced reading, lexical decision, MEG and eye-movement data. I will present evidence showing that both lexical and compositional factors are relevant to aspectual interpretations, that some verbs are inherently telic, but that no verbs are inherently atelic, that the domain for aspectual interpretation is the verb phrase, not the verbal head, that unbounded events and unbounded entities evoke similar processing costs, and that aspectual coercion can be dissociated from iterated event interpretations.