Away: a case of aspectual schizophrenia explained by argument properties

Lionel Dufaye

CHAPTER THREE

AWAY: A CASE OF ASPECTUAL SCHIZOPHRENIA EXPLAINED BY ARGUMENT PROPERTIES

LIONEL DUFAYE

Introduction[1]

AWAY is compatible with two seemingly contradictory aspectual values—a dual property which was already noted by Bolinger (1971: 102-103):

> *'away* displays only two, fairly compact, semantic areas. The first centres about the literal meaning of 'to (at) a distance from the scene,' the second is aspectual—a kind of intensive perhaps definable by the legal phrase 'without let or hindrance'.

For instance, if we consider the following examples:

(1) The bruises went away.

(2) The kids chatted away.

it is interesting to note that although AWAY occurs in apparently similar syntactic patterns (NP subject + intransitive V + AWAY), it receives two opposite readings. In (1), AWAY implies that the event gradually leads to a natural endpoint, so that the predicate has a telic value; an intuition which is further confirmed by Vendler's *in / for* alternation test (1957: 145) since only "time-frame" adverbials—as opposed to "time-span" adverbials—are felicitous:

(3) The bruises went away within / *for a couple of weeks.

[1] I am much indebted to my colleagues Mark Gray and Fiona Rossette for their careful reading and for their valuable suggestions on the earlier draft of this paper.

Conversely, in example (2), the predicate is aspectually atelic in the sense that no natural endpoint can be inferred from this process. Accordingly, only "time-span" adverbials are compatible in this case:

(4) The kids chatted away for / *(with)in hours.

To account for this apparently erratic behavior, we will develop a twofold explanation. The first theoretical dimension sets a background hypothesis, which actually applies to all the uses of the marker, and which is based on a set of topological features; the second, more specific analysis addresses the problem of the aspectual versatility itself; as we shall see, it hinges directly on the argument structure of the verb itself. The general idea will consist in mapping the topological properties derived from the first hypothesis onto the SV(O) syntax of the clause.

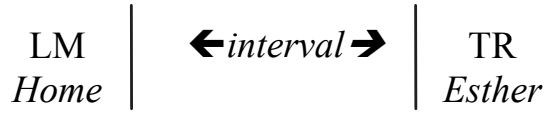
I. Background hypothesis: from space to topology

Starting with typically spatial considerations, we will derive a set of formal properties. The first one, an "interval", will form the basic invariant from which other more specific, context-dependent properties can be derived: gradability and open-closed boundaries.

I.1. Invariant property: an interval

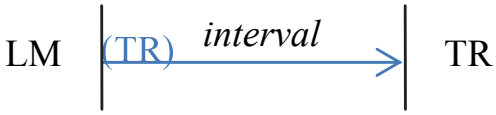
As a background hypothesis, we will assume that AWAY—be it aspectual or spatial—prompts a topological scenario which sets a distance between a Trajector and a Landmark (henceforth TR and LM). In short, whatever the context, TR and LM are separated by an interval (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Esther^{TR} was away from home.



When the predicate is dynamic—*e.g. Esther ran away from home*—,TR is associated with an oriented process which moves it progressively away from LM, which is represented by an arrow in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Esther^{TR} ran away from home.



According to Bennett (1975: 73), static uses would somehow be secondary, in the sense that they can be derived from the directional uses:

> First, it should be noted that the directional uses of *away* […] represents the unmarked, or basic, use of [that item], whereas the locative uses in [*Trevor is away from home*] are felt to be marked, or derived.

This distinction is probably irrelevant since the static *vs.* dynamic values depends on the context, not AWAY. Besides, in temporal uses like:

(5) If this is a missile, we're about *30 seconds away from* the explosion.

the distance between TR and LM obviously decreases, contrary to spatial uses. This seems to substantiate the claim that the only invariant dimension is really the interval, which can co-occur with different types of processes: static, decreasingly dynamic, or increasingly dynamic, depending on the context. Thus, although neutral in itself, the interval may be qualified in different ways *far away, miles away, minutes away*…; as such, it is compatible with various interpretations, depending on the context. For instance, *The bird flew away* may imply that it was "out of sight" and / or that it was "out of reach". Similarly, lexicalized collocations such as *squirrel away / chuck away / lock away* may yield different interpretations, but in any case TR is at a distance from LM and consequently "kept at bay", "safe from harm", etc. Actually, the interval appears as a stable semantic feature, regardless of the degree of metaphorization, as already noted by Lindstromberg (1997: 47):

> The commonest kind of metaphorical use of *away* consists in speaking of an act or action as if it were a movement *away* from a mentioned or implied reference point [...].

For instance, in the following metaphorical use, AWAY is qualified by an adjunct which somehow echoes its semantics:

(6) Clinton won *going away* by a sizeable *margin*.

French translations would be especially revealing in this respect: "*avec une* ***marge*** *d'avance*", "*avec* ***plusieurs longueurs*** *d'avance*", "*en* ***creusant l'écart*** ", "*de* ***très loin***", etc. Likewise, the following paraphrase is congruent with the intuitive interpretation of AWAY as the expression of a distance:

(7) She is *out and away* the best student in this group.

(8) She is *by far* the best student in this group.

I.2. Derived property 1: gradability

The combination of an interval with an oriented path gives rise to an interesting property: it satisfies the conditions for hosting gradable processes. To take a trivial example, if one watches someone "walk away", it may imply that the person "gradually disappears" from sight. Note that in this case the process is not only gradable, but also decremental.

Decremental processes can actually be defined by the conjunction of two properties: a gradable scale on the one hand and an orientation toward a vanishing point on the other. As a consequence, telic predicates—which by definition have an endpoint—will consistently have a high-to-low orientation.

Gradability is often explicitly underlined in dictionary entries referring to AWAY. Consider for instance the following definitions from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (emphasis mine):

> WASTE AWAY: to *gradually* get thinner and weaker, in a way that is unhealthy:
> *You get thinner every time I see you, Sara, you're wasting away.*

> WHITTLE AWAY AT STH: To gradually reduce the size or importance of something:
> *A series of new laws has gradually whittled away at the powers of the trade unions in this country.*

This "decreasing intensity" value is highly prevalent in contexts involving scalar notions:

(9) *The murmur of whispered conversations* slowly died away as the jury trudged back in.

One can easily understand why a predicate like DIE AWAY occurs almost exclusively with sounds, light, emotions, etc., all of which being notions of intrinsically gradable intensity (a sound can be more or less loud, the wind more or less strong, etc.):

(10) As we came out the *bells* were dying *away* in long and low echoes, now faint, now louder, like mingled voices of gladness and regret.

(11) During that time I did nothing but stand and look at the steamer, which was moving more slowly than before, for the reason that the *wind* was *dying away*.

In the same line of reasoning, the following online search within the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA[2]) provided consistent evidence:

echoes|*sound*|*wind [die] away*: 12 matching records;
echoes|*sound*|*wind [die] out*: 1 matching record.

"Echoes", "sound" and "wind", which are all intrinsically scalar notions, are highly compatible with decremental processes occurring within the range of the bounded interval. Conversely, OUT, which refers mostly to sudden or so-called "catastrophic" changes (*The war broke out, I passed out,* etc.), is more appropriate with notions such as "species", "dinosaurs" or "family", which are not intrinsically gradable:

dinosaurs|*species*|*family [die] away*: 0 matching record;
dinosaurs|*species*|*family [die] out*: 17 matching records.

Here again, dictionaries provide converging definitions as they lay special emphasis on the outcome of the state-change rather than on the progression of the process (emphasis mine):

DIE OUT. To cease living completely; become extinct: *tribes and tribal customs that died out centuries ago.* (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000))

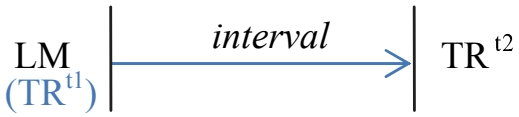
As for AWAY, the existence of an endpoint may actually also be expressly mentioned but gradability remains the most salient feature, as this definition from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* shows (emphasis mine):

[2] http://corpus2.byu.edu/coca/

DIE AWAY**:** If something, especially a sound, dies away, it gradually becomes reduced until it stops existing or disappears:
The sound of his footsteps gradually died away.

Note that the progressive state-change of these notions is characterized by internal gradability; a consequence of this is that the status of the LM and the TR needs to be slightly reviewed. With locative uses, LM could be construed as a reference element from which TR moves or is moved away; in the case of internal gradability, the reference point is the Trajector's initial condition. Somehow, it implies that the distance that separates the TR's initial state from its goal-state is implicitly associated with a time-frame as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The water^{TR} boiled away.



I.3. Derived property 2: open / closed intervals

That said, the fact that an event has decremental properties is not a sufficient condition to conclude that it is telic. And yet, as seen above, Vendler's alternation tests reveal that these predicates are indeed telic since they can only occur with time-frame adverbials introduced by "in" or "within":

(12) He had been diagnosed with dementia, but that isn't terminal as far as I know. He just wasted away, *within months* really.

(13) The spasms died away *within 2 days*.

It appears however that the verb is not necessarily telic in itself—actually, in most contexts it isn't. In fact, two cases at least should be distinguished:

a. The verb already has a telic aktionsart, but AWAY brings a decremental dimension which is not implied by the verb *per se*:

(14) The spasms died away *within 2 days*.

b. The verb is already decremental but its aktionsart is atelic (*e.g. waste, fade*), in which case AWAY reconfigures it into a telic predicate:

(15) The snow melted away quickly.

All the predicates we have considered so far are characterized by the recurrent combination of three semantic components:

- an interval;
- a decremental process;
- an endpoint.

This set of formal properties can be summed up by the diagram in Figure 4[3].

Figure 4: TR undergoes a decremental process.

It should be noted that the interval, which had been delimited so far by a two straight bars, is now enclosed at both ends with brackets, in congruence with the left-to-right path orientation: the first boundary is open and the second boundary is closed. Put simply, the left boundary corresponds to the initial point, the right boundary to the final point. The open / closed distinction, which was hardly relevant for locative uses, will prove particularly important when dealing with aspect and argument structure.

II. Foreground hypothesis: from topology to syntax

The second hypothesis addresses the more specific question of aspectual variation. It stems from the idea that there might be a direct correlation between the topological configuration described above and the Subject-Verb-Object syntactic pattern. Put differently, we will consider that the SVO structure parallels the bounded interval, with a one-to-one mapping

[3] For similar topological representations, see Dufaye 2009 and Ranger 2011. For a detailed treatment of the formalization of aspect, see also Desclés et Guentcheva 1980.

between:

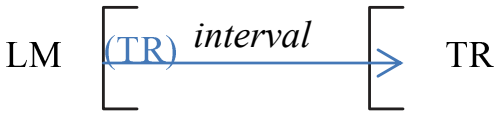
- S and the opening boundary;
- O and the closing boundary.

A consequence of this is that intransitive predicates with no Objects will lack a closing boundary and hence will not be compatible with a telic reading.

II.1. Extensional and modal dimensions

But before we come back to the question of argument structures, let us be a little more precise about the interpretation of the intervals. Only closed intervals have been studied so far, but another type of interval remains to be taken into account: open intervals. This closed to open alternation will be represented in Figure 5 by an open right boundary.

Figure 5: Atelic interval.



The introduction of an open boundary proves necessary to account for atelic uses, such as:

(16) The kid was coughing away.

(17) Her fans were laughing away.

It can be assumed that the open / closed interpretation depends not on AWAY itself but on contextual input; the central invariant property remains the interval that sets LM and TR apart. The nature of the contextual input which induces a change in meaning will be analyzed further on. But first, let us consider Bolinger's remark (1971: 102-103) once again:

> *away* displays only two, fairly compact, semantic areas. The first centres about the literal meaning of 'to (at) a distance from the scene,' the second is aspectual—**a kind of intensive** perhaps definable by the legal phrase **'without let or hindrance'**.

To start with, it should be noted that Bolinger's comparison with the phrase "*without let or hindrance*" is in close keeping with the interpretation of the distance as an "open" interval. Closed intervals on the contrary carry the idea that the process must end at some point either because it reaches its natural termination (as is the case for telicity) or else because it is interrupted. But more importantly, Bolinger's comment reveals that atelic values are probably just as aspectual as they are modal, although, for some unspecified reason, Bolinger does not mention telic contexts—nor their decremental counterpart. He offers an interesting paraphrase as he describes atelic uses as expressing "a kind of intensive". And, true enough, the interpretation of atelic uses such as *The girls chatted away at the back of the car* intuitively gives rise to a sense of intensity at least just as much as it expresses an unbounded event. For instance, the previous sentence could be paraphrased by *The girls chatted* ***like mad*** *at the back of the car;* Ranger (in press) provides a similar example of redundancy: *everyone was talking* ***away like mad***. Likewise, Jackendoff (1997: 540) considers that AWAY "seems to carry some of the sense of heedless activity", as is the case for instance in the following example:

(18) They were both well prepared, and *wrote away at full speed*, almost *enjoying themselves*, and worked steadily till Miss Mitchell said "Pens down."

Accordingly, we will complete our formal description by assuming that telic and atelic uses of AWAY should in fact be described by referring to the interaction of two complementary dimensions: a qualitative dimension on the one hand and an extensional dimension on the other hand[4]:

- with telic contexts, the process is extensionally closed-bounded and qualitatively decremental;

- with atelic contexts, the process is extensionally open-bounded and qualitatively non-decremental.

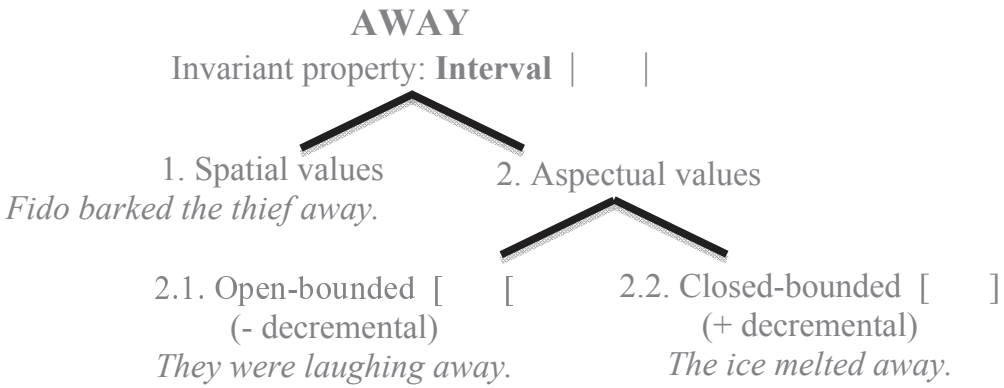
It is important to remember that the Qualitative (modal) and extensional (aspectual) dimensions are context-dependent, as was aptly noted by Ranger (in press):

[4] For a more specific discussion of the concepts of qualitative and extensional (or quantitative) operations, see Deschamps 1999 and Dufaye 2009.

It is true that AWAY can determine the TR with various forms of Quantitative or Qualitative dimensions. Yet, these variations should be dealt with as context-bound values, rather than incorporated in the schematic representation itself, at the risk of removing much of its explanatory force.

For these reasons, the schematic representation that has been proposed for AWAY does not include quantitative or qualitative components.[5]

Here is a summary table listing the three main values that AWAY is likely to assume, as well as the formal properties which have been associated with each value:



There is certainly more to be said about spatial uses, in particular as concerns the relationship between spatial representations and appreciative modality. Most spatial contexts are more or less modally neutral, *e.g.*:

(19) Their house was burgled while they were away on holiday.

(20) They ran away as fast as they could.

(21) You should put this weapon away.

But there are a few cases when the sentence clearly takes on an

[5] Translated from the original text: "Les déterminations quantitatives ou qualitatives qu'opère AWAY sur le ou les terme(s) repéré(s) sont variables, certes. En revanche, nous préférons situer cette variation au niveau de la construction des valeurs, et non pas à celui de la forme schématique même, au risque d'enlever à celle-ci une grande partie de sa puissance explicative.

C'est pour ces raisons que la forme schématique que nous proposons pour AWAY ne fait pas référence à ses composantes quantitatives ou qualitatives." Grateful acknowledgment is due to Graham Ranger, who kindly accepted to review this translation.

appreciative value:

(22) (This film is a must-see.) The ending will *blow* you *away*.

(23) There's far too much food. I'm afraid I got a bit *carried away*.

This modal effect can probably be accounted for by the metaphorical meaning of the overall predicates rather than by a componential analysis of the adverb. But again contexts of this kind certainly call for further study. However, not to stray too far from the original topic, we will leave this problem aside, and move on to the relationship between aspect and argument structure.

II.2. The semantics of argument structure

Consider the following pair of examples once again:

(24) The bruises went away.

(25) The kids chatted away.

We know intuitively—that is, even without Vendler's tests—that the first sentence is telic and the second sentence atelic. And yet these two sentences have the exact same syntax (NP – V – away). So the question is: why is it that we interpret these sentences differently? And what are the elements in the sentence that point toward the appropriate reading?

The hypothesis that we have developed from the observation of such data postulates that the interpretative value depends directly on the presence or absence of an object argument in the clause. More specifically:

- if an object argument occurs within the clause: the predicate gets a telic (hence modally decremental) reading;
- if no object argument occurs within the clause: the predicate gets an atelic (hence modally non-decremental) reading.

Of course, telic sentences like *The bruises went away (within a couple of days)* or *The snow melted away (within hours)* seem to be nothing less than ready-made counter-examples; unless they are interpreted in accordance with the unaccusative hypothesis[6], whereby the surface subject

[6] See notably Perlmutter 1978, Levin and Rappaport 1995, Hale and Keyser 2002.

is analysed as an object (patient or theme). For instance, a sentence like *The snow melted away*, which can only have a telic interpretation, is compatible with the transitive-ergative alternation, which reinstates *the snow* in its object position: *The sun melted the snow*. Indeed it appears that the only cases where the sentences have an atelic reading are unergative structures, either with agentive subjects:

(26) The kids were chatting away.

(27) She's been writing away at her article all morning.

or with emission verbs[7]:

(28) The boxers were sweating away.

(29) The telephone buzzed away.

In other words, AWAY cannot take on an atelic value with structures that host an internal object[8], so much so that even ambi-transitive verbs such as *write (sth)* or *eat (sth)* are incompatible with AWAY unless used intransitively:

(30) *He keeps writing *away* his essay. (Bolinger 1971: 104)

In that case, the demoted object can only be reintroduced within the structure by means of an AT adjunct PP, which is concordant with the open boundary (cf. *He kicked the dog*: punctual *vs*. *He kicked at the dog*: iterative):

(31) He keeps *writing away* at his essay. (*Ibid*.)

(32) Ferrera crawled into the dark frozen holes with a pen torch in her mouth and a knife to *scrape away at the frost* on the sides of the freezers.

On the contrary, transitive predicates whose internal argument occurs in object position as well as intransitive predicates whose internal argument occurs in subject position—namely unaccusatives, ergatives, middles—receive a telic interpretation:

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[7] Levin 1993: 233-238.

[8] Note however that motion verbs which involve a change of location (*walk, run, dart*…) do support this analysis; as markers of spatial relationships, they have to be dealt with as a category of their own. On this issue, see for instance Tenny 1995.

(33) Peter washed away the ink from his hands. (*transitive*)

(34) The rumour quickly died away. *(unaccusative)*

(35) The snow melted away within a few days. *(ergative)*

(36) These bright colors wash away easily.

Based on this insight, we can now try to understand how the argument structure links up with the topological representation described above. To do so, it will be hypothesized that there is a one-to-one mapping between:

a. the causal argument and the initial boundary;
b. the object argument and the endpoint boundary.

In concrete terms, if there is no object argument, then the structure is not right-bounded: accordingly, the right-boundary of the interval remains open. The mapping could be represented as follows:

[		[(AWAY)
They all ➔	*laughed* ➔	Ø

Note that the sense of intensity seems to derive directly from the association of the open topology with the agentive activity; other atelic uses of particles appear to support this claim:

(37) They cheered *them on*.

(38) *They* cheered them *on and on*.

In the first case, the scope of the particle ON is the object, which enforces a resultative reading: *They cheered [the cyclists* [*to go*] *on*] which is somehow comparable with the oft-quoted *twistin' the night away*. Conversely, *on and on*, which carries a sense of intensity, qualifies the agentive activity. In other words, intensity is specifically congruent with the argument that initiates the action and is therefore associated with the left (initial) boundary. On the other hand, the resultative interpretation is congruent with the argument and is therefore associated with the right (endpoint) boundary.

Conversely, in *The sun melted the ice,* the NP *the ice* is the patient that undergoes a change of state, and is therefore associated with the endpoint of the process: accordingly the right boundary of the interval is closed:

[ ] (AWAY)
The sun ➔ + *the ice* (decremental interval) ➔ - *the ice*

In that case the interval delimits the gradual state of change undergone by the object up to the point of non-existence.

Indeed, the transition from existence to non-existence would seem to be a necessary condition that overrules the constraints imposed by the argument structure. Consider for instance the following example, which allows a transitive ergative alternation:

(39) The bells were ringing away.

(40) The monks rang the bells.

In accordance with our claim, (40) should enforce a telic interpretation since *the bells* is the actual object, but it does not. The reason is that the notion /*ring*/ does not have a decremental effect on its object *bells*. In other words, although the argument structure provides an important condition for the understanding of aspectual interpretation, it is never totally disconnected from the notional relationships between the clausal constituents.

Conclusion

Far from providing an exhaustive study, the purpose of this article was to set the preliminary basis for subsequent investigations into the possibility of mapping the topology of adverbs onto the SV(O) sequence, and into the aspectual implications derived from that principle. The study of other contexts seems to provide evidence that correlates with these findings. Compare for instance the following pairs[9], where, on the one hand, the atelic particle ON (*The show must go on, carry on…*) makes the endpoint argument incompatible, and on the other hand the telic particle DOWN makes the object that undergoes the state-change mandatory:

(41) I chopped *on*. / *I chopped the tree *on*.

(42) I chopped the tree *down*. / *I chopped *down*.

Although not directly connected with AWAY, the foregoing examples are obviously consistent with the rationale suggested in this article, that is,

[9] See McIntyre 2004 for a study of similar data.

a parallel between the topological properties on the one hand and the constraints on argument structures and their interpretations on the other hand. Further observations should help confirm to what extent this principle can be generalized to the uses of other aspectual particles.

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