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Actionality (Aktionsart): Pre-Modern Hebrew

Actionality (Aktionsart) is a subcategory of → Aspect. The term has been applied to at least two different types of aspect: situation aspect and phasal aspect. Situation or Aristotelian aspect (Binnick 1991:135–49) describes predicates according to their internal temporal contours. The standard taxonomy of situation aspect includes state, activity, accomplishment, and achievement. Phasal aspect describes alterations of the temporal constituency of a situation distinguished in terms of what part of a situation they focus on. A basic taxonomy includes initial-focused (inceptive and inchoative), final-focused (cessative and completive), and middle-focused (iterative, habitual, continuous, resumptive) phasal aspect. Situation and phasal aspect are treated in turn below.

### 1. Situation Aspect

Situation (or Aristotelian) aspect refers to temporal contours of situations. Modern discussions of situation aspect take Aristotle’s distinction between kinêsis and énergêia as their starting point and (minimally) divide situation types into state, activity, accomplishment, and achievement (Ryle 1949; Vendler 1957; 1967; Kenny 1963). Rothstein (2004) analyzes these situation types using the two features [±stages] and [±telic], as shown in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation aspect</th>
<th>[±stages]</th>
<th>[±telic]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
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</tbody>
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The feature ‘stages’ refers to whether or not a situation involves progression. Static situations (e.g., be sick, sleep) by definition lack progress, as do achievements, which consist of a more or less instantaneous change of state (e.g., die, win). Telic situations have an identifiable endpoint, the arrival at which can be expressed in terms of ‘completion’; by contrast, one does

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**Table 1. Types of situation aspect.**

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**Ruth A. Berman**

(Tel-Aviv University)
not ‘complete’ atelic situations but ‘stops’ or ‘ceases’ from them (e.g., They completed building the house versus They completed playing house). A fifth type, semelfactive, is sometimes added to these canonical four (e.g., Smith 1997:20). Semelfactives are instantaneous event types like knock or blink. However, Rothstein (2004:29) has argued that such a fifth situation type is superfluous, because semelfactives may be understood as ‘minimal event types of activities’ (i.e., a sub-type of activity), since each has a homonym that is an activity when used with an imperfective or progressive conjugation (e.g., knock is knocking).

It is no simple matter to classify predicates using these categories, for a number of reasons. First of all, there is no consensus on the precise number of categories. In addition, there are disagreements over whether verbal lexemes or predicates as a whole (i.e., verbs and their arguments) should be the objects of classification. Contrastive examples like They built a tower (accomplishment) versus They built towers (activity) illustrate that verbal arguments can be determinative of situation classification. There are also questions about interference from pragmatics (conversational implicatures). For example, Olsen (1997:27–31) insists that semantics must be distinguished from pragmatics in the classification of situation types. Furthermore, the linguistic tests used to categorize situation types are often unsuccessful, such as the claim that states are incompatible with progressive expressions (e.g., I am loving my time in Israel!).

These problems are compounded when treating pre-modern Hebrew, especially because of the absence of native speaker informants. Particularly difficult to decide are examples of uncertain duration: are the last three predicates in example (1) to be classified as accomplishments [+stages] or achievements [–stages]? Without native speakers with whom to carry out the linguistic tests (which are not always successful in any case), we cannot be completely certain.

Somewhat less complicated is the identification of stative predicates, because the a-ilu-a (perfect/imperfect) theme vowel variation found in Ancient Hebrew corresponds to a dynamic/stative semantic distinction, as illustrated in examples (2–3):

(2) בָּ֑צַע יָ֑הָע ‘Save, YHWH! For the pious have come to an end’ (Ps 12.2)

But already within Ancient Hebrew (and contemporary Semitic languages) some stative verbs were acquiring more dynamic characteristics and thus began to possess both stative and dynamic meanings. In many cases this semantic shift was accompanied by a shift in the theme vowel, confirming the stative/dynamic marking of the theme vowels. For example, the stative pattern qērēb/yiqraḇ in Biblical Hebrew primarily expresses an activity, ‘draw near’, but some instances are ambiguous between a stative and a dynamic interpretation, particularly in light of comparative evidence: cf. Akkadian qērēb ‘be near, draw near’ (Chicago Assyrian Dictionary XIII 228).

2. Phasal Aspect

The study of phasal aspect originated in Russian grammar, where it refers to various ‘procedural’ affixes which modify the meaning of Russian verbs (Forsyth 1970; Binnick 1991:202–7). Justification of this category comes from a unified analysis of the various phasal types: phasal aspects create an activity-type sub-event out of the initial, middle, or final phase of a situation (Cook 2002:182–84). Inceptive and inchoative phasals make activities out of the initial points of events and states, respectively, while completive and cessative apply to the final points of events and states. The various middle-focused phasals alter situations through repetition (iterative and habitual) or extension with (resumptive) or without (continuative) a pause.

In Biblical Hebrew phasal aspects are expressed mostly through periphrastic expressions consisting of a finite verb and infinitive or two finite verbs that form a verbal hendiadys. Onset-focused aspects include inceptive

(with non-states) and inchoative (with states), as illustrated in examples (4–5). Periphrasis is only infrequently used for inchoative aspect; more frequently statives are interpreted inchoatively based on the discourse context, as in example (6).

(4) way-yāhel yōnā lāḇō bā-ʿir ‘Jonah began to enter into the city’ (Jon 3.4)

(5) hū bēbel līhyōt gibbōr bā-ʿāres ‘He began to be a mighty one on the earth’ (Gen. 10.8)

(6) wa-yhi ka-ʿāser šālālu šaʿārē yorūšāyim līn šabbāt wa-ʿōmā ‘way-yissārā had-dalṭōt ‘When the gates of Jerusalem became dark before the sabbath, I commanded and they closed the doors’ (Neh. 13.19)

The above patterns continue into post-biblical Hebrew (example 7), and Rabbinic Hebrew as well, where the participle form is used instead of the inchoative (examples 8–9).

(7) w-yḥlw l-ṣwṭ h-r ‘And they will start to act evil’ (4Q216 2.13)

(8) laḥem reʿayot ‘I began bringing them proofs’ (Mishna Negaim 7.4; trans. Pèrez Fernández 1992:110)

(9) meleḵ bēl bā-ʿer ‘al gabbe hat-tappuḥ ‘They began piling up ashes on the (ash) heap’ (Mishna Tamid 2.2)

The inceptive/inchoative pair in the initial phase has its final-phase counterpart in the completive/cessative pair, depending on whether the situation is telic (completive) or atelic (cessative), respectively. In Hebrew the verbs hādāl, ṣaβāt, or ṣīḥāt ‘to cease, stop’ are used for the former (example 10) and lel ḥal, bēḥem, or gamar ‘to cease’ for the latter (examples 11–13).

(10) hū bēbel līhyōt šālālu šaʿārē yorūšāyim līn šabbāt wa-ʿōmā ‘way-yissārā had-dalṭōt ‘When Solomon completed building the house of YHWH…YHWH appeared to Solomon a second time’ (1 Kgs 9.1–2)

(11) hádal līhyōt lašārāt ṣim al-nāṣ ‘There ceased being for Sara the way of women’ (Gen. 18.11)

(12) bha-ʿaḇrāhām hā-ʿelle mil-lāpānay ‘The above patterns continue into post-biblical Hebrew (example 7), and Rabbinic Hebrew as well, where the participle form is used instead of the inchoative (examples 8–9).

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(13) gamar mil-leḥazzot qinna ‘et ṣādā ‘When he finished sprinkling, he wiped his hand on the back of the cow’ (Mishna Para 3.2)

Phasal aspects which apply to the nucleus of the event structure affect the progress of a situation, either through repetition (iterative and habitual) or extension, with or without a pause (resumptive and continuous). The expression of these aspects in Biblical Hebrew is less uniform than in the cases of the onset- and coda-focused phasal aspects. The adverb lām as for Sara the way of women’ (Gen. 18.11)

(14) yōd infrequently expresses something like continuative aspect, as in example (14), but more frequently it has the sense of ‘to do again’ (example 15). The participle form of hálak ‘to go’ may express continuation in some contexts (example 16; see Pèrez Fernández 1992:110 for discussion). While this latter meaning comes close to the idea of resumptive aspect, it differs from it in that it denotes a new interval of action, as opposed to a resumption of the same interval after a pause. I am unaware of any clear example of resumptive aspect in Biblical Hebrew:

(15) wa-yipnū mīs-sām há-ʿāḇrāhām ‘when YHWH appeared to Solomon a second time’ (Gen. 18.11)

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Iterative and habitual aspects are semantically similar, but refer to the application of patterned repetition to a minimal event type and any event type, respectively. Although I have not found a clear iterative example in the Hebrew Bible, habitual expressions are numerous and may be expressed in a variety of ways. In most cases the logic of how the situation fits within the discourse context leads to a habitual interpretation of the Irreals Perfective (weqatal) or Imperfective (yiqtol), as in example (17) below. In other instances, temporal adverbial expressions disambiguate and/or reinforce the habitual interpretation of the Irreals forms as in examples (18)-(19). As the Irreals Perfective fell out of use in the post-biblical period, the periphrastic construction with the Perfective of הָיָה ‘to be’ became more frequent, not only for progressive, but also for habitual expressions, as illustrated in example (20):

References

Actionality (Aktionsart): Modern Hebrew

Actionality (also known as Aktionsart) is an aspect of a verb phrase that relates to the way it is structured in relation to time. Actionality should be distinguished from grammatical aspect. The former is an inherent invariant part of an eventuality, which can denote a certain aspectual content according to its semantic