

LEXICAL ASPECT

by Seda Sürel

INTRODUCTION

1. Function

Lexical aspect shows how an action is internally structured, not when it happens. It answers questions such as:

- Does the action have a natural endpoint?
- Does it describe a state, a process, or an instant change?
- Can it continue indefinitely, or does it necessarily finish?

Tense may stay the same.

The type of action changes.

2. Forms

Lexical aspect is not expressed by a single suffix.

It is expressed through:

- the inherent meaning of the verb
- the type of object (especially definite vs. indefinite)
- quantity and boundaries
- time expressions

No new tense or mood is introduced.

3. Morphology

There is no dedicated morpheme for lexical aspect.

The same grammatical material is used:

- same tense markers
- same person endings
- same negation

Aspectual meaning emerges from structure and context.

4. Structural Guide

A key distinction:

- Unbounded (Atelic) actions
→ no inherent endpoint
- Bounded (Telic) actions
→ clear endpoint or result

This distinction maps directly onto Vendler's classification.

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5. Usage

Vendler's Four Lexical Aspect Classes

A) States

Unbounded (Atelic), Durative, Non-agentive

Describe situations, conditions, or mental states.

They do not involve intentional action and do not naturally "finish."

B) Activities

Unbounded (Atelic), Durative, Agentive

Describe ongoing actions controlled by the subject.

They can continue indefinitely.

C) Accomplishments

Bounded (Telic), Durative

Describe actions that:

- take time
- necessarily reach a result

The endpoint is often created by the object.

D) Achievements

Bounded (Telic), Punctual

Describe actions that:

- happen instantly
- mark a sudden change of state

Aspect Shift through Objects (CRITICAL RULE)

In Turkish, definite objects (Accusative -(y)l) often turn an Activity into an Accomplishment.

Indefinite object → Unbounded (Atelic)

Definite object → Bounded (Telic)

This is one of the main aspectual mechanisms in Turkish.

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Diagnostic Tests (Aspect Tests)

Aspect types can be identified using time expressions:

- Duration test: bir saat / bir yıl
 - → compatible with Activities
- In-X-time test: bir saatte
 - → compatible with Accomplishments
- Instant test: bir anda
 - → compatible with Achievements

Examples

States

Ali İstanbul'da yaşıyor.

— State, no natural endpoint.

Bu evi seviyorum.

— Mental state.

Bir saat seviyorum X

— Duration test not natural.

Activities

Ali kitap okudu.

— Activity, no inherent endpoint.

Çocuklar parkta oynadı.

— Open-ended action.

Ali bir saat koştu.

— Duration test ✓

Ali bir saatte koştu X

— No natural endpoint.

Accomplishments

Ali kitabı okudu.

— Definite object creates an endpoint.

Yemeği bitirdi.

— Result reached.

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Ali kitabı bir saatte okudu.

— In-X-time test ✓ (telic)

Achievements

Ali kapıyı açtı.

— Instant change of state.

Film başladı.

— Immediate transition.

Film bir anda başladı.

— Instant test ✓

Aspect Shift (same verb)

Ali kitap okudu.

— Activity (Atelic)

Ali kitabı okudu.

— Accomplishment (Telic)

Ali bir saat kitap okudu.

— Activity limited by time

Ali kitabı bir saatte okudu.

— Completed action

Notes

- Lexical aspect describes internal temporal structure, not tense.
- States are typically non-agentive and do not respond clearly to duration or endpoint tests.
- Activities, Accomplishments, and Achievements are agentive and more compatible with diagnostic tests.
- States are often expressed with present tense (-yor) and can describe temporary situations (Bu aralar İstanbul'da yaşıyorum), without becoming Activities.
- States and Activities are Unbounded (Atelic); Accomplishments and Achievements are Bounded (Telic).
- In Turkish, definite objects (-(y)l) are a key trigger for aspect shift.
- Time expressions are reliable diagnostic tools, but their applicability depends on verb type.