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Martha McGinnis – *University of Calgary*
Painting the wall red for a few hours: a reply to Glasbey (2003)

mcginnis@ucalgary.ca

While McGinnis (2002) argues that idioms are aspectually compositional, Glasbey (2003) contends that this conclusion is undermined by idioms like "paint the town red" ("have an extravagantly good time in town"). As Glasbey points out, this idiom can be aspectually classed as an atelic activity, as in "We painted the town red for hours", while the telic "We painted the town red in an hour" is bizarre. By contrast, common non-idiomatic uses of "paint" in this syntactic context yield telic accomplishments, as in the felicitous "We painted the shed green in a few hours"; thus, the atelic "We painted the shed green for a few hours" is odd.

While Glasbey's examples are intriguing, the aspectual difference between idiomatic and non-idiomatic readings is accidental and pragmatic, not a difference in principle. To obtain a felicitous atelic reading of "paint X red", the "painting" in question must be regarded as an activity with no salient endpoint. This is unusual in ordinary life, but it is easy to construct scenarios that make the reading felicitous. For example, in an experiment testing psychological effects of painting with different colours, a subject might report, "After I painted the wall red for a few minutes, I felt happy." A more ordinary scenario might involve workers painting a large stage set: "We painted the set red for a couple of hours, but then the director realized it looked boring." Clearly, the syntactic context licenses both telic and atelic readings for "paint X red". Both (literal) readings involve applying red paint to an object. In the atelic reading, this event is ongoing, while in the telic reading it is implicitly measured out by the object (Tenny 1987, 1994; see also Dowty 1990, Verkuyl 1993), such that at the endpoint, the object can be described as red.

While pragmatics can play a significant role in constraining the interpretation of an aspectually ambiguous verb phrase, it is important to recall that some syntactic structures are unambiguous: for example, verbs with a mass-noun object (such as "eat tapioca") do not allow a telic reading under any pragmatic circumstances. Despite Glasbey's ingenious examples, there is still no evidence that an idiomatic phrase can have an aspectual interpretation that is incompatible with its syntactic structure.

On the other hand, it is clear that idioms can be more aspectually constrained than their literal counterparts. For example, "paint the town red" seems to be only atelic. This might be because "the town" is a non-referential object; note that giving

a specific town improves the telic reading: "Okotoks? Why, we painted that cute little town red in about an hour." However, the conclusion does not follow in general: "kick the bucket" has both a non-referential object and a telic reading (Marantz 1997). A possible account is that the telic and atelic readings involve distinct syntactic aspectual heads, and that atelic aspect is part of the idiom "paint the town red"; in that case, the "Okotoks" example is a creative extension (Egan 2004) with different syntactic properties.

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