"THE SEMANTICS OF FINAL PHASE IN ENGLISH AND ITS EXPRESSION IN LITERARY TEXTS"

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Abstract: This paper investigates the semantic notion of the *final phase* (or terminal boundary) in event semantics and examines how this notion is manifested in literary texts in English. First, it reviews theories of phase structure in semantics (especially with respect to telic vs. atelic predicates and the notion of event culmination). Then it presents an analysis of how authors exploit final-phase meaning to achieve poetic or narrative effects (such as suspense, ellipsis, or delayed completion). Using illustrative examples from canonical English literature, the study shows that the linguistic marking (tense/aspect, adverbials, modals) often encodes a semantic awareness of the boundary of the event. The paper argues that sensitivity to the final-phase semantics enriches textual interpretation, by highlighting how narrative temporality and completion effects operate. The findings have implications for linguistic stylistics and semantic narratology.

Keywords: final phase semantics, event boundaries, telicity, literary semantics, narrative temporality

Introduction

In formal semantics and linguistic theory, much attention has been paid to the internal temporal structure of events, distinguishing initiation, internal phases, and terminal phases (or culmination). The *final phase* refers to the boundary point at which an event concludes (or its result state is reached). Understanding how that boundary is controlled, represented, or manipulated is crucial in both semantics and in literary interpretation.

In literary texts, authors often play with the expectation of completion, delay, or even intentional disruption of the terminal boundary (e.g. suspense, ellipsis, abrupt endings). A linguistic-semantic lens on how final-phase meaning is encoded allows us to detect subtler strategies in literary temporality.

This study pursues two interrelated goals. (1) To present a clear theoretical account of final-phase semantics in English (especially with respect to telic/atelic distinction, aspect, and adverbial modifiers), drawing on key works in semantics. (2) To illustrate how final-phase semantics is realized and manipulated in literary texts, showing that authors often harness the boundary point for aesthetic effect.

The structure is as follows. First, I review relevant semantic theory (phase structure, telicity, and modifiers). Then I analyze literary examples to show how final-phase meaning is expressed and manipulated. Finally, I conclude with implications for semantic stylistics and directions for further research.

Theoretical Background: Final-Phase Semantics

Event Semantics and Telicity

In event semantics, events are often decomposed into phases (e.g. before, during, after phases). Reilly et al. (2025) provide a contemporary review of event semantics, noting that events are partitioned into initial, internal, and culminating portions, and that the *resulting state* is associated with the culmination of the event.

The classification of predicates by *lexical aspect* (or Aktionsart) is well known (Comrie 1976; Vendler tradition). Telic predicates (like *finish*, *build*, *arrive*) are those that by their lexical meaning presuppose a natural endpoint; atelic predicates (like *walk*, *run*) lack such a boundary. The terminal phase is especially salient for telic predicates, because these predicates imply reaching a final state.

In the semantics of *phasial verbs*, verbs such as *stop*, *finish*, or *begin* explicitly denote particular event phases: *stop* or *finish* typically highlight the final phase or the boundary at which the event ceases. Engerer's work (Phases in Verbal Semantics) surveys models linking medieval to modern accounts, including Jackendoff's cognitive delimitation, Pustejovsky's generative lexicon, and Partee/Bennett's interval semantics.

Thus from existing literature, the idea of a final-phase or boundary is well established in semantic theory, especially in the study of telicity and phasal verbs.

Semantic Phase Theory

An interesting formal construct is the notion of a *semantic phase* (in analogy to syntactic phases). Gründer (2011) introduces a model in which the transition at the *vP* level marks a shift in temporal granularity—from an "imperfective" internal structural view to a "perfective" whole view.

In that model, modifiers like *again* may apply either before or after the phase boundary, generating restitutive or repetitive interpretations respectively. Gründer's *semantic phase* thus accounts for the semantics of repeated actions vis-à-vis boundary effects.

Such a theory suggests that the final-phase is not merely a collapsed terminal point but functions as a semantic hinge—where certain interpretive shifts or abstractions may occur.

Expressing Final Phase in Natural Language

From a linguistic perspective, how do English grammars mark or exploit final-phase semantics? Some relevant mechanisms:

1. **Aspectual morphology**: The perfective past *finished* or *had reached* may emphasize traversal of the boundary.
2. **Adverbial modifiers and temporal adjuncts**: Phrases like *at last*, *finally*, *in the end*, *by the time*, *until* often signal the boundary or closeness thereto.
3. **Temporal adverbs with ambiguous scope**: Words like *again* (in Gründer's analysis) can attach before or after the boundary, thus influencing whether the repeated event refers to the whole event or just the result state.
4. **Ellipsis, suspension, or abrupt truncation**: In narrative, leaving out the final clause (a truncated sentence) may deliberately suspend the final boundary, thereby creating tension.
5. **Modal or conditional override**: Authors may insert *would have*, *could have*, *almost*, *yet* to modulate whether the boundary is fully reached.

In literary usage, these devices become tools for shaping reader expectation about an event's completion.

Literary Semantics & Textual Semantics

The interface between semantics and literary studies has been explored in works on *semantic textuality*. Chollier (2014) traces how *textual semantics* seeks to integrate linguistic tools to analyze how meaning functions at the level of the text (beyond isolated sentences), paying attention to continuity, shifts, and layering of semantic fields.

Similarly, in *Semantics and Literary Studies*, critics seek to understand how semantic features (e.g. ambiguity, presupposition, entailment) contribute to literary effects (e.g. irony, foreshadowing).

Thus, bringing final-phase semantics to bear on literature requires situating boundary phenomena not merely at sentence level, but as part of textual temporality and narrative strategy.

Analysis and Discussion: Final-Phase Semantics in Literary Texts

Below I provide illustrative examples (from widely known texts) and analyze how authors exploit final-phase semantics. (Because of space, I use brief quotes and concentrate on effect rather than exhaustive treatment.)

Example 1: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

In many climactic scenes, Austen delays the full consummation of events (marriage, recognition) until near the end. Consider a hypothetical reconstruction:

"He paused at the door, then moved again, and she—"

Here the narrative suspension before "she" leaves the final boundary unresolved until the next paragraph. The absence of the concluding verb acts as an *ellipsis of the final phase*, heightening anticipation.

In semantic terms, Austen withholds the culmination predicate, thereby deferring the terminal boundary. The reader remains in a *pre-boundary* region, expecting closure.

When later Austen phrases *"It was resolved at last that…"*, the adverb *at last* clearly signals that the final boundary has been reached. The pairing of modality (resolved) and the temporal marker indicates the transition to the final phase.

Example 2: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

In modernist poetry, temporal boundaries are often elusive. Eliot's poem often oscillates between fragments and allusions, leaving many events without explicit endings. For example, lines that begin actions but never culminate them leave readers suspended in the *internal phase*. In this way, the absence of a linguistic marker of the final phase becomes a semantic strategy: non-closure as part of poetic temporality.

Moreover, the poet's use of *"Who is the third who walks always beside you?"* raises expectation but does not deliver a final answer, thus suspending the boundary of knowledge and interpretation.

Example 3: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

At the end of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare compresses multiple final-phase boundaries in a sequence of deaths. For example:

"The rest is silence."

This famous line functions as a terminal boundary: Hamlet's life (event) culminates in silence. The phrase *"the rest is silence"* serves as an *absolute final-phase marker*, collapsing further narrative into completion.

Further, the run of phrases *"Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane"* etc. brings successive events to their final phase in rapid succession; the cumulative effect is a textual stacking of boundaries.

Cross-case Observations

From these examples, a few patterns emerge:

- **Delay or omission of the terminal predicate** creates suspense or open-endedness.
- **Explicit boundary markers** (finally, at last, in the end, the rest is …) assert closure.
- **Stacking of boundaries** (multiple climaxes in quick succession) compresses narrative temporality.
- **Ambiguous or non-culminating syntax** (e.g. fractured sentences) can blur the phase threshold, making meaning more fluid.

In each instance, authors implicitly rely on the reader's sensitivity to final-phase semantics: the reader anticipates a boundary and reacts to its postponement or resolution.

Integration with Semantic Theory

These observations align with the theoretical insights: the final-phase is not merely a passive endpoint but a semantic slot open to manipulation. Authors, by controlling whether or how the boundary is presented, implicitly manipulate the *granularity* of the event representation (à la Gründer). When the boundary is withheld, the event remains in a more *imperfective/intrinsic* view; when the boundary is asserted, the event becomes *perfective/complete*.

Moreover, modifiers (temporal adverbs, modals) that operate near the boundary are crucial. For instance, *finally* or *in the end* can be considered as attaching just at or after the final phase boundary, marking closure. Likewise, modal auxiliary verbs (*would have*, *could have*) often modulate whether the boundary is actualized or potential, thus blurring the reader's temporal perspective on completion.

Hence, literary authors often exploit the semantic tension around the boundary to produce narrative effects (e.g. suspense, irony, open ending).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the concept of the *final phase* (or terminal boundary) is not only a technical notion in semantics but also a fruitful lens for literary interpretation. From the perspective of event semantics and telicity, the final phase is a privileged point in the event structure. Theories such as semantic phase theory (Gründer) suggest that this boundary is a conceptual hinge where semantic abstraction or reanalysis may occur.

Examining literary texts shows that authors actively manipulate the boundary: delaying, omitting, stacking, or explicitly marking the final phase. These manipulations influence narrative temporality, reader expectation, and the texture of closure or openness.

For future research, I recommend:

1. A quantitative corpus-based study investigating the frequency and distribution of boundary-marking adverbials (e.g. *finally, at last*) in different literary genres.
2. A deeper formal-semantic analysis of boundary-ambiguous phrases (e.g. *again*, *until now*) in literary contexts, perhaps adapting Gründer's framework.
3. A cognitive-pragmatic experiment exploring how readers process narrative sentences that withhold or delay boundaries, measuring reading time or expectation.

By bridging formal semantics with literary analysis, we can deepen our understanding of how meaning and temporality interact in literary texts.

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