Limits to the immediate specification of lexical aspect

Research Question
In semantics it is commonly assumed that lexical aspect is a property of VPs or even whole sentences [3]. Does the interpretation of aspect have to wait until the verb and all its arguments have been processed?

Lexical Aspect
(1) Zwei Stunden lang erreichte... Two hours long reached...
(a) ... der Bergsteiger den Gipfel ... the mountaineer the top
(b) ... niemand den Gipfel ... nobody the top

- Erreichen (reach) is an achievement verb
- But, the arguments influence lexical aspect, too (eg. [6], [4], [2], [5])
- Aspect depends on a complete verb-argument-structure (achievement in (1a) vs. state in (1b))

Hypotheses
Incremental Aspectual Interpretation (IAI)
Lexical aspect is determined on a word-by-word basis.

Predictive IAI (A-IAI)
The parser automatically anticipates (cf. [1]) aspectually appropriate arguments?

Anticipatory IAI (A-IAI)
The parser predicts a sentence completion that makes the sentence sensible (if there is one at all).

Verb Driven IAI (VD-IAI)
The parser expects a continuation that is highly associated with the lexical material encountered so far (eg. discover → achievement).

Predictions for sentence continuation:
- A-IAI: Comprehenders can come up with sensible continuations for cases like (2)
- VD-IAI: Comprehenders cannot find a sensible continuation

The Tested Constructions
(1) Der Ringer gewann das Turnier, ganze drei Stunden, obwohl ...
(2) For two hours reached...

- 60 part. received the incomplete items in the mismatch condition and were asked
  - To judge whether the sentence could be completed in a sensible way
  - If so, to provide a sensible continuation
- Missing argument(s): subject vs object vs subj.+obj.
  - Overwhelmingly, participants didn’t come up with continuations; evidence against A-IAI

Aspektual Shifts Aren’t Anticipated – A Continuation Experiment

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Evidence for Late Aspectual Interpretation – Eyetracking Experiment

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Discussion
- Clear support for the LAI hypothesis
- Findings extend earlier results from self-paced reading (2)

Open Questions
- What about other aspectual classes?
- Are there crosslinguistic differences? Eg. earlier effects in aspect languages?

References