Adverbial mimetics and lexical aspect

Previous research, Toritani (2007), has shown that Japanese verb phrases (VPs) are sensitive to the inherent aspectual properties of adverbial mimetic phrases (AMPs) and that AMP modification can affect VP lexical aspect. Thus, the unmodified VP (1) is understood as atelic whereas the AMP modified VP (2) is understood as telic. However, Toritani’s analysis does not indicate why AMP modification should result in lexical aspectual shifts. I propose instead that analysis of AMP modification should be contextualized within an account of lexical aspect.

2. Mizu ga zaasQ to nagareta.  Water NOM gush ADV flow.PST ‘(One burst of) water gushed.’

My proposed lexical classification system for Japanese is adapted from Olsen (1997) and defines three privative aspectual features: [+dynamic], [+durative], [+telic]. Crucially, only those aspectual properties lexicalized by the verb are considered when initially determining lexical aspectual classification - VP internal elements such as direct object noun phrases (DOs) are disregarded. Thus, activities and accomplishments form a single class with [+dynamic] and [+durative].

However, external elements such as direct object NPs can potentially add aspectual features. For example, adding hon o nisatsu ‘two books’ to yomu ‘read’ adds [+telic] in (3). In (4), however, the availability of multiple interpretations for hon ‘a book/the book(s)/books,’ indicates that [+telic], while available, is not necessarily added. Furthermore, the availability of multiple interpretations for hon (4) means that the VP is itself open to multiple interpretations, here an activity interpretation ‘read books’ and an accomplishment interpretation ‘read a book/the book(s).’

3. Tomu wa hon o nisatsu yonda.  Tom TOP book ACC two volumes read.PST ‘Tom read two books.’

Like DOs, AMPs can also potentially add aspectual features to VPs, e.g. in (2) addition of the AMP zaasQ to ‘gush’ means that [+telic] is added to the VP, narrowing the interpretations available to the VP and interfering with the availability of an atelic interpretation. Similarly, in (5), adding the AMP marumaru ‘completely’ also adds [+telic] to the VP and therefore interferes with the availability of the activity interpretation so that the VP is interpreted as an accomplishment.

5. Hazukashi nagara, hon o marumaru yonda ato demo wakaranakatta  Shy while book ACC completely read.PST after even understand.NEG.PST ‘It’s embarrassing that even after reading the book(s)/books completely, I didn’t understand.  
http://blog.livedoor.jp/ugoky/archives/52012122.html

In contrast, in (6) the DO nisatsu no hon ‘two books’ is already quantized so the VP must already be interpreted as an accomplishment. In this case, adding [+telic] via AMP modification by marumaru does not have an effect because the VP is already marked for the feature [+telic].

6. Hazukashi nagara, nisatsu no hon o marumaru yonda….  Shy while two volume GEN book ACC completely read.PST…. ‘It’s embarrassing that even after] reading two books completely…

In (7), as in (5), not only is hon open to multiple interpretations, the VP as a whole can be understood as either an activity or an accomplishment (though the activity interpretation is somewhat pragmatically unlikely). Addition of the AMP batan ‘thud’ results in the VP being marked with the feature [+telic], interfering with an activity interpretation for the VP. In contrast to (5), however, AMP modification by batan does not make any interpretation of the noun phrase hon unavailable in (8) and so represents a slightly different pattern of AMP modification.