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Aspect as a communicative category. Evidence from English, Russian and French

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Abstract

On the basis of internal evidence from primarily the use of imperfective forms and external evidence from primarily first language acquisition, it is argued that English, Russian, and French aspect differ from one another, because they go back to an obligatory choice among three possible communicative directions: should a grammatical category be grounded in the speaker's experience of a situation, in the situation referred to or in the hearer as information about the situation? The progressive vs. non-progressive distinction in English is acquired in the present tense of atelic (simplex) verbs as a distinction within imperfectivity between the speaker's visual or non-visual experience. It is first-person oriented. The perfective vs. imperfective distinction in Russian is learnt in the past tense of telic (complex) verbs as a distinction between two complex situations in reality, an event and a process. It is third-person oriented. French aspect in written discourse is a three-way distinction between one imperfective form, *imparfait*, and two perfective forms, *passé composé* and *passé simple*, which present a deductive, abductive and inductive argument to the reader. It is learnt in school and is connected to the meta-distinction between atelic (simplex) and telic (complex) verbs. It is second-person oriented. The specific order arrived at reflects the Peircean categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness and their predictions. This can account for the fact that the English and Russian types can be found in the same language (e.g., Chinese) and the Russian and French types, too (e.g., Georgian), but never the English and French types.

Keywords: Perfectivity and imperfectivity; External and internal evidence; Atelic and telic verbs; States, activities, and actions; Direct and indirect reference; Lexical-grammatical and grammatical categories

1. Introduction

1.1. On previous approaches

If we look at the theories of the progressive vs. non-progressive distinction in English (e.g., *He is/was singing* vs. *He sings/sang*), the imperfective vs. perfective distinction in Russian (e.g., *Ona pisala roman* 'She was writing a novel/She has written a novel' vs. *Ona napisala roman* 'She wrote a novel/She has written a novel/she had written a novel') and the tripartite distinction between *imparfait* (e.g., *Elle entrait dans la chambre* 'She was entering the room'), on the one hand, and *passé simple* (*Elle entra dans la chambre* 'She entered the room') and *passé composé* (*Elle est entré dans la*

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chambre 'She has entered the room/She is in the room'), which is confined to Formal French, on the other hand, one observes a striking similarity. The features, notions or parameters used in English, Russian and French linguistics to account for the differences between the various forms in the languages in question are the same: ongoing process, an action in progress, an action in its non-totality, and an incompleted action are used about the English progressive form, the Russian imperfective aspect and the French *imparfait*, while an action in its totality and a completed/bounded action are applied to the English non-progressive form, the Russian perfective aspect and the French *passé simple* (the *passé composé* has been excluded from the formal system of French). Thus irrespective of language the grammatical category of aspect and its representatives are treated in the same way.

We find, however, one difference: while the form that is considered to be the imperfective version in English, viz. the progressive form, is marked with respect to [−totality] or [−completion], the Russian perfective aspect and the French *passé simple* are marked with respect to [+totality] or [+completion]. The majority of linguists who have been concerned with the progressive vs. non-progressive distinction in English from a more general perspective consider the progressive aspect as having something to do with the temporal distinction or contour of an event (Hockett, 1958:237), with the internal temporal constituency of a situation (Comrie, 1976), with reference to one of the temporally distinct phases in the evolution of an event through time (Johnson, 1981:152), or with the relation of an event or state to a particular reference point located before, after, around (i.e., the progressive aspect) or simply at a particular point in time (Anderson, 1971:39). This view, which implies that aspect is treated as a kind of relative or secondary tense concerned with the internal time structure of a situation, has been the most prevalent one in general linguistics completely regardless of theoretical background (see Jakobson, 1957; Katz, 1972:320; Coseriu, 1980; Miller and Johnson-Laird, 1976:442f; Barwise and Perry, 1983:288ff; Givón, 1984:272; Talmy, 1985:77; Lyons, 1977:705; Allan, 1986; Klein, 1995; Bhat, 1999:43f; Radden and Dirven, 2007; etc.). Precisely this view makes it possible to view the English progressive, the Russian imperfective aspect and the French imparfait as being tokens of the same type – a type which is called *imperfectivity* by Comrie (1976), Brinton (1987), and Freed (1979), or *durativity* by Friedrich (1974) and Verkuyl (1972) to mention some of the founders of modern aspectology. To my knowledge, the universalistic view on the category of aspect and its imperfective and perfective members have never been challenged. I will try to explain why it is important to do so just below.

Like most linguists since Smith (1983), I make a conceptual distinction between verb class ('situation aspect' in Smith's terminology) and aspect ('viewpoint aspect' in Smith's terminology) (see also Dickey, 2016). I distinguish three verb classes: (1) state verbs, (2) activity verbs (corresponding to Vendler's 'state terms' and 'activity terms', respectively), and (3) action verbs (corresponding to Vendler's 'achievement terms' and 'accomplishment terms'). State verbs and activity verbs are called 'simplex verbs', because both create a single propositional structure. Action verbs are called 'complex verbs' because they all comprise an activity description and a state description. These three verb classes are meant to be universal. This means that verbs of all languages are supposed to name the same kinds of situations. Simplex verbs such as state verbs (e.g., *sit*, *sidet'* and *etre assis*) name a stable situation and simplex verbs such as activity verbs (e.g., *smoke*, *kurit'* and *fumer*) name an unstable situation that can be captured by the human eye in one single picture – a state (''a person who is sitting'') will leave a stable picture, while an activity (''a person who is smoking'') will leave an unstable picture. Complex verbs (e.g., *give*, *dat'/davat'* and *donner*) name two situations, an unstable situation in which ''somebody, X, is doing something with a thing, Y'' and a stable situation in which ''another person, Z, has that thing, Y''. These two situations cannot take place at the same time, X and Z cannot be in possession of the same Y at the same point in time – either Y is with X as it is the case during X's production of the activity, or Y is with Z as it is the case if the activity causes a change of state. This means that an action is a collective concept for two other concepts, namely a process (an activity intended to cause a state) and an event (a state caused by an activity) (I use 'event' in von Wright's understanding of it (see Wright, 1974). All Slavic languages take this into consideration and that is why they have two verbal forms for one form in the majority of other languages: the perfective form *dat'* for the event manifestation of an action and the imperfective form *davat'* for the process manifestation of an action. Slavic languages do not have a name for the collective concept itself, i.e., the common idea behind the event and the process. This specific feature, however, only concerns complex verbs. With respect to state verbs and activity verbs all Slavic languages have one basic form (always imperfective), but from this underived form one may derive several *Aktionsart* verbs (also called 'procedurals'), perfective verbs by prefixes or imperfective verbs by suffixes. If one wants to be able to explain the aspectual system of Slavic languages, it is important to make a distinction between complex verbs and simplex verbs. This does not mean that the meta-distinction is irrelevant for non-Slavic languages, as we shall see in the following sections.

Below I shall demonstrate that it is necessary to distinguish between a verb's naming properties and its communicative direction. Naming properties are linked to the three universal verb classes: states, activities, and actions (cf. Durst-Andersen et al., 2013). Any verb will belong to one of these three classes. Communicative direction is connected to the aspectual forms of a particular language, used in a specific communicative setting where the obligatory participants are found: the speaker, the hearer, and the situation named by the verb, viz. a state, an activity, or an action, being a collective concept of an event and a process. Aspectual forms of a verb will refer to the situation named by the verb itself, but it may do so in three different ways: (1) indirectly through the speaker's experience of it; (2) directly through the situation itself; or