PROBLEMS OF ASPECT AND TENSE

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This paper deals with the question of Aspect and Tense endeavouring to sift through the variable and inexplicit uses of these terms to come to an understanding of the phenomena which lie behind them in their own terms. Reference is made to the question of marking of temporal relations both within languages and across languages, using especially the example of English, Russian, Guyanese Creole and French.

It was originally intended that this paper would deal with the aspect system of English. However, it soon became clear that there was some disagreement about whether aspect was in fact a category of English grammar and that this disagreement was due more to division on the nature of Aspect and Tense as grammatical categories than to disagreement about the facts of English. As a result, this paper will rather treat the entire subject critically, pointing out difficulties and inconsistencies in the treatment of temporal characterization.

The following are, in my opinion, the problems which have led to the greatest degree of confusion in any discussion of aspect and tense:

A the variability of terminology
B the inexplicit use of terminology
C the concentration on form over function
D the concentration on sentences out of context
E confusion of setting in time and sequence of events
F the failure to distinguish description from narrative

The variability of the terminology is, I think, the most widespread cause of misunderstanding and perhaps the most
difficult to correct. A ready example is the traditional grammatical term, 'tense', as opposed to the common modern-day linguistic term, 'tense'. Tense in traditional terms refers to any morphologic marking of a verb or verbal auxiliary which makes any reference to time. This conception of 'tense' is intimately connected with a word/paradigm model of morphology, for the 'tenses' are conceived of as being made up of words which are members of paradigms. Thus, we are taught that English has a simple present tense, present progressive tense, simple past tense, past progressive tense, future tense, present perfect tense etc. Likewise we are taught that French has le temps present, le temps passe simple, le temps passe conditionnel, les temps composés etc. On the other hand, tense as defined by J. Lyons in his book *Theoretical Linguistics* is a category which marks time in a much more restricted way, i.e., it marks when an event takes place in relation to the present moment (defined as the moment of speaking). In these terms, each of the above English and French 'tenses' would have as an element a 'tense', without them all being a 'tense'. This conception admits the possibility of several grammatical categories being realized together in one morpheme, with tense being more restricted in definition to one of the several categories which are realized in the inflectional endings of English or French (or for that matter, Latin) verbs.

Others, although abandoning the traditional usage, have an altogether different definition. Charles Hockett describes Hopi as having three 'tenses'; one marking 'timeless truth', one marking 'known or presumably known happenings', the third marking 'events still in the realm of uncertainty'. Hockett has here used another common, negative, sense of tense, where it is understood as that verbal morphology which does not refer to
either person or number. Both Hockett's and Lyons' use of tense are restrictions of the traditional use of the term, but they are nonetheless, completely different in sense.

Aspect is equally prone to variegated usage. There are in general two schools, membership in one or the other being largely determined by one's familiarity with Slavic languages. I will take R.W. Zandvoort, though not himself a Slavonicist, as representative of the Slavic school and J. Lyons as typical of the opposite extreme. In his article Is Aspect an English Verbal Category? Zandvoort decides that it is not. His main reasoning is that 'aspect' originated as at term in the English language as a translation of the Slavic term 'vid'. 'Vid' refers to a specifically Slavic phenomenon of verbal morphology and is not used to refer to phenomena in other language families which are either formally or functionally analogous. Thus Zandvoort feels 'aspect' should be used in English in the same way, to refer specifically to Slavic verbal morphology. But, linguists such as Lyons, having restricted the traditional definition of tense, are left with English verbal morphology which they do not wish to label as tense and is, hence, nameless. It seemed to them that what these English forms resembled most was the Slavic category 'vid', so 'aspect' was appropriated to refer to those aspects of verbal morphology that were excluded from the categories of 'person', 'number', 'tense' and 'mood'. Lyons' use of aspect includes Zandvoort's, but goes beyond it in being more general in both its formal and functional applications. To be fair to both, neither explicitly gives the reasons I have attributed to them, although they are, it seems, the only ones to be inferred.

Inexplicit use of the terminology, while equally widespread, is the most easily prevented cause of misunderstanding
and thus the most reprehensible of the practices which I have listed. Imagine two scholars with fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of aspect and tense criticizing each other for not understanding the phenomena, when in fact they are either referring to two different phenomena by the same term, or to the same phenomenon by two different terms. Thus after having criticized former grammarians for describing Creoles as having no tense, D. Bickerton in Dynamics of a Creole System then posits the prefix a- as a continuous aspect marker and the prefix bin- as an anterior tense marker. Firstly, it is quite right to say that Creoles do not have tenses in the traditional sense as do most European languages. It is fruitless to try and conjugate the Creole verb. It is equally true that, in the modern linguistic sense, Creoles do have tense. Bickerton is reacting against those modern grammarians who state that Creoles have no tense based on descriptions by traditional grammarians. Yet, at no point does Bickerton himself define what it is about the above two prefixes that makes one a mark of aspect and one a mark of tense. Again when Hockett posited three tenses in Hopi, he explains what they mark, but not why what they mark should fall under the rubric tense and not, for example mood. Lyons' explains to some degree what he thinks aspect is, but when he gives examples of English aspect in action he fails to show how these examples fit into his own scheme.

Zandvoort, on the other hand, in rejecting the perfect and progressive forms of the English verb (not to mention the progressive perfect forms) as marks of aspect neglects to offer any suggestions as to what then they might be. One can only guess, if they are neither tense nor aspect markers, what Zandvoort would call them. He has, however, left himself an out. In rejecting aspect as an English verbal category, Zandvoort leaves
the possibility open that aspect may be a category of English grammar at some other level. This brings us to the question of form versus function. Most definitions of tense and aspect are formal ones. Marks of aspect and tense are generally thought of as affixes or auxiliaries of verbs. Such a view misses the generalization that identical temporal relations between events may be marked in different ways, both within one language AND from one language to another. Given the importance of verbal morphology in this area, that is no reason to overlook the role of adverbs, conjunctions, both subordinate and coordinate, auxiliary verbs, clausal ordering and type of discourse in signalling temporal information about events. In addition, the concentration on form leads us frequently to overlook the possibility that, in some contexts, lack of a formal mark may be a mark at another level of analysis. Whatever the category to which the English expanded verb forms ultimately will be assigned, they are relative newcomers to the English language. If we are looking too closely at form, we will expect that the origin of the expanded verb forms in English will coincide with the origin of two new categories, that is, that the English language began to mark formally what it formally did not express. The contrary opinion is that English merely added two new mechanisms to its repertoire for expressing functional distinctions it earlier expressed by other means.

It is a common statement that Creoles have no tense. D. Bickerton has shown that, for Guyanese Creole, this is not true. Because sometimes a Creole verb stem has past reference and sometimes non-past reference, it has been thought that:

i) Creoles have no tense
ii) they mark time only adverbially, e.g. today, before etc.

If one both allows the existence of non-verbal marks of tense
and admits that no formal mark may sometimes be a functional mark, the earlier statements become ridiculous. Whether or not the verb is being used narratively or descriptively (i.e. as a non-stative or stative verb) determines the time reference of a bare stem form. Thus, non-statives, typical of narration, have past reference unless marked otherwise, while statives, typical of description, have non-past reference unless otherwise marked. Here we have an example of zero being a mark and what it marks being consistently determined by its context in the discourse. Thus, redi 'ready' means 'be ready' in description and 'get ready' in narration. Non-inclusion of the role of zero and context of discourse in marking temporal relations have caused many a grammarians to miss the essential regularity of the Creole verb.

English is said not to have the Slavic distinction perfective/imperfective. Where Russian has for every verb two possible forms, English has three, the simple forms, the perfect forms and the progressive forms (a fourth form, the perfect progressive is a combination of the last two), there being no one to one correspondence the English and Russian forms, even when not considering the use of the forms. However, if one takes into account the fact that choice of an English form is to some degree optional with both expanded forms able to be replaced by the simple form in some circumstances, the situation changes. Looking at the simple form as neutral with respect to the distinction between the perfect and progressive forms, we are left, as in Russian with a binary opposition. Does it resemble in any way the Slavic binary opposition of perfective/imperfective? Formally, no, but functionally, yes. Let us consider some of the functions of choice among forms in Russian. If several actions are simultaneous, or it is not significant what order
they occurred in, all are marked by an imperfective verb. Thus:

a) d'edushka sid'el i chital
   Grandfather was sitting and reading.

b) s'evod'n'ja v'echerom ja budu chitat' i pisat'   
   Tonight I'll read and write.

In example a), the two events are simultaneous and in example b) it is not known whether the events are ordered or simultaneous.
In neither example are the two actions marked as ordered, however, our interpretation of a lack of ordering in these examples may have as much to do with our understanding of sitting, reading and doing homework as with the verb forms used.
On the other hand, to mark several actions as taking place in sequence, they must all appear in the perfective form. Thus:

c) d'edushka s'el i nachal chitat'
   Grandfather sat down and (then) started to read.

d) on vstan'et, od'en'et's'ja, i pozavtrakajet
   He will get up, get dressed and have breakfast.

If a second action starts before an earlier action has ceased, then the first action appears in the imperfective and the second in the perfective. Thus:

e) kogda ja r'eshal zadachi, moj brat pozvonil
   When I was working on the problems, my brother called.
   (calling interrupts problem solving)

Much of what Russian does morphologically, English marks by syntactic means alone. Compare:

f) When you call tonight, I'll read some grammar.

g) When you call tonight, I'll be reading some grammar.

h) When you call tonight, I'll have read some grammar.
In the first example, the order alone of the two clauses is equivalent to two Russian perfectives. For the implication of this order, that the reading will follow the calling, to be negated, as in g) where the reading and calling are simultaneous and as in h) where the reading begins before the calling, the earlier of the two must be marked, in the one case by the progressive form, in the other by the perfect form. Here in examples e) and g) we have two cases of the English progressive being used where Russian requires the imperfective, both being used to indicate simultaneity or rather, lack of sequentiality. The main difference between the two seems to be that use of the English progressive in an appropriate context is often optional, while in the appropriate contexts, the use of the imperfective is obligatory. Is the fact that English uses a strikingly different form to accomplish the same purpose and optionally rather than necessarily enough to classify the two as realizations of different rather than similar phenomena? It is legitimate, having asked this question, to answer yes. But one should not reject the possibility of the existence of aspect in both Slavic and English out of hand.

The use of a perfect form in English generally marks an action or state as having begun before another action or state. This is in some ways analogous to the use of the perfective in Russian. It seems to me that most of the superficial differences between Slavic and English verbs arise from the fact that where Slavic languages have two forms, the unmarked imperfective and the marked perfective, English has four forms, the unmarked simple form, the marked progressive, the marked perfect and the doubly marked progressive perfect. Even given a precise understanding of what all the marked forms mark, the mapping of possible forms from either language to the other would not be
simple.

If we look at sentences within a larger context and look at the function of the various temporal markers within that context, it seems to me that we are able to come up with a rough working functional definition of the various formal marks which have on occasion been posited as marks of either aspect or tense. The common element, assumed from the beginning, is temporality. We may distinguish two types, both relative. The first characterizes some event relative to the time of speaking. The second type characterizes an event as taking place at a certain time relative to some other event, which may in fact be the event of speaking. Let us try and apply this concept to an example of Zandvoort's. Illustrating the difference between the use of the imperfective and the perfective, he quotes Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*:

Columbus was happy, not when he had discovered America,

byl, imp otkryl, pf

but when he was in the course of discovering it.

otkryval, imp

Zandvoort quotes Umbeaun who, in his Russian Grammar, observes that it was not the result of a completed action that made Columbus happy, but the process of discovery. Contrarily, I would say that all that the verb forms mark is that Columbus' happiness and discovering cooccurred and that his happiness did not follow his discovering. Whether it was the discovering process or the result of the process which was the cause of his happiness is inferred, since it is possible to construct a context in which the happiness would only be coincidentally related to the discovering, rather than causally. For example:

Columbus was happy when he was discovering America, not when he had discovered it -- because he still thought that it was India.
There is another phenomenon which is brought out in connected discourse which is often overlooked. Robert King in Historical Linguistics and Generative Grammar discusses some unusual of early Indo-European syntax. He shows that early Greek and Old Icelandic used something similar to a historical present in a different way from Modern English or German. Unlike these languages, it was never used in a sustained discourse, but only when the verb preceding was explicitly marked for time reference. Thus in Old Icelandic (trans):

they **leaped** on their horses and **ride** down to the Pyre-fields; then they **saw** that King Athils **rode** after them and **wants** to kill them.

Early Greek does this and more besides. In early Greek, a sequence of future reference + future reference is realized as future tense + present tense with a similar result for sequences of two aorists, optatives or imperatives. Paul Kiparsky takes this as evidence for an early Indo-European transformation which would be like:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\alpha \text{tense} \\
\beta \text{mood}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{u tense} \\
\text{u mood}
\end{array} \quad \bigg/ \quad \begin{array}{c}
\alpha \text{tense} \\
\beta \text{mood}
\end{array}
\]

This transformation is the temporal analogue of those which reduce a nominal referent to a pronoun or zero. Thus we have here a phenomenon suggestive of anaphoric tense and mood. However, languages vary according to the degree to which they allow reduction of temporal marks. In some cases it is obligatory, in others optional, in some strictly disallowed. Here we have one of the most difficult to learn differences between French and English. In English one must say:

I will be there when you **arrive**.

while in French, one must say:

Je **serai** là lorsque tu **arriveras**.
In English, all verbs with future reference which are subordinate to another verb with future reference are unmarked as such, while in French, this is never the case. Languages also differ in what the neutral form is; most use the present tense, while some, like Sanskrit, have a special form which is never used independently.

Another kind of context to consider is the type of discourse. There are two basic types of discourse with most extended discourses made up of a mixture of the types. They are, of course, description and narration. The archetypical descriptive verb is be and the archetypical narrative verb is do. That is, one deals with states, the other with actions which are, in fact, usually the causes of the beginning or ending of some state. Many linguists have found that verbs classify themselves by their syntactic behaviour as statives or non-statives. However, non-statives sometimes act as statives and vice versa. If we classify the verbs rather by the type of discourse in which they are found we can explain the exceptions. Bickerton states that in Guyanese Creole statives do not take the prefix a-, with some exceptions. One exception is 'redi' 'be ready'. When used with the prefix a-, a ređi means 'get ready' and not 'be ready'. This is an example of a normally descriptive verb being used narratively. If we restate the distribution of the prefix a- such that a- is used only in narration and not description, then the putative exceptions disappear. Similarly, in Slavic the unmarked form (imperfect) is typical of description, while the marked form (perfect) is typical of narration. Facts such as these go a long way towards explaining why in many languages the same forms are used for marking a single state, iterative actions habitual actions and continuous actions. All are used in description. It is only when description and narration intermingle, for example, in the short story, that changes back and forth from one discourse type to another are especially significant.
References


Zandvoort, R.W. (1962) "Is Aspect an English Verbal Category?", Contributions to English Syntax and Phonology, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell