

Aspect

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Abstract

This article discusses aspect, a linguistic property of verbs and predicates in language. It deals with the question what aspect is and how it can be defined, what types of aspect there are in different languages of the world, what the distinction is between verbal aspect and lexical aspect, and what the relation is between aspect and tense. The article also pays attention to aspect as a crosslinguistic category, and aspect as a language-specific category.

Keywords: Imperfective, Lexical aspect, Perfective, Verbal aspect

Keypoints:

- Insight into the phenomenon of aspect in languages of the world
- Insight into the diversity of aspect and similarities across languages
- Insight into some important types of aspect
- Insight into the differences and relations between verbal aspect and lexical aspect
- Insight into the difference and relationship between tense and aspect

1. Introduction: What is aspect?

In linguistics, the term *aspect* is employed to describe various phenomena related to the specific ways provided in language of viewing or conceptualizing the internal temporal constituency of a situation (see for example Comrie 1976, p. 3). This can be illustrated with the distinction between the English progressive and the simple present tense:

1. *He is working.*
2. *He works in London.*

Although both constructions describe a present situation involving work, they differ in the perspective taken on the working event. While in (1) the situation is unfolding at the moment of speech, in (2) the situation describes a state that holds even if the person is not working, it is a generic or habitual situation, not referring to a specific instance of working, but to the recurring nature of the situation. The difference between (1) and (2), expressed by the different verb forms, is thus not temporal (both are present tense), but aspectual, taking a specific view on the internal temporal constituency of the situations. Every language has its own aspects or aspectual forms or constructions, even though some types can be found in several languages in the world, for example progressives, habituals and perfectives (see for example Dahl 1985).

This category of aspect is also referred to as *verbal aspect* or *grammatical aspect*. In addition to this, verbs or predicates possess intrinsic aspectual properties. An illustrative example is the difference in temporal unfolding between actions such as *sit* and *read a book*, where only *read a book* implies a natural endpoint. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *Aktionsart* or *lexical aspect*.

2. Grammatical aspect

2.1 The perfective/imperfective distinction and other related systems

In some languages, for example the Slavic languages, Romance languages, Greek, Armenian, but also in non-Indo-European languages such as Modern Standard Arabic or Mayan languages, there is a systematic division into perfective and imperfective verb forms. In Slavic this encompasses the whole verbal system (present, past, future, imperative, infinitive, gerunds and participles), in Greek of a large part of the verbal system (past, future, imperative), whereas in, for example, Romance languages, Armenian, and Albanian it occurs in the past tense only. In Tzotzil Mayan, finally, there is no tense and the verbal system is divided into perfective and imperfective verb forms. The meaning and function of the perfective/imperfective distinction can be illustrated with some examples.

The Russian perfective presents the event as having reached its inherent or natural boundary (telos) or as having reached an imposed boundary. The imperfective signals the absence of such a boundary or the absence of reaching the boundary, and is used, for example, in habitual and progressive contexts, or in contexts where the idea of reaching the telos is pushed to the background:

3. *On rešil zadaču.*
 he.nom decide.pfv.pst.m puzzle.acc.sg
 ‘He solved/has solved the problem.’
4. *On rešal zadaču.*
 he.nom decide.ipfv.pst.m puzzle.acc.sg
 ‘He was solving the problem/He would solve the problem.’

In Romance languages we find a similar opposition (in the past tense only), but here the perfective is also used in instances without natural (inherent) boundary, in instances where the speaker wants to emphasize the temporal boundedness of the event. The following Spanish example and its Russian translation is taken from Janda & Fábregas 2019, p. 700:

5. *Leyó toda la noche,*
 read.pst.pfv.3sg all the night
 [*ajeno a los ronquidos de las religiosas y a las estaciones fugaces en la niebla*].
6. *On čital vsju noč’*
 read.ipfv.pst.m.sg all.acc.f.sg night.acc.sg
 [*naprolet, ne zamečaja ni xrapa svoix sputnic, ni mel’kanija okutannyx dymkoj stancij*].

‘He read all night, unaware of the nuns’ snoring or of the stations that flashed by in the fog.’

In Spanish (5) we find the perfective past because the action of reading is seen as bounded in a specific timeframe, namely “all night”, and the writer indicates that the action took place. If the imperfective past had been chosen, the focus would be on something that took place during the reading event. Russian (6), on the other hand, uses the imperfective, because the situation does not have an inherent endpoint, as, for example, reference to a specific book that has been finished is absent. The phrase “all night” signals that the action was taking up a considerable amount of time, suggesting the idea of an action in progress, which triggers the imperfective.

In Bulgarian, and to a lesser extent Macedonian, both types of perfective-imperfective oppositions exist, one concerning the inherent boundary, as in the usual perfective-imperfective verbs as also found in Russian, and one concerning a temporal boundary, the aorist-imperfect opposition in the past tense, which is reminiscent of the Spanish situation. The oppositions can also be combined to create, for example, an imperfective perfective (aorist) or a perfective imperfect(ive), as in the Macedonian example below:

7. *Navčer koga će se vrateše od rabota,*
 at_night when fut refl come_back.3.sg.impf.pfv from work
ke go zapaleše kandiloto i ke si
 fut. acc.def light.3.sg.impf.pfv candle.def and fut refl
legneše.
 lay_down.3.sg.impf.pfv
 ‘At night, when he would come home from work, he would light the candle and lie down.’ (adapted from Koneski 2004, p. 494)

The combination of the perfective aspect of the verb, expressing the attainment of an inherent boundary and stressing the completeness of the separate events, with the imperfect tense form, indicating temporal unboundedness, indicates the habitual nature of the completed events.

Even though the perfective~imperfective aspectual distinction can be found in different languages in the world, there are important language-specific differences. This can be illustrated with Tzotzil Mayan, which has a basic distinction between perfective (completive) verbs and imperfective (incompletive) verbs. The imperfective (incompletive) expresses the duration of an action, or habituality in addition to unrealized future events, whereas the perfective (completive) expresses instantaneous events or a past action regardless of its aspectual nature (Vinogradov 2014). There are also aspectual systems that only show partial similarities to binary perfective~imperfective systems. This can be found in some languages of Africa (West Africa and Berber languages of North Africa), where we find an aspectual marker which is called factative (Welmers 1973). The interpretation of the verb marked by the factative depends on the lexical aspect (Aktionsart) of the predicate, or the larger context. A predicate is interpreted as perfective (referring to a completed event, or a resultative state) in the case of an active predicate, and imperfective in the case of a stative predicate. This verbal system can be illustrated with the following sentence from Turka, a Gur language of the Niger-Congo family spoken in Burkina Faso:

Factative with an active verb (perfective interpretation)

8. *Wù* *húusá.*
 3c1 vomit.fac
 ‘S/he vomited.’

Factative with a stative verb (imperfective interpretation)

9. *Hũn-fuu-gì* *núú.*
 water-hole-c3 be.deep.fac
 ‘The well is deep.’ (Suggett 2015, p. 250)

If a speaker wants to express an ongoing event in the past, or an ongoing telic event in the present, the language has special imperfective or similar forms to indicate this. As such, even though one can speak of the perfective and imperfective from a comparative perspective, there is quite a lot of variation across languages. Some authors (for example Dahl 1985) see the perfective and the imperfective as language-specific categories, which can be compared across languages, whereas others treat them as universal categories (for example Verkuyl 2022, who works within a formal semantic framework).

2.3 Boundaries of aspect

Even though it is possible to provide a crosslinguistic comparative definition of the term aspect, in the description of individual languages, different definitions of the term aspect are given because of the specific linguistic categories available in the various languages, the varying linguistic traditions, and the rather abstract definition of the term aspect as referred to above, which allows for a wide range of phenomena to be described as “aspect”.

Most linguists of English do not use the term aspect for phasal expressions such as English *He started to sing* with the lexical expression *start*, even though its meaning adheres to the definition of aspect in terms of the internal temporal constituency of a situation. The same authors would, however, use the term aspect for the English progressive. The reason for this is that *start* is a verb with its own lexical meaning, in contrast to the progressive, which is an idiomatic or grammaticalized construction which has a rather abstract temporal meaning. Nevertheless, the distinction between lexical and grammatical elements is not clear-cut, and for some languages it is common to use the term inchoative aspect to refer to forms which indicate the first phase of an event as in example (4) from Tuwuli (an Atlantic–Congo language spoken in Ghana):

10. *bɔ-ya-naa* *sukuu ne* *Amanfrom*. (Harley, 2008, p. 321)
 1pl-come/start-go school loc Amanfrom
 ‘We started going to school at Amanfrom’.

In Eyak (see Krauss et al 2025, Section 15.8), a now extinct Na-Dené language from the United-States, the progressive or inceptive perfective can indicate an action in progress, but also that the beginning of an act or action has taken place and is now in progress. This latter use is translated with ‘starting’ or ‘getting’. This shows how comparative meanings such as ‘start’, ‘completed’, and ‘progress’ can be related to each other.

More in general, the term aspect is often used for the broader field of completion and duration, as exemplified by Aikhenvald’s description of Tariana (North-West Amazonia), for example in (11) with the expression =/*-ina* ‘little by little’:

11. *di-daripa-tuki-pidana* *di-ukena* *diha-ne*
 3sgnf-near-dim-rem.p.rep 3sgnf-arrive+little.by.little he-foc.a/s
 ‘He (the jaguar) came a little closer to the man.’ (Aikhenvald 2003, p. 325)

The English counterparts for the aspectual forms in (10) and (11), *started* and *little by little*, would usually not be classified as aspectual expressions.

In many languages, forms that express an aspectual meaning also express a meaning that has to do with tense or mood. An example is the expective in Iraqw, indicated by *-n*, a Cushitic language spoken in Tanzania. The marker *-n* indicates that the state of affairs is unavoidable, dictated by the circumstances or due to a routine (Mous 1992). It often gets a habitual meaning, but is also used in conditionals, with modal verbs or in progressive contexts. The meaning of *-n* is aspectual, but also modal. Another language which illustrates how difficult it is to disentangle aspect, tense and mood comes from the mixed language Ma’á/Mbugu (Mous 2003). In this language, due to grammaticalization, some (verbal) adverbs have become part of the verbal paradigm, giving rise to tense-aspectual meanings. This is, for example, the case with the present unfinished tense marker *chéri* (‘still’), which emphasizes that the action is still going on. Such examples show that the boundaries of aspect are not neat, and a precise definition of aspect is necessarily language-specific or even construction-specific.

2.4 Pragmatic and epistemic function of aspect

Even though the term aspect is used for the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation, most aspectual constructions or forms are also used to convey things which have to do with the relation between the speaker and the hearer or to convey

information about the knowledge of the speaker. Such pragmatic or epistemic functions of aspect can be linked to the more purely temporal functions. This can be illustrated with Chinese and Russian. In Russian, all verbs are marked for either the perfective or imperfective aspect. The imperfective imperative can be used to take away a hesitation to realize the action indicated by the imperative, for example:

12. *Proxodite!*

come_through.imp.ipfv.pl

‘Come in!’ [for example, when someone is hesitant to enter a room]

This pragmatic function of the imperfective imperative can be linked to the temporal meaning of the imperfective aspect in Russian. In (12) the speaker focuses on the onset of the action, which is the phase before the full completion of the action, which would be expressed by the perfective. As such, in Russian there is a conventionalized relation between the focus on the first phase of the action, and the function of taking away hesitation in imperatives. In Mandarin Chinese, sentence final *le* is described as a change-of-state marker, but the change may relate to the knowledge of the speaker, as can be illustrated with the following example from Xiao and McEnery (2004, p. 133):

13. *Xiàyǔ le.*

rain LE

‘It is raining now.’ [= (i) in contrast to before; (ii) already for a long time but I just noticed it]

3 Lexical aspect

Lexical aspect (also called actionality or *Aktionsart*) refers to the inherent temporal structure of an event or situation as expressed by a lexical verb (that is, the verb meaning in abstraction from tense, aspect, mood, and other meanings expressed by grammatical verbal marking). For instance, the meaning of the English verb *sit* differs from *read a book* because, while both actions generally unfold over time, only *read a book* implies a natural endpoint.

Various linguists have proposed classifications of lexical aspect (see Tatevosov, 2002, for an overview). One influential framework is Vendler’s (1957) classification of four distinct actional classes (“time schemata”) of English verbs (and their arguments): activity, accomplishment, achievement, and state. Accomplishments (e.g., read a book) and achievements (e.g., reach the top) both involve a “terminal point” (natural end point, inherent boundary, telos), but they differ in that achievements are instantaneous or momentary. In contrast, state verbs describe static situations that persist over time without involving change or progression (e.g., know French), hence situation without an inherent boundary. States do not imply any dynamic action or development; they simply represent conditions or truths. Consequently, permanent states are incompatible with the progressive construction in English, which explains why expressions such as *I am knowing French* are ungrammatical. Activities (e.g., push the cart), on the other hand, involve dynamic, ongoing actions that are not inherently bounded. Unlike states, activities are typically volitional and describe processes in which the subject is actively engaged. Activities are often compatible with the progressive tense, which emphasizes their continuous nature.

From a communicative perspective it is to be expected that all languages will have means to talk about situations that either have a natural end point (telos) or not, and as such

that the aspectual potential of similar verbs across languages is language-specific (cf. Croft 2012, p. 83).

4 Aspect and its relationship to tense

Tense concerns the relationship of a situation to a reference point. For example, a situation is located at the moment of speech (present), before the moment of speech (past) or after the moment of speech (future). Besides the moment of speech, the reference point can also be another reference time, for example in the following sentence: *I had mailed the letter when John came and told me the news*. This sentence, taken from Reichenbach (1947), illustrates the sequence where the mailing event precedes the reference point of John's arrival, both occurring before the moment of speech. If a language has formal meanings to indicate such temporal relationships, it is said to have the category of tense.

Tense is different from aspect, since aspect reflects the temporal perspective on the situation itself and not the location of the event with respect to a reference point, such as the moment of speech. Klein (1994) models this in a framework which is reminiscent of that of Reichenbach, distinguishing event time, the actual time when the event occurs, and topic time, the time interval about which information is provided in the sentence. In his model, the English simple past (e.g., *I wrote a letter*), which he classifies as a perfective, can be analyzed in terms of the event time as contained within the topic time. In the case of the progressive (which he sees as an instantiation of the imperfective aspect) the event time overlaps with the topic time, focusing on the ongoing nature of the action (e.g., *I was writing a letter*). In both cases, the event time occurs before the moment of speech, which is reflected in the past tense.

Even though tense and aspect are different theoretical linguistic concepts, and different categories in individual languages, in many languages, there is relationship between tense and aspect. An example of this, already mentioned above, is that in some languages (French, Spanish, Albanian, Armenian), the perfective/imperfective distinction is only expressed in the past tense. In other cases, the perfective may evolve into a past tense marker. This is the case in Modern Standard Arabic, where the perfective almost exclusively expresses a past event. The relationship between aspect and tense is also evident in languages with a factative as mentioned above. The verb marked for the factative expresses a past event with dynamic verbs, but a present situation with non-dynamic verbs. As such, one could argue that the factative is both an aspectual marker and a tense marker. In Chinese, a predicate marked with the perfective marker *le* often indicates a fully completed past event, but it can also refer to a present state that is the result of some change in the past. This shows that Chinese *le* is an aspectual marker of which the temporal interpretation depends on the meaning of the predicate and the context in which the predicate is used. Arabic and Chinese show that there is relationship between past and perfective, something which is also confirmed for Russian by Janda & Lyashevskaya (2011, p. 732) who note that non-past forms dominate the distribution of imperfective verbs, whereas the past forms dominate the distribution of perfective verbs.

5 Conclusion

Aspect, also called verbal aspect or grammatical aspect, is a property of the verbal category of natural languages. Aspect indicates a particular way of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation as expressed by a verb or predicate. It differs from tense, which has to do with the location of the situation with respect to a reference point such as the moment of speech. Even though there are many similarities between aspectual systems and

aspectual categories in the languages of the world, and universal trends which make it possible to treat aspect as a general linguistic category, there are also many differences, and aspect is partly a language-specific category. Aspect is usually distinguished from lexical aspect or *Aktionsart*. Lexical aspect refers to the inherent temporal structure of an event or situation as expressed by a lexical verb and its arguments. Just as with grammatical aspect, even though there are properties of lexical aspect that can be found in all languages of the world, there are also many language-specific differences. Finally, while grammatical aspect, lexical aspect and tense are all different categories, they are related categories.

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