

A perfect mess:

The distinction of tense and aspect in grammatical traditions

ABSTRACT

Almost one half of the languages in the world have a special morphological expression for the perfect aspect, i.e., they have a verbal form which reports about an event in the past, but from the perspective of present relevance (according to the sample of more than 500 languages in the *World atlas of language structure*). Native speakers tend to interpret such forms chronologically, by assigning each verbal form a place on a timeline linking the event with the moment of speech (the 'here and now'). This resembles the approach of almost all grammatical traditions: grammarians usually analyze the verbal system from a temporal perspective, in which the existence of past, present, and future tense is assumed axiomatically. In such an analysis, verbal forms with a perfect aspect tend to be analyzed as past tenses.

In this paper, I shall deal with the analysis of perfect verbal forms in various grammatical traditions. My focus will be on the Greco-Latin tradition and the contrast between the Aristotelian framework and the Stoic ideas about the verbal system. An important aspect of this part of the paper will be the reception of the Greco-Latin model by grammarians of the vernacular languages in Europe (Romance, Germanic, and Slavonic) in the 15th and 16th centuries.

After that, I shall deal more briefly with the Arabic tradition (and its reception by Coptic and Turkic grammarians), and very briefly with the Sanskrit tradition (and its reception by Tibetan and Tamil grammarians). Both Arabic and Sanskrit grammarians arrived at a temporal analysis of the verb and very rarely discussed the aspectual value of perfect verbs. This chronological framework was taken over almost wholesale by grammarians of other languages, who did their best to fit the structure of the language they were describing within the framework of the exogenous model.

The methods of the grammarians and their application of exogenous models will be compared with the methods of the 17th and 18th century missionaries, who gave the first descriptions of 'exotic' languages outside Europe, using the framework of European school grammar.