

## Perfectives, Imperfectives and Progressives

### *Perfective vs. imperfective*

The dichotomy perfective / imperfective is a primary component in tense-aspect theory (Comrie 1976). The two labels make up the basic divide in the notion aspect. Perfectivity refers to the fact that the event is viewed in its entirety, i.e. as a terminated event. This crucially entails that the speaker envisages the terminal point as an essential part of the event. Alternative labels sometimes encountered are ‘completive’, ‘terminative’ or the like (the reader should be aware that in this domain of linguistic research terminological standardization is less than satisfactory). As an example of perfectivity, consider:

(1) Sp. *Ayer, Juan escribió una carta* ‘Yesterday, John wrote a letter’

which entails completion of the letter-writing action, namely creation of a previously non-existing object. Thus defined, perfectivity is also involved by perfect tenses (see **Perfects, resultatives and experientials**), as in:

(2) *By 5 o’ clock, John had written a letter.*

By contrast, imperfectivity refers to the fact that the terminal point of the event is not envisaged. This may correspond to not less than two aspectual sub-specifications, namely: progressive (see below) and habitual (see **Generics, habituais and iteratives**). In this contribution we shall only consider the first option, which is prototypically illustrated by sentences such as:

(3) *At 4 o’clock, John was writing a letter*

which only informs us that, at the given time, John was involved in performing a letter-writing action, without entailing that the event ever reached completion. This particular condition, which is typical of telic predicates (see **Predicates, aspectual types**), is often referred to as the ‘imperfective paradox’. By contrast, with atelic predicates (such as *to cry, to sleep* etc.) the very notion of completion does not apply. Yet, the event may either be viewed as terminated, hence perfective, as in:

(4) Fr. *Jean pleura longuement* ‘Jean cried for a long time’

or as non-terminated, hence imperfective, as in:

(5) Fr. *Quand la maman est arrivée, Jean pleurait* ‘When the mother came, Jean was crying’.

Another traditional way to describe the opposition perfective / imperfective consists in saying that the former aspect involves a ‘global’ or ‘external’ view of the event, whereas the latter involves a ‘partial’ or ‘internal’ view, as though the event were seen, so to say, from the inside. It is essential to note that the notion aspect, which is

minimally articulated by the cited dichotomy, refers to the specific viewpoint adopted at a given moment by the speaker within her/his communicative act, quite independently of the knowledge that s/he has about the actual state of affairs. Indeed, one and the same event may be successively retold perfectly or imperfectly, depending on the communicative intention. As an example, consider the following narrative:

(6) *Yesterday, Mary went to the beach (perfective), where she spent an unforgettable day. While she was going there (imperfective-progressive), she met John....*

This shows that presenting an event as non-terminated (namely, selecting a particular point within its development) does not imply that the speaker ignores the further course of the event, for the initial sentence in (6) anticipates that the going-to-the-beach action was in fact performed successfully. Thus, irrespective of the objective knowledge possessed by the speaker, the aspectual choice adopted indicates – as some authors would put it – the subjective view chosen at a particular stage of one’s communicative act. This explains why aspect is often said to involve an individual point of view, or perspective.

Another relevant matter consists in the relation between the aspectual and the temporal domains. Although there are tendential correlations, such that an event occurring in the present is most likely imperfective while an event occurring in the future is most likely perfective, these tendencies may be reversed. All versions of the sentence in (7) are perfective just as all versions of the sentence in (8) are imperfective, although the temporal interpretation in (7-8) is quite diverse:

(7) *John entered / enters [reportive] / will enter the room*

(8) *By this time, John was / is / will be sleeping.*

A possible confound emerges whenever the means by which tense and aspect values are conveyed are not fully expressed at the formal level. As it happens, the morphology of most languages is in this respect defective. While the tense employed in (1), i.e. the Simple Past, is overtly marked for both past and perfective, the tense in (3) bears a purely statistical relationship with these connotations, for the English ‘Simple Past’ may also, in the appropriate contexts, convey a non-past meaning (as in: *We shall only accept the applications that arrived before the beginning of next month*) or an imperfective meaning (as in: *When I was younger, I often played tennis*, which is an example of habitual aspect). Some languages present an extended situation of neutralization (Boogaart 1999, Dahl 2001). In German, for instance, the two Past tenses may convey both the perfective and the imperfective aspect, as in *Letztes Jahr, arbeitete Hans in der Uni / hat Hans in der Uni gearbeitet*, which may both mean ‘Last year, Hans worked in the University’ or ‘Last year, Hans was working in the University’ (the choice between the two tenses depends on the particular dialect).

Although the formal means may be defective, possibly leading to a systematic neutralization of the aspectual meanings, the context allows us in most cases to disambiguate the interpretation.

For this reason, it is useful to distinguish the notion “tense” not only from that of aspect, but also from that of temporal reference, although the frequent contrast of aspect and tense may suggest that the latter notion coincides in fact to temporal reference. But given the situation described above, it looks more appropriate (departing slightly from current usage in linguistics): (a) to rescue the traditional sense of “tense”, as referring to the peculiar inflectional paradigms that manifest themselves in the grammars of individual languages; (b) to acknowledge that each tense conveys both aspectual and temporal information, although these may often be derived from context rather than being directly inferred from the tense itself. (Needless to say, there may be contexts where a formally underspecified tense may turn out to be actually ambiguous in terms of temporal and/or aspectual reading).

#### *On the Slavic languages*

Before proceeding, it is useful to address a related and delicate problem. As it happens, the labels perfective / imperfective are also used to name the two major types of predicates that build up the verbal lexicon in Slavic languages, as well as in other languages showing a similar structure. In Russian, for instance, *pisat'* means ‘to write’ (in the most general sense of this word), whereas *napisat' X* means ‘to write X (until completion)’. This bears a resemblance with the situation described in (1) and (3) above, as shown by:

(9) *Ivan pisal (pis'mo)*

(10) *Ivan napisal pis'mo*

which may as a first approximation be translated as: ‘Ivan was writing (a/the letter)’ vs. ‘Ivan wrote a/the letter’. Thus, the merge of the general aspectological terminology with the terminology used in the international literature with reference to the grammar of Slavic languages seems perfectly justified. (Note that the labels used in the individual grammatical traditions differ; e.g., Russian *soveršennyi / nesoveršennyi*). The situation, however, is not that simple. In fact, although the translation provided above for (10), with the ‘perfective’ verb *napisat'*, is undisputable, the actual interpretation of (9), with ‘imperfective’ *pisat'*, may depend on the communicative intentions. Disregarding further complications, suffice it to say that in some contexts (9) may be interpreted as referring to a terminated letter-writing action that did not lead up to actual completion. Thus, although the verb in (9) is ‘imperfective’, the aspectual interpretation may be either imperfective or perfective, depending on whether the event is viewed as

terminated or non-terminated. In view of this, it is useful to distinguish between ‘termination’ (i.e. attainment of the terminal point of the event, implying perfectivity) and ‘completion’ (i.e. telic completion, hence *a fortiori* perfectivity). To understand this point, consider:

(11) *John painted a wall for two hours / between 2 and 4 / until 4*

which presents a terminated event (for its terminal point is obviously envisaged due to the delimiting adverbials), without yielding a completed action (for the painting of the whole wall is not entailed, again due to the temporal limitation imposed by the time adverbials). By contrast, consider:

(12) *John painted a wall in two hours*

which is both terminated (perfective view) and completed (telic attainment), or:

(13) *John was painting a wall*

which is imperfective, and thus by implication non-completed (see (3) above). It is important to realize that although a given predicate may be telic in its basic characterization, the actual fulfillment of its telic nature depends on context. In fact, although the two predicates used in all of (2-3) and (11-13) are telic, their telic nature is actually fulfilled only in perfective contexts, namely (2) and (12). The important generalization here is that completion (i.e., fulfillment of telicity) implies perfectivity, whereas the reverse is not true, as suggested by (11) despite the presence of a telic predicate, or by (4), which is based on an atelic predicate for which the idea of completion cannot possibly arise.

Coming back to the Russian examples in (9-10), the best way to make sense of the contrast is to state that the meaning originally conveyed by the ‘perfective / imperfective’ opposition, as implemented in the verbal lexicon of Slavic languages, corresponds to the opposition telic / atelic, although the further evolution of Slavic languages has largely (as in Russian) or slightly (as in Bulgarian) blurred the initial picture. Indeed, the originally actional meaning (see **Aspect and Aktionsart**) has been to a larger or smaller extent superseded by aspectual connotations. Needless to say, this interpretation presupposes that the notions aspect and actionality be kept apart, as suggested by several scholars (Comrie 1976, Bertinetto 1986, Smith 1991).

### *The progressive*

As noted above, one major implementation of imperfectivity is by way of the progressive aspect. English has a specialized periphrasis to express this meaning, as shown in (3), (6), (8), (13). Other languages may have generically imperfective tenses as, e.g., the French Imperfect as in (5), possibly supplemented by dedicated periphrases, as is again partly the case in French with the “*être en train de* + Infinitive” construction

(which however undergoes restrictions), or definitely so in Spanish, where the “*estar + Gerund*” construction is generously employed alongside the Imperfect and the Present. One difference between dedicated progressive devices and general imperfective tenses is that the latter may receive other interpretations beside progressivity, most notably habituality. As to progressive devices, they often derive from locative expressions or, less frequently, from movement expressions; in some cases, reduplication processes provide the formal means to convey this meaning (Bybee et al. 1994).

Progressivity may be regarded as the quintessence of imperfectivity, and indeed it is often used to exemplify the latter notion. In progressive sentences, such as the ones already cited, the event is viewed in a specific stage of its development, as observed in the comment to (6). We may call such stage the “focalization point”. Note that the normal course of the event may be interrupted immediately after this point (compare (6) with: *Yesterday, Mary was going to the beach. But on the way she met John, so she never got there*). One can capture this feature by stating that in progressive sentences the continuation of the event beyond the focalization point is left indeterminate, irrespective of the knowledge of the actual state of affairs held by the speaker. With atelic predicates, this does not cause any problem of conceptualization, for the event (by its very nature) cannot imply completion. With telic predicates, on the other hand, formalization difficulties arise. These lie in the fact that one should be able to express the idea that the specific stage viewed belongs to an event which, if carried out to its natural end, would involve completion even in cases where one knows for sure that completion could not possibly obtain (as in: *While the man was crossing the street, he was hit by a lorry*). The solution to this apparent paradox has been sought, broadly speaking, in the domain of modal logic, the idea being that the continuation of the event (with its possibly hypothetical completion) lies in some ‘possible world’, everything else being equal (Dowty 1979, Landman 1992, Bonomi 1997). Other scholars have looked for an alternative solution in the direction of actional coercion, under the assumption that the progressive alters the nature of telic predicates (Parsons 1990), although this line of reasoning may present problems (Bertinetto 1997).

One remarkable feature of the progressive is that dedicated periphrases cannot normally be combined with stative verbs (cf. **Predicates, aspectual types**). Consider: *\*John is possessing a car*. This restriction is not absolute, however, as shown by: *John is resembling more and more his father*. Besides, individual languages may be relatively tolerant, as is the case in English and Spanish with copular verbs. In such cases, non-periphrastic predicates depict permanent situations, whereas periphrastic ones refer to contingent situations: cf. *Mary is kind* vs. *Mary is being kind*, *María es amable* vs. *María está siendo amable* (note that Spanish makes use of two different

auxiliaries). Unsurprisingly, \**Mary is being beautiful* remains unacceptable, for beauty cannot be understood as a contingent property. In any case, the observed constraint does not hold for the progressive aspect as conveyed by non-dedicated devices, i.e. by general-purpose imperfective tenses, as shown by: Fr. *Quand je suis arrivé, Marie était malade* ‘When I arrived, Marie was.IPF-PAST ill’. Thus, the constraint in question has to do with the peculiar characterization of progressive periphrases (Squartini 1998, Dahl 2000 and papers therein), rather than (as sometimes held) with the alleged stative nature of progressive sentences, which would supposedly exclude progressivity markers from stative verbs for reasons of redundancy (Bertinetto 1994).

#### *Typological remarks*

It is worth observing that general-purpose imperfective tenses, to the extent that they are characterized as such in the grammar of individual languages, tend to express all imperfective values, disregarding the additional presence of specialized devices. Thus, in Romance languages the Imperfect (imperfective past) may be used in both progressive and habitual contexts, despite the availability of progressive and habitual periphrases. This shows that the different imperfective values share some important feature, presumably to be sought in the idea of indeterminacy (which in the case of progressivity may be identified with the indeterminate continuation of the event, while further assumptions need to be made for habituality; cf. Lenci & Bertinetto 2000).

As to markedness, the issue of the relative hierarchy of perfectivity and imperfectivity has often been raised. Both members of this pair have, however, been proposed as the unmarked member by different authors, with reference to different language families. Indeed, if contextual flexibility and zero marking are taken as basic criteria for unmarkedness, then one might observe that imperfectivity is the unmarked member in, e.g., Chasu (Bantu), whereas the reverse is to be observed in Obolo (Benue-Congo), where imperfective tenses are obtained by adding the morpheme *-ki-* to perfective ones. It is not easy, at the moment, to state which of these two situations is more frequently observed in the languages of the world. Presumably, both situations obtain as a result of the different evolution of the various tense systems.

Pier Marco Bertinetto

## *Bibliographical References.*

NB: The literature on this topic is too large to do justice to all scholars who gave significant contributions. Many more references may be found in the titles cited below.

- Bache, Carl (1997). *The Study of Aspect, Tense and Action: Towards a Theory of the Semantics of Grammatical Categories*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
- Bertinetto, Pier Marco (1986). *Tempo, Aspetto e Azione nel verbo italiano. Il sistema dell'Indicativo*, Firenze: Accademia della Crusca.
- Bertinetto, Pier Marco (1994). Statives, progressives and habituals: Analogies and divergences. *Linguistics* 32, 391-423.
- Bertinetto, Pier Marco (1997). *Il dominio tempo-aspettuale. Demarcazioni, intersezioni, contrasti*, Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Binnick, R I. (1991). *Time and the Verb: A Guide to Tense and Aspect*. New York etc.: Oxford University Press.
- Bonomi, Andrea (1997). The progressive and the structure of events. *Journal of Semantics* 14, 173-205.
- Boogaart, Ronny (1999). *Aspect and Temporal Ordering. A Contrastive Analysis of Dutch and English*, The Hague: Holland Academic Graphics.
- Bybee, Joan; Perkins, Revere; Pagliuca, William (1994). *The Evolution of Grammar. Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, David (1989). *L'aspect verbal*. Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises.
- Comrie, Bernard (1976). *Aspect*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, Östen ed. (2000). *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe*, The Hague etc.: Mouton - De Gruyter.
- Dahl, Östen (2001). Languages without tense and aspect. In *Aktionsart and Aspectotemporality in non-European Languages*, Ebert, Karen H.; Zúñiga, Fernando (eds.), Zürich: Arbeiten des Seminars für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft n° 16, Universität Zürich, 159-174.
- Delfitto, Denis (2002). *Genericity in Language. Issues of Syntax, Logical Form and Interpretation*, Alessandria, L'Orso.
- Dowty, David (1979). *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Forsyth, J (1970). *A Grammar of Aspect. Usage and Meaning in the Russian Verb*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- García Fernández, Luis; Camus Bergareche, Bruno eds. (2004). *El Pretérito Imperfecto*. Madrid: Gredos.
- Landman, Fred (1992). The progressive. *Natural Language Semantics* 1, 1-32.
- Lenci, Alessandro; Bertinetto, Pier Marco (2000). Iterativity vs. habituality: On the iterative interpretation of perfective sentences. In *Speaking of Events*, Higginbotham, James; Pianesi, Fabio; Varzi, Achille C. (eds.), 245-287. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parsons, Terence (1990). *Events in the Semantics of English*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Smith, Carlota S. (1991). *The Parameter of Aspect*, Dordrecht etc.: Kluwer.
- Squartini, Mario (1998). *Verbal Periphrases in Romance. Aspect, Actionality and Grammaticalization*, Berlin/New York.: Mouton De Gruyter.