

Aspect Bound

**A voyage into the realm of
Germanic, Slavonic and
Finno-Ugrian aspectology**

Casper de Groot and Hannu Tommola (eds.)

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Preface

In Vaasa, Finland, in August 1983 a conference was organized at the instigation of Marja Leinonen and Hannu Tommola which was given the theme 'Slavonic aspect and related phenomena in the Germanic and Finno-Ugrian languages'. The need for a discussion of these topics can be illustrated by the fact that at the closing session the participants expressed the wish to renew the discussion in two years time. The conference was therefore closed as the First Scandinavian Conference on Aspectology. The major part of its proceedings is represented by the papers in this volume.

Since most contributions deal with aspect limited neither to one language nor to one aspectual category, we decided to divide the papers into three rather loosely defined thematic groups in order to facilitate access to this volume. We hope the indexes will contribute to its accessibility as well.

We want to express our gratitude to all those who have contributed to the organisation of the conference and the production of this volume, Marja Leinonen for general organisation, Marja-Liisa Tommola for organizing the unforgettable sauna-party, Nigel Brigden for polishing the English versions of the texts, Norbert Corver, Angeliek van Hout and Marian de Wijs who did the proof-reading and helped us with the indexes, and Annemieke de Winter who typed the text.

Last but not least, of course, we thank the participants in the conference for their contributions to the discussion and to this volume.

March 1984

Tilburg, Casper de Groot

Vaasa, Hannu Tommola

Contents

PART 1 THE TYPOLOGY OF ASPECT

<i>Östen Dahl</i> Perfectivity in Slavonic and other languages	3
<i>Jouko Lindstedt</i> Nested Aspects	23
<i>Mihail Šeĭjakin</i> On the Essence of the Category of Aspectuality and its Lexical- Semantic Level in Russian	39
<i>Svein Mønnesland</i> The Slavonic Frequentative Habitual	53
<i>Eeva Kangasmaa-Minn</i> Tense, Aspect and Aktionsarten in Finno-Ugrian	77

PART 2 VERB, SENTENCE AND ASPECT

<i>Lars-Gunnar Larsson</i> The Rôle of Baltic Influence in the Aspectual System of Finnish	97
<i>Hannu Tommola</i> On the Aspectual Significance of 'Phase Meanings'	111
<i>Casper de Groot</i> Totally Affected. Aspect and Three-Place Predicates in Hungarian	133
<i>Orvokki Heinämäki</i> Aspect in Finnish	153
<i>Nigel Brigden</i> Towards a Functional Grammar of Aspect in Finnish	179
<i>Sven-Gunnar Andersson</i> What is Aspectual about the Perfect and the Pluperfect in Swedish?	199

PART 3 TEXT AND ASPECT

<i>Stig-Olav Andersson</i> Changes of Aspect in Text Production	211
<i>Nils Thelin</i> Coherence, Perspective and Aspectual Specification in Slavonic Narrative Discourse	225
<i>Marja Leinonen</i> Narrative Implications of Aspect in Russian and in Finnish	239

VIII

Jens Skov-Larsen

Is it Possible to Construct Germanic-Slavonic Translation rules, which Predict the Choice of Aspect	257
INDEX OF PROPER NAMES	277
INDEX OF LANGUAGES	279
INDEX OF TOPICS	281

Part 1

The typology of aspect

Perfectivity in Slavonic and other languages

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0. Introduction

This paper builds on work carried out within the research project *Universal grammar and language typology* at the Department of Linguistics of the Universities of Göteborg and Stockholm, which was funded by the Swedish Research Council for the Human and Social Sciences. In spite of its all-encompassing name, the project was almost entirely devoted to the study of tense-mood-aspect (TMA) systems. Data were collected basically in two ways: (i) by consulting extant descriptions of different languages, (ii) by the *TMA Questionnaire*, which contained a number of sentences and short connected texts in English (in all about 200 sentences) together with indications of the contexts the sentences or texts were assumed to be uttered in. The questionnaire was completed by native speakers and analyzed by use for about 60 languages from at least 15 unrelated language families and covering all major continents of the world. The analyses for the questionnaires have been put on a computer, which has made it possible to perform fairly sophisticated analyses using a data-base system. The results of the project will be reported in a book (Dahl forthcoming).

In the course of the project work, a set of universal TMA category types have been postulated, from among which language-specific categories are chosen. These universal categories are identified by clusters of semantic and morphosyntactic properties, which characterize their prototypical manifestations. The following is a list of the most important of these: PERFECTIVE:IMPERFECTIVE, PROGRESSIVE, CONCLUSIVE, FUTURE, PREDICTIVE, PROSPECTIVE, PAST, PERFECT, EXPERIENTIAL, RESULTATIVE, HABITUAL, HABITUAL-GENERIC, HABITUAL-PAST, HODIERNAL, REMOTE, QUOTATIVE.

In this paper, I shall look at the concept of perfectivity. Perfectivity is often taken to be *the* category of aspect: this is a view taken in particular by many Slavists, who are often unwilling to label anything that differs in any way from the Slavonic opposition between Perfective and Imperfective as aspect. Also, the Slavonic, or rather the Russian, aspectual system is often taken as a

paradigm for what an aspectual system should look like. One of the aims of this paper is to look at Slavonic aspects from a typological perspective. I shall claim that if one does that, it becomes clear that the Slavonic systems are indeed rather idiosyncratic in many ways.

1. PFV:IPFV and markedness

In various disguises, the PERFECTIVE:IMPERFECTIVE (PFV:IPFV) opposition list of the categories that are probable candidates for being the PFV member of the opposition in the different languages are given. For comparison, the list also includes the accusative/genitive cases in Finnish and Estonian. Perfectivity plays an important role in the determination of direct object case marking in these languages: I do not want to claim that they are manifestations of the universal category PFV.

PFV:IPFV differs from most other universal TMA categories enumerated above by not having very clear marking relations: in almost all other cases, we can choose one member of a TMA opposition as the universally marked one; this choice will not be contradicted by more than one or two counterexamples. In the case of PFV:IPFV, on the other hand, it seems rather to be a typical situation that even in individual languages, we cannot assign one member of the opposition as being clearly unmarked. This is the reason why I have chosen to treat PFV:IPFV as an *equipollent* opposition in the sense of European structuralism, although this term could be misinterpreted to imply that the two members of the opposition are equivalent, which is certainly too strong a statement.

The view taken here differs from that formulated in Friedrich 1974, where what we have labeled here PFV:IPFV is subsumed under a *durative/nondurative* opposition, where the durative member is said always to be the more marked one. I think that the picture is skewed in Friedrich's treatment by his identification of PFV:IPFV and PROGRESSIVE: for PROGRESSIVE, the marking relations are much clearer in that the *durative* member of the opposition is in fact always marked.

The difficulty of deciding which member of the opposition is marked and which is unmarked is connected with the tendency for PFV:IPFV to be realized not by affixation or by periphrastic constructions but rather by less straightforward morphological processes. The *classical* Indo-European and Semitic systems are illustrations of this.

2. PFV and time reference

We shall now turn to the relations between perfectivity and time reference. There is a strong tendency for PFV categories to be restricted to past time reference. In terms of the prototype approach to TMA categories, I interpret this tendency as follows: for all languages it holds that *past time reference* characterizes prototypical uses of PFV - single, completed events will in the *typical cases* be in the past. Languages will differ, however, in the extent to which they allow uses of PFV with non-past time reference. Also, within one and the same language, the *past time reference* restriction may hold with unequal force in different contexts. A good illustration of this is the Aorist in Homeric Greek, as described in Friedrich 1974. After noting that indicative aorists *usually seem to refer to the past* he goes on:

...The aorist also lacks obligatory past reference in the oblique moods and certain other, less important cases. The aorist participle, although it usually refers to an antecedent act, is obligatorily marked only for aspect. We may thus agree with Wackernagel that, "Im ganzen ist zu leugnen, dass dem Aoriststamm an und für sich ein (sic) Bezeichnung auf das Präteritum anhafte." In other words, past tense is an implication of the aorist forms, but it ranges from a limited probability to a weak connotation to zero. The one exception is the fact that the aorist necessarily refers to the past in contrary-to-fact constructions.

Likewise, in Modern Standard Arabic, the category variously called *Perfect* or *Perfective* normally has only past time reference but may refer to the future in certain subordinate clauses, as in the translation of (Q.104):¹

(1) ?ida: ?it:asala elwaladu bilwa:li sayaštari: hadiy:atan lilbin
if comes the boy to the money he will buy a present for the girl

'If the boy gets (Perfective) the money, he will buy (Future) a present for the girl'

The same seems to be possible in some other languages (see Table 1).

There are, however, several exceptions to the tendency to restrict PFV to past time reference, the most notable being the Slavonic Perfective. Interestingly, though, the category of Perfective in, for example, Russian is not without its restrictions as to time reference: it is well known that the Russian Perfective Non-Past normally cannot be used to refer to the moment of speech. A sentence

like (2) will therefore be understood as referring to future time in its most natural reading:

- (2) Ja napisu pis'mo
'I write (Perfective Non-Past) a letter'

Thus, Russian and the languages discussed above have in common that PFV is not possible with present time reference but differ as to the status of the future. There might thus be a strong and a weak version of the time reference restriction on PFV: it may be interpreted either as *only past* or as *only non-present*.

The fact that the Russian Perfective cannot have present time reference is sometimes interpreted as a necessary consequence of the semantics of this aspect. It is said that a Perfective verb form must refer to a *total* event and that what happens at the moment of speech is necessarily on-going rather than completed. A Perfective Present would therefore be a contradiction in terms. However, there are candidates for *total* events at the moment of speech: notably the so-called reportive present and performatives. In fact, PFV is used in such cases in several languages, as can be seen from Table 1. This suggests that these languages have a very loose time reference restriction on PFV, if any at all.

3. PFV:IPFV and tense

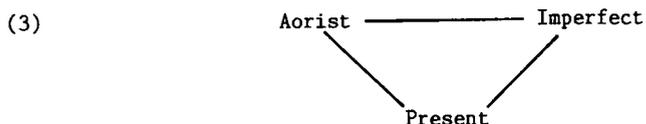
So far, we have spoken about the relation between perfectivity and time reference. We shall now consider the relation between PFV:IPV and tense. It is of some importance to keep apart two things:

- (i) possible restrictions on the time reference of particular aspectual categories
- (ii) the ways in which aspectual and temporal categories may be combined to build up a TMA system.

This distinction is not always made. Consider the following passage from Comrie 1976: 71:

One of the most interesting relationships between aspect and tense ...occurs when an aspectual distinction is restricted to one or more tenses...It appears that the tense that most often evinces aspectual distinctions is the past tense. Thus in many Indo-European languages, and also in Georgian, the difference between the Aorist and the Imperfect exists only in the Past Tense, and there is no corresponding distinction in other tenses...

Comrie is here referring to the fact that it is very common for non-future TMA categories to form a tripartite system, as in the *classical* Indo-European TMA system (neglecting the Perfect for the time being):

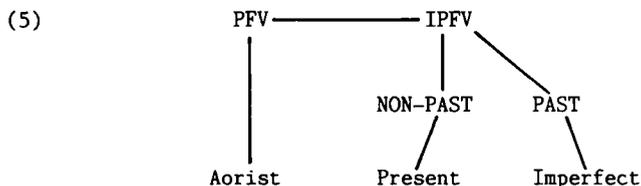


Comrie's formulations suggest an analysis of these systems as follows:

(4)

	Pfv. aspect	Ipfv. aspect
Past tense	Aorist	Imperfect
Present tense	Present	

However, there are several facts that suggest that such an analysis is wrong. From (4) we would expect there to be a marker of past tense common to the Aorist and the Imperfect and some aspectual marker distinguishing them. In fact, this situation is not very common: it is questionable if it is found at all, at least not in the form described. If we look at the Indo-European languages, we see that instead, the Imperfect and the Present typically go together in that they are formed from the same stem (commonly called the Present stem) and that they are distinguished by different sets of personal endings. This suggests an alternative analysis as follows:



In such a system, there would be *Past Tense* category comprising both Aorist and Imperfect: Aorist is simply PFV, and the fact that it (normally) has past time reference is in accordance with the general tendencies for that category. Imperfect, on the other hand, would be analyzed as a combination of IPFV and PAST. In addition to morphological arguments such an analysis would be supported by

the fact that (as pointed out in the quotation from Friedrich above) the aorist is not always restricted to past time reference in all contexts. Furthermore, the analysis proposed here makes the classical Indo-European system look very much less different from the *Semitic* one, in which there are also three categories: (i) the *Perfect* (or *Perfective*) characterized by suffixed subject markers (ii) the *Imperfect* characterized by prefixed subject markers and (iii) the imperfective past construction formed by combining a past tense copula with an Imperfective verb, as illustrated by the following example from Classical Arabic:

(6) Perfect	Imperfect	Imperfective Past
kataba	yaktubu	ka:na yaktubu
'he wrote'	'he's writing'	'he was writing'

The systems would differ mainly in how PAST is marked and in to what extent the use of PAST is obligatory.

We notice, however, that (6) is not adequate for Classical Greek: contrary to what we have said about the general tendency in Indo-European, there is a consistent marker of past time reference in that language, the so-called augment, i.e. a prefix *e-* which characterizes both the Aorist and the Imperfect. How does this fit into the general scheme? This is the point where the distinction made in the beginning of the section becomes crucial. In this particular case, we must keep apart two things:

- (i) whether a PFV category is restricted to past time reference
- (ii) whether the use of a PAST is restricted to IPFV

Since these two are logically distinct, there are theoretically four possibilities, all of which may very well turn out to be realized in actual languages. The most common case is no doubt the one where (i) and (ii) go together in that both are answered by yes or both by no, but cases where they differ may also be found, and Classical Greek seems to be a case in point: the PFV category - the Aorist - is (in the indicative at least) restricted to past time reference, but the manifestation of PAST applies to both PFV and IPFV. The converse situation is less easily documented, at least if we are looking for a language where there is no time-reference restriction at all on PFV - we do not have any unequivocal

examples of those in the material. The languages mentioned above where PFV can be used for reportive presents are possible candidates, however.

In spite of the existence of cases like Classical Greek, the tendency for (i) and (ii) to go together is undeniable. There is an obvious functional explanation for it: if the mere use of a PFV form entails past time reference, further marking of past time reference is redundant. Interestingly, there is an exactly parallel situation with regard to future time reference in some of the languages which have the weaker variety of the time-reference restriction on PFV. In a language like Russian, it is only the Imperfective aspect that has a special Future tense, viz. a periphrastic construction where a Future copula (*bud-* with the appropriate ending) is combined with the infinitive of an Imperfective verb.

4. Prototypical PFV semantics

In the literature, there have been many attempts to characterize semantically what underlies perfective:imperfective oppositions. Most of these attempts aimed at finding a common feature – a *Gesamtbedeutung* – of the perfective members of the oppositions – something which has appeared natural in view of the more apparent *polysemous* character of imperfective categories. If the *prototypical* approach to the semantics of grammatical categories that I am advocating is correct, the search for *Gesamtbedeutungen* will in general be a futile one. The difficulty aspectologists have had in coming to an agreement on the question what is the essential characteristic of perfectivity is understandable if they simply have been looking at different features that make up the description of the prototypical uses of PFV. It may also well be that although the prototypical uses are common to all PFV categories, there is variation among languages in how they delimit PFV. In fact, our material gives some support to such a hypothesis. Let us look at some critical cases, taking as a point of departure one rather common view of the nature of perfectivity as summed up by Comrie (1976: 16):

perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation, while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation.

Let us call this the *totality* view of perfectivity. In Dahl 1980, I pointed out that this view is not equally adequate for all language-specific categories that it has been applied to. Consider (Q.9) and (Q.13-14)

(Q.9)

Context: A: I went to see my brother yesterday. B: What he DO?² (What activity was he engaged in?)

Sentence: He WRITE letters

(Q.13)

Context: A: What did your brother do after dinner yesterday?

Sentence: He WRITE letters

(Q.14)

Context: A: What did your brother do after dinner yesterday?

Sentence: He WRITE a letter

The crucial sentence here is (Q.13). At least *prima facie*, it looks as a clear case of perfectivity according to the characterization above, and indeed in most languages with a PFV:IPFV opposition it is translated using a PFV form, as can be seen from Table 1, although there are quite a few exceptions - a notable group being the Slavonic languages (except for the Aorist in Bulgarian!). Let us look closer at what happens in Russian. The translations of the sentences above are the following:

(Q. 9:RU) On pisał pis'ma

(Q.13:RU) On pisał pis'ma

(Q.14:RU) On napisal pis'mo

The perfective counterpart to (Q.13:RU) would be

(7) On napisal pis'ma

which is unacceptable if *pis'ma* is not interpreted as referring to a definite set of letters. The reason that a perfective verb cannot be used in (Q.13) is that *writing* is an unbounded activity as long as we have not delimited the object in any way. If we do so, however, as in (Q.14), the perfective *napisal* can be used. In other words, the notion of boundedness is crucial to the choice between Perfective and Imperfective in Russian. To take another example, consider the following sentence:

- (8) Včera posle obeda my tancevali/potancevali.
'(What did you do yesterday after dinner?) we danced/danced a little'

Here, it is possible to use both an imperfective verb (*tancevali*) or a perfective one (*potancevali*), but the latter delimits the activity quantitatively (*we danced a little*). Again, the Perfective aspect entails a bounded activity.

In Slavonic aspectology, one often talks of the so-called *general factual* or *simple denotative* use of the Imperfective aspect, where *there is no specific reference to the completeness of the event and the speaker is simply interested in expressing the bare fact that such and such an event did take place, without any further implications* (Comrie 1976: 113). (Q.13) might be an example of this; another would be (Q.53), which is also translated into Russian with the Imperfective:

(Q.53)

Context: A: I want to give your brother a book to read, but I don't know which.

Is there any of these books that he READ already? B:

Sentence: (Yes,) he READ this book

(Q.53:RU) On čital ètu knigu

Comrie says that the existence of such a use of the Imperfective is *perhaps the strongest single piece of evidence in Russian...for considering the Perfective to be the marked form*, the argument being that the Imperfective has a less specific interpretation since it *may or may not have imperfective meaning*. The question is if such an explanation of the *general factual* use of the Imperfective is compatible with the totality view of perfectivity – it would otherwise seem that the description given of this use makes it look very much like a prototypical case of viewing an event as a single whole without paying *essential attention to the internal structure of the situation*. Referring to the absence of *further implications* in the Imperfective (apparently as opposed to the presence of such implications in the Perfective) is in fact coming fairly close to an acknowledgement that the crucial factor is not *totality* but something else.

The view that boundedness – or rather the attainment of a limit – is the crucial factor for aspect choice in Russian has been taken before (see e.g. Vinogradov

1947). Some authors make no difference between *totality* and *boundedness*, however, and it is therefore worthwhile pointing out that if we make such an identification we cannot invoke the concept of totality to explain the difference between (Q.9) and (Q.13) and why in fact most languages draw the line between IPFV and PFV here rather than between (Q.13) and (Q.14).

A much discussed problem is that of the cooccurrence restrictions between aspects and adverbial phrases specifying length of time. Adverbials of the type *for two hours* are often thought of as most readily cooccurring with imperfective verb forms. This is certainly true of Russian, where a sentence like (9) is absolutely ungrammatical with the Perfective aspect.

- (9) On pisał/*napisal knigu dva mesjaca
'He wrote the book for two months'

Both in Russian and other languages, however, counterexamples to this can be found, and sentences like the following belong to the stock examples of aspectological literature:

- (10) On postojal tam čas
'He stood (Perfective) there for an hour' (Russian)
- (11) Ebasileue deka étē
'He reigned (Aorist) for ten years' (Classical Greek)

There appears to be a difference here, though, in that the addition of the perfectivizing prefix *po-* to the imperfective Russian verb *stojat'* (and many others) results in an additional nuance of *shortness of duration* which is not present in analogous examples from many other languages. (Other prefixes may change the interpretation in other ways, e.g. the so-called *perdurative* prefix *pro-* whose use rather seems to imply that the time interval referred to was long or in some way remarkable - the generalization that the perfective constructions are marked choice remains valid, however.) In our questionnaire data (Q.95) would be a relevant example:

(Q.95)

Context: Q: What your brother's reaction BE when you gave him the medicine (yesterday)?

Sentence: He COUGH for an hour