SENSATION AND PERCEPTION AS MARKERS OF THE CATEGORY OF ASPECT

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Abstract: *The paper aims at finding the semantic constitution of the verbs of perception as marking the category of aspect, mainly the opposition progressive/non-progressive. Verbs known as describing inert perception mostly refer to mere sensation and require the use of the non-progressive aspect, while verbs referring to active perception describe perception proper and can be used in the progressive aspect.*

Keywords*: aspect, sensation, perception.*

1. Aspect – Definition and Specific Terminology

Aspect is an important category of the verb and it is equal in importance to tense in understanding the way temporal relations are organized in a particular language. But if tense is somehow a traditional concept for the speakers of European languages in the sense that any speaker can intuitively say that, for example, past tense mainly expresses past time, aspect is not a traditional category for European languages. (see Binnick, 1991: 135) Tense locates the time of the events described in the sentence relative to the moment of speaking being thus described as a deictic category. It relates different kinds of events to the speech time and structures them by the relations of simultaneity, anteriority and posterority. Thus, the verb in the sentence *George is working* is located temporally as simultaneous with the moment of speaking, while the verbs in the sentences *George was working at this time yesterday*. and *George worked a lot yesterday*. are located temporally as antecedent to the moment of speaking.

Aspect is different from tense if we notice that the difference between the previous two sentences *George was working at this time yesterday.* and *George worked a lot yesterday*. is not one of tense, since both forms have past time reference, but of aspect. The former sentence presents the situation referred to in its totality, while the latter refers to the internal temporal structure of the situation. So, since it relates the time of the event described in the sentence to a time of reference which is not the moment of speaking, it follows that aspect is a non-deictic category.

Holt (1943:6) defines aspect as such: "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation", but his definition is somehow improved and developed by Comrie, who states that "aspect is not concerned with relating the time of the situation to any other time-point, but rather with the internal temporal constituency of the one situation; one could state the difference is one between situation – internal time (aspect) and situation – external time (tense)." (Comrie, 1976:5) So, what aspect informs us about is the contour of the event, i.e. the event can be presented either as a single unanalysable whole, with beginning, middle and end rolled into one, or divided into various individual phases; the interest falls on the existence of an internal structure.

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In the discussions on aspect, the term *situation* is often used as referring to what reality consists of, i.e. "individuals having properties and standing in relations at various spatio-temporal locations" (Barwise, Perry, 1983). That is to say that certain situations and not others are the case at any given point in time and space. Some situations hold over intervals of time (*It is snowing.*), others are, on the contrary, *momentaneous (The car stops.)*. Then, on the other hand, certain aspectual situations are *gappy* (*Diana was making a cake yesterday.*) whilst others are not (*He has a headache*.). Situations with a human agent are said to be *agentive*, while situations with no human agent are *non-agentive*. Moreover, if we nominalise the respective verbs, we shall discover that certain aspectual situations are *uncountable* (*He is sad.*) while others are *countable (He drew a circle yesterday*.) In modelling situations, the notions of *phase/stage* and *occasion* are used; the stage denotes any time in the occurence of a situation, the respective occurence being called occasion. Occasions may be repetitive or not, while the repetition may occur during one single interval (iterative) or during more intervals (habitual situations).

2. Aspectual Categories

2.1. Aspectual Situation Types

The first well-known intuition about aspectual differences belongs to Artistotle who, in his *Metapysics*, states that verbs in natural languages designate either the kind of activity or the end/result of that activity. In Greek terms, the meaning of some verbs involves movement, motion (*kineseis*) e.g. *to lose weight, to build*, whereas that of others involves action, energy (*energeia)* e.g. *to see, to live, to think, to walk.*

The Aristotelian aspectual distinction was rediscovered in the 20th century by the philosophers and linguists, who proposed new terms: Gilbert Ryle (1949) introduced the term *achievements* to distinguish the culminative (resultative) verbs from non-culminative activities, while Anthony Kenny (1963) distinguishes *activities* from *states* and replaces *achievements* with *performances.* It is Zeno Vendler (1967:97-121) who first systematically distinguishes among four different aspectual classes of verbs in the chapter *Verbs and Times* in his well-known *Linguistics in Philosophy*: *States, Activities, Accomplishments* and *Achievements*. His four types of situations are constructed on the basic concept of time. Vendler establishes time schemata for various verb phrases which help him make the following classification of situations:

"For activities: *A was running at time t* means that time instant *t* is on *a* time stretch throughout which *A* was running.

For accomplishments: *A was drawing a circle at t* means that time instant *t* is on *the* time stretch in which *A* drew that circle.

For achievements: *A won the race between* t_1 *and* t_2 means that *the* time instant at which *A* won the race is between t_1 and t_2.

For states: *A loved somebody from* t_1 *to* t_2 means that at *any* instant between t_1 and t_2 *A* loved that person." (Vendler, *op. cit.*: 106)

Here are some examples of verbs that can be integrated in Vendler's categories: activities – *run, walk, swim, push a cart, drive a car*; accomplishments – *paint a picture, make a chair, deliver a sermon, draw a circle, push a cart*;

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achievements – *recognize, spot, find, lose, reach*; states – *know, believe, have, desire, lose*.

2.2. Aspectual Pairs

A first aspectual pair is *Perfective vs. Imperfective.* Perfectivity indicates "the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up the situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation." (Comrie, *op. cit*: 16) A clasification of aspectual oppositions is also due to Comrie (*ibidem*: 25):

Aspect: Perfective vs. Imperfective
Imperfective: Habitual vs. Continuous
Continuous: Nonprogressive vs. Progressive

A second aspectual pair includes, as Comrie distinguished, *Habitual vs. Continuous* Aspect. Habituality refers to a "situation which is characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended in fact that the situations referred to is viewed not as an incidental property of the moment but, precisely, as a characteristic feature of a whole period. If the individual situation is one that can be protracted indefinitely in time, then there is no need for iterativity to be involved (as in *the Temple of Diana used to stand at Ephesus*) though equally it is not excluded (as in *the policeman used to stand at the corner for two hours each day*). If the situation is one that cannot be protracted, then the only reasonable interpretation will involve iterativity (as in *the old professor used always to arrive late*)." (*ibidem*: 28).

A third aspectual pair is made up of the opposition *Nonprogressive vs. Progressive*. A general definition of Progressiveness can be given as "the combination of progressive meaning and nonstative meaning". So, "stative verbs do not have progressive forms, since this would involve an internal contradiction between the stativity of the verbs and the nonstativity essential to the progressive." (*ibidem*: 35)

3. Sensation and Perception Verbs in Connection to the Category of Aspect

In psychological terms, sensation can be defined as "the conversion of energy from the environment into a pattern of response by the nervous system. It is the registration of information. Perception is the interpretation of that information. For example, light rays striking your eyes produce sensation. Your experience of recognizing your roommate is a perception. In practice, the distinction between sensation and perception is often difficult to make." (Kalat, 2010:97) More specifically, sensation represents the detection of stimuli from the outer world with the help of the receptors i.e."specialized cells that convert environmentla energies into signals for the nervbous system" (*ibidem*:98) that can be found in our sensory organs. The stimuli are translated by our brain into different representations.

The processes of sensation and perception are linguistically represented by verbs referring to the five senses: *see, hear, smell, taste, feel*. According to Leech (2013:28-29), there is a semantic complexity inherent to these verbs which, as we shall see, dictates the aspectual behaviour of the repsective verbs. Thus, verbs such as *feel, taste, smell* can semantically cover two types of perception: 'inert perception', when "the sensation is an experience that simply happens to

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me" (*ibidem*:28) and 'active perception', when "I go out of my way, physically, to focus my attention on some object" (*ibidem*).

Therefore, in terms of aspectual situations, perception verbs can be viewed either as states or as non-states since "different psychologial theories differ as to just how active a process perception is and there is no reason to suppose that language presuposes the answer by uniquely classifying as either a state or a dynamic situation." (Comrie, *op. cit.*:35) These verbs can denote either a single act of perception (which would be perception in psychological terms) or physiological processes that cannot be controlled (which would represent sensation in psychological terms), that is states. (see Kabakčiev 2000:190) As Comrie (*op. cit.*:35) reminds us, in English (unlike, for example, in Portuguese) it is generally impossible to use verbs of inert perception in their progressive forms.

Any grammar of English lists the verbs of perception among "verbs not normally used in the continuous tenses" (Thomson, Martinet, 1986:113). Yet, some of the respective verbs are then described in point of their continuous aspect behaviour which is semantically marked.

The most important perceptions, seeing and hearing, have the most complex aspectual behaviour as verbs. As state verbs proper, semantically marking the psychological type of sensation, they do not take progressive forms and, although they are agentive, they do not imply the agent's volition in this action: *I see a bird (flying). *I am seeing a bird (flying). I hear a nice piece of classical music. * I am hearing a nice piece of classical music.* Yet, when their meaning becomes more complex than just a simple sensation, when they imply perception and even another semantic feature added to the respective perception, they can be used in the progressive. Thus, the verb *see* can be used in the continuous "when it means 'meet by appointment' (usually for business), 'interview': *The director is seeing the applicants this morning.*; *I am seeing my solicitor tomorrow.* Also when it means 'visit' (usually as a tourist): *Tom is seeing the town/the sights.* It can also be used in the continuous in the following combinations: *see about* = make arrangements or enquiries: *We are seeing about a work permit/or you.* (trying to arrange this); *see to* = arrange, put right, deal with: *The plumber is here. He is seeing to the leak in our tank.*; *see somebody out* = escort him/her to the door; *see somebody home* = escort him/her home; *see somebody to + place* = escort him/her to + place: *ANN: Is Bill seeing you home after the party? MARY: No, he's just seeing me to my bus.*; *see someone off* = say goodbye to a departing traveller at the starting point of his journey (usually the station, airport etc.): *We're leaving tomorrow. Bill is seeing us off at the airport. "* (Thomson, Martinet, *op. cit.*: 114)

The second most used verb of perception, *hear*, "can be used in the continuous when it means 'listen formally to' (complaints/evidence etc.): *The court is hearing evidence this afternoon. Hear* meaning 'receive news or letters' can also be used in the continuous form but only in the present perfect and future: *I've been hearing all about your accident. You'll be hearing about the new scheme at our next meeting.*" (*ibidem*)

A separate discussion is made on the polysemantic verb *feel* which can refer both to sensation and perception (that we shall underline) and to feelings and emotions. "When followed by an adjective indicating the subject's emotions or physical or mental condition, e.g. *angry/pleased, happy/sad, hot/cold, tense/relaxed, nervous/confident, feel* is normally used in the simple tenses but can also be used in the continuous: *How do you feel/are you feeling? ~ I feel/am feeling*

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better. *Feel* meaning 'touch' (usually in order to learn something) can be used in the continuous*: The doctor was feeling her pulse.* Similarly, *feel for* meaning 'try to find something by touching': *He was feeling for the keyhole in the dark.* But, *feel* is not used in the continuous when it means 'sense': *Don't you feel the house shaking?*, when it means 'think': *I feel you are wrong.* and when it is used as a link verb: *The water feels cold.*" (*ibidem*: 113-114)

With other two verbs of perception, *smell* and *taste*, the difference between their use in the progressive or nonprogressive aspect translates the difference between agentive and nonagentive type of aspect. Moreover, it may represent the opposition between volitional and nonvolitional actions. Thus, "the continuous is not used with *smell* meaning 'perceive a scent/an odour', e.g. *I smell gas*. or with *smell* used as a link verb, but can be used with *smell* meaning 'sniff at': *Why are you smelling the milk? Does it smell sour?* [...] *Taste* as a link verb is not used in the continuous: *This coffee tastes bitter* (has a bitter taste). But *taste* meaning 'to test the flavour of' can be used in the continuous: *She was tasting the pudding to see if it was sweet enough.*" (*ibidem*: 114)

Moreover, the verbs like *see* and *hear* develop an interesting distinction between perfective and imperfective actions expressed by the short indefinitve infinitive or, respectively, present participle of a verb placed after the respective verbs of physical perception. In the following examples:

I heard/say the soldier cross the street.

I heard/saw the soldier crossing the street.

the infinitive in the first example shows perfectivity, while the indefinite participle in the second example shows imperfectivity. In Vendler's terms, the infinitive *cross the street* belongs to the group of accomplishments, while the participle *crossing the street* denotes a process. (see Kabakčiev *op. cit.*: 190)

4. Conclusions

Aspect is a non-deictic category which relates the time of the event described in the sentence to a time of reference which is not the moment of speaking. In Vendlerian terms, there are four types of aspectual situations: states, activities, accomplishments, achievements. Aspectual oppositions are: Perfective vs. Imperfective; *Imperfective*: Habitual vs. Continuous; *Continuous*: Nonprogressive vs. Progressive.

Verbs referring to sensation (inert perception) and perception (active perception) mainly belong to the state situation types and are not normally used in the progressive aspect. Yet, they display enough semantic complexity - their meaning may be agentive or nonagentive, volitional or nonvolitional, or the perception marker can be enriched with other semantic markers - to be safely used in the progressive aspect, too.

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