CONTRASTIVE REMARKS ON ASPECT IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

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Abstract: *Aspect is a rather knotty issue. It is rarely dealt with and minutely defined in most Romance languages, including Romanian. On the other hand, it is, in a number of ways, highly specific to the English language. In both English and Romanian there is a profound, though not always obvious, interrelation of Aspect and Tense. The overall picture of this grammatical category is complicated and often sprinkled with tricky, elusive particular issues. In Romanian, Aspect is mainly marked from a lexical angle, which contributes to rendering the category itself irrelevant to Romanian students. The didactic tinge of the present paper is meant to raise awareness as to the intrinsic difficulties of the category of Aspect in both English and Romanian, thus enabling both educationalists and students to better cope with this real challenge of Indo-European grammar.*

Key words: *Aspect, Tense, perfective, imperfective, progressive, continuous, grammatical, lexical, English, Romanian, contrastive*

Aspect is a grammatical category that is recognized as such in comparatively few Indo-European languages. In English, the category of aspect, alongside of the category of tense, defines the part of speech (or the lexical category) of the verb with respect to the time factor. Aspect is one of the most highly debated verbal problems. In English, the perfective // imperfective distinction (typical of Slavonic languages) is not very evident, and thus it cannot settle, with any regularity, the aspect issues of the verb in that language.

Unlike the grammatical category of ***tense***, which marks the order of the events in time, conveying information about the location of events in time with respect to the moment of speaking, the grammatical category of ***aspect*** does not depend on that (chronological) reference point. Instead, it marks the temporal contour of the events, their duration, their being accomplished or not. Therefore, aspects are different ways of viewing the internal (temporal) constituency of a situation. The category of tense locates the time of a situation in relation to the time location of the utterance, so it may be described as being *deictic*: the reference of the verb depends on the context of utterance. Tense typically locates a situation

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with reference to the present moment, though also with reference to other situations. It is a deictic category, in being the expression of the relationship between the time of occurrence of a situation and the moment of speaking about it (i.e. it materializes the relationship between *event time*, *speech time* and *reference time*).

Contrarily, aspect is concerned with relating the time of the situation to the internal temporal constituency of the respectiv situation, capturing such aspects of temporal situations as whether they should be viewed as analysable wholes or as having various structures typically concerned with beginnings, middles and ends; a *non-deictic category*, aspect informs about the contour of the event. Aspect is also said to describe the quality of an event, while it is observed by the way in which the speaker "sees" the event. Such dynamic properties of a situation as *completion*, *repetition* and *duration* fall under the umbrella of grammatical aspect. In English, the aspect of verbs comprises various morphological structures of the verbs, which imply the duration of the action or the state it expresses. Some linguists also use the German term *Aktionsart* to imply the idea of *kinds of action*; that concept is distinguished from *aspect* in several ways, the main two being concerned with drawing a divide between aspect as grammaticalisation of the relevant semantic distinctions, and *Aktionsart* as a manner of lexicalizing the distinctions (so, from that angle *Aktionsart* is related to the notion of "inherent meaning"). Moreover, most specialists in Slavonic languages distinguish between aspect, as grammaticalization of the semantic distinction, and *Aktionsart* as lexicalisation of the distinction, as far as long as the lexicalisation is done by means of derivational morphology. English seems to be richer in aspect markers than any other Indo-European language; the main aspectual opposition in English is realized either as *have* + Past Participle or as *be* + *V-ing*, or both. By way of tradition, the forms usually referred to as Progresive (e.g. *Tom was reading* – v. also the dictionary definition of the term: "denoting an aspect of verbs in some languages, including English, used to express prolonged or continuous activity as opposed to momentary or habitual activity: a progressive aspect of the verb *to walk* is *is walking*" COLL) are sometimes referred to as Continuous, although there is a distinction generally made between the two terms, *progressive* being subordinated to *continuous*.

Romanian, unlike English or Slavonic languages, e.g. Russian, evinces aspect not as a grammatical but mainly as a lexicalized category (expressed by means of adverbials, e.g. *mereu, zilnic, deja*, certain verbs and verbal phrases, e.g. *a începe să…, a se apuca să…, a termina / sfârşi să… / de…*, and, occasionally, derivational morphemes, e.g. *a-* as in *a adormi*) clearly subordinated to the

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category of tense, since only past tenses express aspectual oppositions in syntagms with *to continue*, *to keep* (*on*), *to go on* etc.

The chief point of intersection between tense and aspect involves the idea that the ordering of events imposed by a certain tense may have an influence on the aspect of a certain predication. Still, it should be kept in mind that aspectual distinctions do not depend on the moment of speech. On the other hand, the tense morphemes indicate how the speaker situates the events in relation to an axis of reference, since tense deals with order in time, while the aspect morphemes indicate what and / or how many portions of time the speaker has in mind, since aspect deals with quantity of time, or relations between quantities of time. From a chiefly semantic point of view, VP's are referred to as predications, not verbs, because i tis obvious that the meaning of a verb lexeme is actually modified by other elements in the sentence, especially the direct objects or the adverbials (e.g. *read*, *eat*, *run*, and *read a book*, *eat a peach*, *run a mile*, respectively, will be assigned different features).

Aspectual meaning is essentially a combination of the semantic features of countability and plurality, duration an frequency, as well as the time of reference intended (unique or irrepeatable, definite or indefinite). When the referent of each predication is associated with a time span, the feature [+duration] is marked; duration itself can refer to longer or shorter periods of time, e.g. *build a house*, *aspire to perfection*, or *slam the door*, *snap one's fingers*.

In keeping with their aspectual features, predicates in English are usually classified as *stative* vs. *dynamic*, e.g. *I am running* vs. *I have always admired his house* (such predications indicate continuity). Semantically, specialists in English grammar usually distinguish such categories of predications / verbs as: Activity verbs, e.g. *ask*, *drink*, *eat*, *listen*, *play*, *say*, *throw*, *write*; Process verbs, e.g. *change*, *grow*, *mature*, *widen*; Verbs of bodily sensation, e.g. *feel*, *hurt*, *ache*; Transitional event verbs, e.g. *arrive*, *die*, *fall*, *land*, *lose*; Momentary verbs, e.g. *hit*, *jump*, *kick*, *knock*, *nod*, *tap*; Static verbs, e.g. *be*, *represent*; Verbs of inert perception and cognition, e.g. *adore*, *astonish*, *believe*, *desire*, *detest*, *doubt*, *forgive*, *hate*, *hear*, *imagine*, *intend*, *know*, *like*, love, *remember*, *see*, *smell*, *suppose*, *taste*, *think* ("to consider, judge, or believe; to expect; to suppose; to consider; to regard"), *want*, *wish*; Relational verbs, e.g. *apply to*, *belong to*, *concern*, *consist of*, *contain*, *cost*, *deserve*, *fit*, *have*, *include*, *matter*, *need*, *own*, *possess*, *require*, *seem*, *sound*.

A more meticulous, far-ranging and relevant distinction was drawn by Vendler, who used the term *verb*, while in fact referring to (phrases made up of) verbs plus direct objects, or verbs and adverbs. In his view, if the situation goes on

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time in a homogeneous way any part of the situation or of the same mature as the whole, the verb phrase indicates an activity (e.g. *run, walk, swim, push smth, pull smth, drive a car, play the piano, look at, drink beer, travel*). If the situation is not homogeneously going on in time, its parts not being of the same nature as the whole, the verb phrase is an accomplishment (e.g. *paint a picture, make a chair, build a house, write a novel, read a novel, grow up, recover from illness, get ready for smth.*). On the other hand, situations that do not have interval phrases are subdivided into two subclasses: states, which last for a period of time (e.g. *have a headache, have a house, know, believe, trust, love, hate, desire, like, feel, taste*), and achievements, which occur at a single moment of time (e.g. *recognize, realize, lose, find, reach the top, win the race, start, stop, arrive*).

From a contrastive (and didactic) standpoint, the trouble for learners (and educationalists) starts when one considers the English verbs / predications from a purely lexical point of view, when such classes are specified as: (1) Verbs of durative action, expressing actions which require a certain duration and last the time, e.g. *to work, to exist, to listen, to sleep, to continue, to keep, to know, to live, to love, to own, to run, to fly*. (2) Time-point verbs, which express actions and states which occur in a fraction of time, e.g. *to come accross, to start, to stand up, to begin, to end, to catch, to arrive, to reach, to seize, to send, to end*. (3) Verbs of double aspect (only in their dictionary state), which may be used either as durative or as time point verbs, depending on the context, e.g. *He sees well* (durative) vs. *He saw her coming* (time point verb); *to lie* (Rom "a sta întins") – *to lie down* (Rom "a se întinde"); *to stand* "a sta în picioare" – (Rom *to stand up* "a se ridica"); *I hear very well* (durative) vs. *I heard him singing* (time point verb); *to get* (durative – Rom "a deveni") vs. *to get up* – Rom "a se scula" (time point verb); *to make* (durative – Rom "a face") vs. *to make off* – Rom "a fugi" (time point verb).

The overall picture of the English verb is further complicated by the restrictions some (lexical) verbs have with respect to the continuous / progressive aspect, which prevent them from being conjugated in the so-called continuous forms / tenses. The main such classes are represented by the following verbs / predications: ● Verbs of perception: *to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, to feel, to sound, to look, to appear*, e.g. I don't hear what she is saying. ● Verbs expressing feeling and attitudes, such as *to like, to love, to prefer, to hate, to dislike, to object, to loathe, to adore, to regret, to object, to mind, to detest, to want, to wish, to desire*, e.g. *I dislike her behaviour*; *they will not object to being examined later*. ● Verbs expressing wish, such as to wish, to desire, to want, e.g. *I want you to read more*; *I wish to wear the old dresses, too*. ● Verbs expressing „mental activities" such as *to know, to understand, to believe, to think, to doubt, to suppose, to*

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imagine, to suspect, to realize, to hope, to forget, to remember, e.g. *I know the correct answer*; *I believe he has reached home*. ● Verbs which show existence or permanent qualities of the objects (most auxiliary verbs, link verbs, modal verbs), such as *to be, to have, to belong, to consist of, to possess, to own, to contain, to include, to comprise, to weigh, to measure, to cost, to resemble, to need, to require*; Other categories of (abstract) verbs, such as *to concern, to mean, to matter, to seem, to keep* („to continue"), *to appear* („to seem"). Virtually all the above verbs are verbs of state. Yet, when they express actions, they can be used in the continuous / progressive aspect. Similarly, some of them may be used in the continuous aspect when the speaker means to lend them a certain emotional force; in that case, they are usually accompanied by such adverbs as: *always, forever, continually, generally*, e.g. *He is always doubting her words*. *They are constantly being cross with him*.

From a (purely) grammatical point of view, there are a considerable number of relevant aspectual oppositions in various languages: Nida counts no less than fourteen kinds of aspect formally marked in various languages, e.g. momentaneous, punctilinear, continuative, frequentative, habituative, customary, inchoative, completive, incompletive, augmentative, diminutive. Most languages have markers for one of these oppositions only, and some languges do not possess the syntactic category of aspect at all. Thus in Romanian, aspectual distinctions are lexicalized, the only instance when a specialized syntactic form reflects an aspectual opposition being "the imperfect" tense (e.g. *mergeam*) versus the "perfect simplu" and the "perfect compus" (*mersei* / *am mers*), both of them past tense, which leads to the conclusion that aspect in Romanian is subordinated to the category of tense. In contradistinction to Romanian, English is very rich in aspectual markers. It possesses specialized devices used in the marking of aspect.

The main aspectual opposition in English is established between the Perfective and the Imperfective aspects. Perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole without distinction of the various separate phrases that make up that situation, while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation. Perfectivity involves lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal constituency of a situation, rather than explicitly implying the lack of such internal temporal constituency. The perfective aspect presents a situation in its totality without concern for its internal constituency. The perfective // imperfective opposition is grammaticalized in two distinct ways: *have* + (Past) Participle, and *be* + *V-ing*. It operates with four of the eight morphemes of English (*-s*, *-ed*, *-en*, *-ing*). Many grammarians consider the habitual as representing a semantic aspectual feature, on the same level with the perfective // imperfective

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distinction. It is also called the frequentative, because it shows the repetition of an action or of a state; its marker are the auxiliaries *will*, *would*, and *used to*.

In Romanian, aspect was recognized and dealt with in keeping with the descriptions provided by the grammars of the languages where aspect is generally recognized. It is realized mainly by means of lexical markers, or else it is derived from the meaning itself of a number of verbs that are used to form phrases relevant in point of aspect, e.g. *a începe* (*să*…), *a sta* (*să*…), *a se apuca*…, *a da*…, *a se porni*…, *a prinde*… etc., as well as a number of verbs considered in themselves. Actually, Aspect in Romanian is sometimes considered a mere grammatical scruple; discussing about aspect in Romanian may sometimes by seen as a sort of adaptation of a conceptual model to a body of linguistic facts used as examples, or the superposing of a "grid" on verbal structures / verbs, whose sense / meaning can be subject to aspectual observation (e.g. *a termina*, *a înceta*, a *sfârşi*, *a conteni*, *a apuca*, *a isprăvi*, etc.). Still the study of the verb in the light of the category of aspect is by no means irrelevant for Romanian: it can sometimes disambiguate contextual meanings (sometimes even in translation work – from English, in our case, e.g. *Vara el lucra la pădure* vs. *Când am sosit, ea lucra la broderie*, or *Când am plecat, el tot mai lucra*).

Treating aspect in a contrastive manner can facilitate the correct acquisition of the usage of English tenses, thus avoiding mistakes like: *****He was reading a lot as a child*. In English the status that aspect enjoys is rather solid and clear. Yet, traditional learners' English grammars usually refer to the mere opposition "continuous (progressive) / simple aspect". Another traditional contention / widely observed rule regarding the progressive aspect is that it is used when the respective action or state is / was / will be intersected by other action, e.g. *It was snowing when we met*, *It is snowing now*. The semantic *modus operandi* that postulates that the aspect usage of a verb is in keeping with its appurtenance to the logic-semantic categories of the verb (activities, accomplishments, achievements, states) points to solecisms like: *****He has been stopping the car* (*for two minutes*), *****He was cutting the inauguration ribbon* (*for X minutes*), *****I am liking chocolate*. Similarly, from a logic and semantic point of view we have to do with distinct meanings of the same verb (if we consider it as a single dictionary entry) in: *He ran up to her* / *He had been running for two hours*, which can be made sure by providing the corresponding Romanian translation: *Se duse în fugă spre ea* / *Alerga de două ore*.

The precise, contextual meaning of such aspectual English constructions / verbal phrases is basically established: a) within the context; b) according to a number of norms and tendencies of the general use, e.g. the progressive when

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indicating emotional involvement, irritation, accidental events (e.g. *You are hearing now!*, *He is being naughty*, etc.). The major aspectual distinction in English is only grammaticalized in the case of the distinction opposing the simple / habitual and continuous / progressive aspects; also, through adverbial particles in complex verbs, e.g. *She read the book over*. So, the distinction continuous / progressive vs. habitual / simple is the aspectual distinction that, in English, comes closest to the fundamental perfective / imperfective distinction.

In Romanian, the expression of aspect is effected through means the nature of which is both lexical (or else, semantic-lexical, e.g. *Îşi continuă tema*, *Se lăsă de fumat*) and morphological / derivative (belonging to the processes of lexical word-formation, e.g. *Şi-a reluat slujba*, *A întrebat şi răsîntrebat*; *a zburătăci* – cf. *a zbura*). Grammatically, the aspectual information is included in the tense form of the respective verbal phrase; thus, it will be solidary with temporal expression, and definable as one of the uses/values of the respective tense forms (since for the Romanian *imperfect*, for instance, there are both modal uses / values, e.g. *Dacă tăceai, filozof rămâneai*, and aspectual values: *Când mergeam la mare, luam şi colacul*). In Romanian, the opposition perfectivity / imperfectivity is not actually expressed through such verbal forms as *aş fi făcut*, *să fi făcut*, which merely indicate anteriority.

To conclude, one can state that the aspect categories / classes / values / shades Romanian grammar distinguishes are mainly expressed through such paraphrases as: the inceptive aspect structures, e.g. *a începe* / *porni* / *da* (in *a da în clocot*); *a lua* (in *a o lua la fugă*), *a sta* (in *a sta să cadă*); *a da*…, *a lua*…; the aspect of evolution / development; the terminative / finitive aspect. This manner of expressing apect obviously lacks consistent oppositive paradigms, e.g. specific markers. It is also marked syntactically: through specific constructions / paraphrases (typically including verbs with aspectual meaning, e.g. *începu să*…, *termină de*), and time adverbials, e.g. *Deodată maşina se opri*. Thus, one is entitled to say that this syntactic way is lexically loaded. Romanian does not have a syntactic modality proper to express aspect. Such a grammatical way is at best suggested in Romanian by odd occurrences, mostly archaic verbal constructions of a syntactic nature, e.g. *era zicând*, *a fost făcând*, etc. The category of aspect is rather a matter of vocabulary and of derivational morphology in Romanian. Since aspect in English can be a difficult issue, it has to be carefully dealt learnt and with mainly by (Romanian) beginners.

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