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Pros and Cons of the English Aspect[1]

by
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After a brief explanatory word on the distinction between 'aspect' and 'Aktionsart' (alternative label: 'lexical aspect') in Section 1, the author of the present contribution surveys the wide array of aspectual subcategories in Section 2, then proceeds to highlight the major macrogeneric features of the two categories exhibited by English in this grammatical province – Progressive and Perfect – in the following two sections, with a main focus on the motley assortment of lexical and grammatical means of expressing aspectuality in Section V, and a final zoom on the frustratingly tenuous, at times, imperfective-perfective opposition.

I. Definition. Aspect vs 'Aktionsart'

Generally viewed as one of the most daunting and difficult areas of grammar, a s p e c t is a grammatical category featuring the distinctions in the temporal structure of an event (cf Trask 2007).

The distinction between 'aspect' and 'Aktionsart'[2] has always been a bone of contention and is still a moot point for many grammarians. Some of the most noteworthy insights into the Aspect – Aktionsart dispute stem from Raith's *Aktionsart und Aspekt*. Incidentally, Raith is one of the trailblazers in the field. He did his best to adjust the term 'aspect' – which is of Slavic extraction – to the requirements of the English language, a feat which was soon to invite mordant criticism from the Slavic quarter. As regards the distinction at issue, whereas the 'mode of action', he feels, presents the verbal concept as varying up and down an imaginary scale (ingressive, inchoative, conclusive, resultative, iterative, causative, factive, intensive, etc), the 'aspect' views it dichotomously: as 'perfective' and 'imperfective'. In other words, the former should be regarded as an objective category, and the latter as a subjective one. However, one should know better than to class the one with the syntactic and the other with the stylistic devices.

Contemporary linguistics, however, tends to view matters more drastically, and, as a result, Aktionsarten are simply evicted from the province of grammar. So, for instance, Trask (1993: 12-13) lists under 'Aktionsart' two definitions: one applying to the term as originally employed by Slavicists ("A distinction of

[1]The present research is part of an ongoing project, "Lexico-Morphological Idiosyncrasies of Romanian as Compared with European Romance and Germanic Languages. Similarities and Contrasts", sponsored by the Romanian National Council for Scientific Research in Academic Education.

[2]The term was originally coined by S. Agrell in his *Aspektänderung und Aktionsbildung beim polnischen Zeitworte*, 1908, I, IV, 2, Lunds Universitets Årsskrift.

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aspect which is expressed by derivational morphology"), and the other referring to the term in use in languages like English ("A distinction of aspect which is expressed lexically, rather than grammatically: *eat, nibble, devour*"). He takes the matters even further in his later writings, by qualifying his statement on the type of distinction denoted ("Certain types of aspect *like* [ital. by me] distinctions may be expressed by lexical means, rather than grammatically: an example is the contrast among *nibble, eat, devour*"), if however, admitting that the category in question is still an aspectual one ("A distinction expressed in this way is called an A k t i o n s a r t or l e x i c a l a s p e c t" (2007: 27).

II. Classification

The notoriously meagre resources of the English inflectional system – when compared with other languages – can be taken to account for the fewer aspectual choices it displays. Most linguists usually recognize two aspectual oppositions in English: progressive ↔ non-progressive and perfect ↔ nonperfect (cf Greenbaum & Quirk 1991: 51, Trask 2007: 26; see also Măciucă 2004: 19-39 for fuller discussion of the topic), though some of them consider only the former one as obligatory[3] (cf Locke & Downing 1992: 363).

The main superordinate aspectual divisions which natural languages canonically distinguish are imperfective, perfective and transformative[4]. While *imperfectivity* makes reference to the internal temporal consistency of a situation, *perfectivity* views it as a single whole, without zooming in on the separate phases, with the *transformative* focusing on the transition from one state or activity to another.

The *imperfective* category further subdivides into *durative, progressive* (alternative label: *continuous*), *habitual* (also *consuetudinal*) and *iterative* (also *frequentative*). *Durative* denotes a state or action which usually exists or continues for a considerable length of time. Whereas in most languages this particular subcategory does dot find explicit representation – recourse is had in such cases to a general imperfective form –, English boasts distinct forms from the ones expressing the other three imperfective divisions, namely simple past or simple present, as in *She slept for three solid hours.*

Progressive views the event as extending over time, e.g. *His Lordship w a s h a v i n g tea.*

Activities labelled *habitual* are the ones carried out consistently or regularly. English has a specific form to resort to only for discontinued habit or state, or better said, for past habituality, namely the lexical auxiliary *used to*, e.g. *She u s e d t o live in Glasgow.*

[3] S. also Trask 2007, p 26: "The perfect is often classed as an aspect, although it is decidedly unusual among aspects".

[4] Heringer (1968: 81-2) advanced a different classification into qualitative (with subdivisions "kursiv", ingressive and egressive) and quantitative aspect (further subdivided into semelfactive, punctual, iterative and durative).

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When the action is viewed as a series of repeated events, the verb is as a rule thought to be in the *iterative*. Though boasting no distinct form for this, English sometime makes use of the auxiliary *keep* for this purpose, as exhibited by *The children k e e p pestering me to take them to the zoo.*

The superordinate category *perfective* apparently distinguishes two further subdivisions: *punctual* (cf Heger 1967: 564, 572; Heringer 1968: 81, 82) and *semelfactive,* which contemporary linguists erroneously tend to equate. To compound the confusion, even a polymath like Trask is obviously hesitant about acknowledging a semantic difference between the two. Thus, he defines and exemplifies *punctual* as "The aspect category expressing an action or state which is confined to a single instant of time, as in the example *Hillary reached the summit of Everest*" (1993: 224). Later in the same dictionary he also defines *semelfactive* as "an aspect category expressing an action or event which is perceived as happening exactly once" (1993: 250), and illustrates it by having recourse to *Lisa sneezed,* that is the very example – only with changed subject – which he cites as exhibiting *punctual* aspect in his more recent compendium referred to here, cf: "Some other languages display further aspectual forms, such as the *punctual* aspect (the event is viewed as occurring in a single moment); English has no special form for this, and we use our perfective form, as in *She sneezed* " (2007: 26).

Comparing the two examples above, *Hillary reached the summit of Everest* and *Lisa/She sneezed* – in a purely Dixonian (*scil.* logic-chopping) manner – I am more inclined to view the former as exhibiting *semelfactive* aspect and the latter as illustrative of the *punctual* one, since the undertaking of such an extraordinary feat by the same subject is far less likely to happen a second time within a relatively short span of time than is a fit of sneezing (compare also the diametrically opposed semantic roles attached to the subjects in the two sentences analysed: 'intentional performer' in the former, as against 'unintentional permitter' in the latter; for an in-depth discussion of semantic roles s. Măciucă 2000 b): 39-56).

Transformative aspect reflects the transition from one state or event to another. It further subdivides into *inchoative* (also *inceptive, ingressive*) and *conclusive* (also *egressive*). While *inchoative* stresses the initial stage of a state or activity, e.g. *They s t a r t e d building the house in January,* the *conclusive* subcategory highlights the final one, e.g. *They f i n i s h e d building the house in December.* As clearly shown in the above examples, English boasts no explicit markers (*scil.* distinctive forms) of this aspectual type.

A further type added by some linguists to the grammatical category under scrutiny is the *prospective,* denoting the imminence of some event, as illustrated by the English lexical auxiliaries *be going to* or *be about to.*

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Trask also includes *completive* aspect, as exhibited by *She done talked* in the African-American variety of English, and *narrative* aspect, a feature of Jamaican English, e.g. *She bin talked* (cf 2007: 26).

III. The English Progressive

III.1. Defining the Concept

'Progressive' as Trask claims, is "The a s p e c t category which refers specifically to an action or event which is in progress at the moment of time serving as the reference point for the utterance" (1993: 219). Some linguists prefer instead the term 'continuous', which is, indeed, regarded as an alternative label in the province of grammar[5].

As regards its means of realization, English regularly resorts to *be…-ing*, i.e. a verbal periphrasis made up of some form of *be* plus the *–ing* participle. Standing in for progressive *be* are on occasion two prototypical motion verbs such as *come* and *go*, in which case the combination becomes a genuine contradiction-in-terms, i.e. a most bizarre merger of opposite aspects, perfective and imperfective, e.g. *The soldiers c a m e r u n n i n g across the fields* (cf Downing & Locke 1992: 372).

III. 2. Semantic Spectrum

Since in English the choice between progressive and non-progressive is not an erratic, much rather an obligatory one – which is not the case with other languages exhibiting progressiveness (s. Măciucă 2004: 153-219) – , it can be traced back to semantic oppositions such as temporariness vs. permanence, duration vs. punctuality, action vs. statement, interpretation vs. description, agentivity vs. non-agentivity, 'proper' vs. 'improper' behaviour, literalness vs. figurativeness.

Whether postulating the existence of an "immanent aspect" (Hirtle 1967), of a 'time-frame' theory (Jespersen 1931), of an 'incompletion' reading (Jespersen, Kruisinga, Leech), or of an 'emotional' one (Curme, Jespersen, Zandvoort), the quest for a core meaning of the progressive is not nearly over yet (s. Măciucă 2004: 65-84 for a fuller discussion of the topic)[6].

As regards compatibility with verb senses, though statives are notorious for steering clear of progressive-friendly contexts, nowadays' usage shows even arch-enemies of the aspect in question like 'mental-state' verbs to succumb to its charms, e.g.

Billy is kissing Petronela, and i s l o v i n g it.
Charles i s u n d e r s t a n d i n g French a lot better since he's been to France.
(cf Aitchison 1994: 100; s. also Măciucă 2004: 85-96 for further details on the topic).

[5] A noticeably diverging opinion voices Comrie (1976) who views 'continuous' as synonymous with 'non-habitual', with 'progressive' acting as a subcategory of the former.

[6] The semantics of tempoaspectual blends featuring the progressive will be referred to in more detail in a forthcoming research on the English Tense.

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Along similar lines, 'futurity', as an idiosyncratic feature attached to progressives only when combined with 'motion' verbs, seems to be no longer confined to this type of verbs, as clearly indicated by the following example:

Tom i s h a v i n g a b a t h as soon as Arabella is out of the bathroom (cf Aitchison, ib.).

The specimens below adduce yet further undeniable conclusive evidence in favour of the ever fuzzier distinction between use and abuse, which, in turn, is tantamount to a sad reminder that natural languages are unfortunately left to the tender mercies of their ill-informed speakers, who more often than not are totally unaware of how frustratingly tenuous the borderline between making or marring a language can become at times:

The matron does not know all she should b e k n o w i n g about this affair.
We're certainly hoping they'll b e w a n t i n g to do it again (id.).

IV. The English Perfect

The 'perfect', Trask claims, "is somewhat anomalous among aspectual forms, and its precise characterization is a matter of some controversy" (1993: 204; s. also Comrie (1976) and Dahl (1985) for a minute investigation of the topic). Two facts, to my mind, mainly account for both this somewhat anomalous look and ill-defined profile of the perfect: the fact that in certain European languages like French, German, Italian, Romanian, Spanish, the label 'perfect' is usually attached to a past tense constructed in the same way as is the English tempoaspectual blend 'present perfect'; and the fact that, despite their entirely distinct meanings, people get 'perfect' and 'perfective' aspects confused rather frequently – regrettably, even some textbooks seem unable to avoid the pitfall[7] (see discussion of the perfective aspect in Section VI below).

Quite unlike the perfective, the perfect denotes "a state resulting from an earlier event, as in *Lisa has got out* (i.e., *she is not here now*)" (Trask 1993: 204).

On the other hand, the perfect must be clearly distinguished, Dahl (1985) maintains, from the 'resultative' aspect which is often regarded as a synonym for the former. Thus, the semantic difference between *He has gone* ('perfect') and *He is gone* ('resultative') – which both denote a state resulting from an earlier event – is, Dahl claims, that in the latter the earlier event is rendered more conspicuous to the detriment of the present state, whereas in the former things are viewed the other way round.

Both means of realization and the semantic spectrum largely depend on the tense involved in the tempoaspectual blend of which the perfect is the other constituent. And indeed, with both aspect and tense referring to time – though in clearly different ways (cf. Trask's definitions, of aspect above, and of tense (1993: 276)) – and, furthermore ,with distinctions within each category marked mostly on

[7] Trask puts the confusion down to "the unfortunate similarity in their names, which results from the accident that Latin happened to use the same form in both functions" (1993: 204).

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verbs, the two grammatical categories are so closely knit together in English that, in time, the bond between them has been rendered, so to say, shatter–proof. That is why, given the multitude of combinations derived in the process, minute investigation of both subjects can be more appropriately conducted in a study *per se*.

V. Means of Expressing Aspectuality

Even if reluctantly disregarding the quite numerous cases of one-off employment of less orthodox devices for expressing aspectuality – the topic, fascinating as it is, lies outside the immediate scope of the present research – we are still left with a multitude of patterns which can be successfully called on to do the job. The following odd assortment of lexical and grammatical items may be viewed as aspect-related:

T e n s e**:** *Smith passes the ball* (completive/perfective)
Smith smokes pot (habitual/imperfective)
A d v e r b i a l p h r a s e**:** *His boss phoned him all of last week*
(iterative/imperfective)
D e f i n i t e v s i n d e f i n i t e n o u n**:** *Her father visited the museum*
(completive/perfective)
A lot of tourists visited the museum
(frequentative/imperfective)
V e r b a l t y p e**:** *She sleeps a lot* (durative/imperfective)
She sighs a lot (iterative/imperfective)
A r t i c l e s**:** *He will be good at drawing the map* (perfective)
He will be good at drawing maps
(repetitive/imperfective)
V e r b a l c o n s t r u c t i o n**:** *My daughter strolls quite often in the park*
(frequentative bounded activity/imperfective)
My daughter has frequent strolls in the park
(frequentative unbounded activity/imperfective)
He saw her jump (completive/perfective)
He saw her jumping (durative/imperfective)
A s p e c t u a l i z e r s**:** *He started playing the piano*
(inchoative/imperfective)
He finished playing the piano
(completive/perfective)
He keeps trying to distract me
(iterative/imperfective)
She used to love dogs but one attacked her and she doesn't like them anymore
(discontinued habit/imperfective)
C o m p l e m e n t s t r u c t u r e**:** *The cat began to sneeze*
(inchoative/perfective)
The cat began sneezing

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(inchoative-iterative/imperfective)
P h r a s a l v e r b p a r t i c l e s**:** *I was still writing away when the exam finished* (imperfective)
The music faded away as the procession moved slowly up the street (perfective)
(for a comprehensive semantic scrutiny of aspectual complementation s. Freed 1976).

Aspectualizers (or 'aspectual verbs') are lexical or auxiliary verbs which primarily express a distinction of aspect, such as *begin, cease, complete, continue, end, finish, keep, last, quit, repeat, resume, start, stop* progressive *be* or perfect *have* (s. detailed discussion of the concept and alternative terminology – 'phased' verb groups, 'raising' verbs – in Măciucă, 2000 a): 5-20). Freed characterizes them as 'container' verbs operating on sentences (which are appropriately 'deformed'), nominalized verbs, or 'primitive' nouns. They do not, however, intrinsically exhibit a semantic property claiming that the activity denoted is or not conducive to the achievement of a certain goal, hence susceptible to the 'completed/uncompleted' interpretation, as do 'telic' and 'atelic'[8] verbs respectively, which can carry a sense of their own duration.

VI. Imperfective vs Perfective: a Moot Point?

As logic would have it, discussion of the subtopic will start from cases exhibiting a more or less clear-cut aspectual distinction, shift to fuzzier patterns and end with blatantly ambiguous constructions.

Thus, the imperfectivity of 'have-a-verb' periphrases is made abundantly clear by the fact that they cannot be taken to denote some activity related to a time or space limit, or intended to achieve a goal. As a result, one can say *She walked in the park from 10 to 12,* but not **She had a walk in the park from 10 to 12,* or *He swam across the river* (perfective), but not **He had a swim across the river* (cf Dixon 1992:346)[9].

With 'take-a-verb' combinations the opposite holds true. Since they contrast with 'have-a-verb' constructions in denoting as a rule a single unit of activity, 'take-a-verb' periphrases can be readily assigned to the perfective category.
Compare:
She w a l k e d in the park (imperfective: bounded)
She h a d a w a l k in the park (imperfective: unbounded)
She t o o k a w a l k around the pond (perfective)
(cf Dixon 1992: 352)[10].

[8] The former are verbs with a natural ending, e.g. *Lisa is cleaning the fridge, We drove to Canterbury* (cf Trask 1993: 276), whereas the latter obviously lack it, e.g. *Janet is sleeping, Lisa speaks good French* (cf Trask 1993:22; for a more thorough investigation of the topic see Comrie 1976).

[9] Dixon's thoroughly documented investigation of '*have-a-/take-a-/give-a-verb*' combinations supplied me with all the necessary reasons for refuting Freed's claim (1976: 28) that the former should be viewed as denoting 'boundedness', while corresponding one-word verbs 'unboundedness'.

[10] Again, since 'take-a-verb' constructions usually imply that just one unit of the activity is being completed, Freed's example *David takes frequent walks* (1976: 28) sounds rather infelicitous.

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Yet 'have/take-a-verb' combinations and corporeal verbs undoubtedly are the area where the subtlest differences in meaning between the two really glare at one. So, for instance, since *smell* generally denotes a series of inhalations, hence a repetitive action, this verb appears to feel more at home with a 'have-a-verb' rather than with a 'take-a-verb' periphrasis. By contrast, a verb like *sniff*, which is more likely to refer to a non-segmented activity, will accordingly be more easily accommodated by a 'take-a-verb' construction rather than by a 'have-a-verb' one. Compare:

He h a d a s m e l l of the wine (imperfective, repetitive)

The dog t o o k a s n i f f of the medicine (perfective)

Freed's interpretation of the perfective / imperfective distinction is not, I am happy to say it, one of the typical keep-hands-off-so-as-not-to-spoil-the-data cases. To her the imperfective aspect is intended to include – in addition to uncompleted actions, repetition of any sort whether of a habitual action or an iterated one, whereas the perfective one normally subsumes not only completed actions, but those "that have been successfully initiated as well" (1976: 30).

It is this last point, to be sure, that creates some confusion in the reader's mind, for one may wonder – as Freed herself does, to be perfectly candid about it – what aspect the interplay of these various aspectual forms will engender if one of them normally indicates 'perfective' and another marks 'imperfective'. It is not difficult to label an isolated verb, a simple kernel sentence, or an "aspectualizer with its operand deleted" as 'perfective' or 'imperfective' (Freed 1976: 30). In this way, *jump* may be viewed as perfective, whereas *breathe* as imperfective. *She ate the orange* is considered perfective, although *She is eating an orange* is regarded as imperfective. And finally, *She started* is, in Freed's opinion, specific enough to indicate perfectivity, but *She continued* is unspecific and hence imperfective.

The question remains, however: what is the aspect of a sentence like *She started eating*? *She started* is a perfective sentence, but *She started eating* does not specify either the duration or completion of the event and therefore seems to be imperfective. "Because of such examples it would be simplistic to classify *start* as a perfectivizing aspectualizer", Freed infers (ib.). Kittredge makes just this claim in his thesis (1970: 44, apud Freed, op. cit.) calling *start*, *begin*, etc. 'perfectivizers'. Yet the suggestion does not find favour with Freed, who aptly remarks that "the aspect of a sentence containing *start* can vary according to the aspect of the operand, which in turn depends on the aspect of the verb (or noun) in question plus the syntactic form of this argument" (1976: 31).

Retrospective verbs have also developed a penchant for dual patterning in this respect. With *remember*, for instance, *-ing* and infinitival complements occur in complementary distribution signaling perfectivity and imperfectivity respectively, e.g.:

I distinctly remember l e a v i n g the keys on the kitchen table.

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I remembered t o l e a v e the keys on the kitchen table.
With *forget*, on the other hand, it is context alone that helps one tease apart the two interpretations. Thus
She completely forgot a b o u t f e e d i n g the cat is ambiguous between:
She forgot that she h a d f e d the cat (perfective) and
She forgot that she s h o u l d f e e d the cat (imperfective).

Last but not least, as illustrated in Section V above, phrasal verb particles, too, have been shown to intrinsically exhibit a semantic amalgamation of the two opposing aspects, with the context, again, resorted to as the most reliable extricator. Two further examples with *up* are being submitted below:
There's a storm blowing u p [= beginning to develop].
I'd like to wind u p [= to bring to an end] *the meeting by thanking all those who were able to attend at such short notice.*

Discrepancy of opinions on the issue at stake is most probably due to the fact that analyses of such cases are cast in terms of different, sometimes even opposite, sets of typological parameters, i.e. either theoretically or pragmatically based ones.

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