

## VERBAL ASPECT IN ENGLISH\*

### I. DEFINITION OF VERBAL ASPECT

Italian linguistic scientist Giacomo Devoto defines verbal aspect as »the quality of verbal action« (L'aspetto del verbo, *Lingua nostra*, anno II, fasc. 2, marzo 1940–XVIII).

John Dyneley Prince in his »Practical Grammar of the Serbo-Croatian Language« (Beograd 1929) says that »aspect regulates the expression of continuance or noncontinuance of the verbal action.« Though this »Grammar« is intended strictly for practical purposes it is interesting for our discussion as it gives a definition of the verbal aspect in Serbo-Croatian by an English-speaking person. Rajko Hamilton Ružić in his treatise »The Aspects of the Verb in Serbo-Croatian« (California University Press) defines aspect as the expression of the continuance or noncontinuance of the verbal action.

O. Jespersen in »Philosophy of Grammar« tries to define verbal aspect in terms of its various functions, which are as follows:

- (1) The tempo distinction between the aorist and the imperfect.
- (2) The distinction between durative or permanent and punctual or transitory.
- (3) The distinction between conclusive and non-conclusive verbs.
- (4) The distinction between finished and unfinished.
- (5) The distinction between what takes place only once, and repeated or habitual action or happening.

\* It should be underlined right at the beginning of this paper that it is by no means intended as an attempt to give a definite answer to the question of verbal aspect in the English language. It will treat the question of verbal aspect (or aspects) in general, trying to show what the problem is rather than making an attempt to solve it. The paper will try to find out whether there is such a thing as aspect in the English language; if it exists, how it is expressed.

(6) The distinction between stability and change.

(7) The distinction according to the implication or non-implication of a result.

Curme (Syntax) says that »aspect indicates the aspect (sic!), the type, the character of the action.

It will be interesting to mention that the so-far fullest treatise on the question of aspect in Serbo-Croatian (Đuro Grubor, »Aspektna značenja«, Rad Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti, knjiga 293, Zagreb 1953), which has 229 pages, does not even attempt to define the nature of aspect but begins immediately with the various meanings of aspect forms.

Almost all of the authors quoted above are members of nations whose language has no aspect proper but only Aktionsart, which is often confused with aspect. This paper will try to show that they belong to two quite different categories although their spheres may overlap, or may seem to do so. A similar confusion is not at all rare in works of Slavic authors on the same subject for the reasons explained further on.

Essentially, the term »verbal aspect«, at least that is the position of this paper, is the distinction between one and the same kind of verbal action considered in its progress or in a state of completion inherent in the verb itself without regard to its lexical value. This explains why the present of perfective verbs (completed action at  $O_n$ ) can be used for the past in Croatian: *Dođu rano, ali je on već bio otišao*; and the present of imperfective verbs (action incompleted at  $O_n$ ) for the future: *Dolazim sutra*.

The definition of verbal aspect as representing a verbal action as static or dynamic covers more or less completely all the definitions given above. Some of them coincide exactly with this definition or are, as that of Jespersen, only a more detailed analysis of the same thought, and others, like that given by Curme, are so vague that it would be difficult to find something they could not mean. Although a majority of the definitions are in accordance with the one maintained by this paper, the approach to the question of aspect is different. The definition of aspect as given in this paper views aspect as an inherent characteristic of a given verb, while most of the definitions given above consider the various types of actions which can be expressed by a verb, but which are more a result of the actual meaning of the verb than of anything else. They consider the types of verbal action while this paper goes to the verbal action itself and defines it as activity or act, in other words they are concerned with the meaning, our definition considers the function. They mostly confuse the dynamic or static quality of a verbal action with the possibilities in which variants of this dynamic or static quality can be expressed, that is, they confuse aspect with Aktionsart. While the function of verbal aspect is to show whether the verb means that the action it stands for is in its development or in a state of completion, Aktionsart stands for the various forms a completed, incompleted or aspectually neutral action can assume. Aktionsart

is concerned with the meaning of the verb and has no influence on its syntactic use, aspect determines syntactic situations in which a verb *can* be used. The function of aspect comes nearer to the function of tenses than it does to Aktionsart, as both tenses and aspect are categories based on time; tenses defining a verbal action as past, present or future; aspect viewing it as occupying a certain length of time or no time at all. As they both are concerned with time, it is quite natural that one will have some influence on the other and that they will sometimes be taken one for the other as in the example given above where the perfective present stood for the past while the imperfective present stood for the future.

To illustrate the question of aspect, let us take the verb *to drink*. From its infinitive form nothing can be concluded as to the aspectual value of the verb. The verb can mean an action considered in its development, without any implication of the beginning, end or even actuality, as *He drinks a lot of tea*. Or it can mean a single act, as *He drank a cup of tea after dinner*. The difference in the function of the verb *to drink* in each of the sentences, is what is called aspect in this paper.

Of course, we can take the compound verb *to drink up* and say that it unmistakably means an act and not an action. That is only apparently true, for we can use the verb in a context as the following: *In summer he drinks up one large glass of water after another*, where the verb stands for an action, not for an act, that is, the final moment is of no importance and the action is not considered as static but as dynamic.

Why the verb *to drink* seems to stand for an action, and the verb *to drink up* for an act will be discussed in Part Two.

## II. ASPECT IN ENGLISH

Let us take the verb *to drink* again. We have seen that in the sentences *He drinks a lot of tea* and *He drank a cup of tea after dinner* the verb is used for two different aspects of the action of drinking. In the first sentence it stands for a pure action, in the second it may stand for a finished act. But the action or the act value of the verb is not determined by the nature of the verb itself, it entirely depends on the context in which the verb is used. We can take the second sentence (*He drank a cup of tea after dinner*) with the act-value of the verb, and changing it slightly we shall get quite the opposite value of the verb, that is action, as *He drank tea after dinner*. From the above examples it is evident that the act or action function of the verb is only a question of the situation in which it is used and is not a permanent characteristic of the verb. In Serbo-Croatian in the sentence *He drinks a lot of tea*, the verb would be imperfective (*pije*); in the second sentence, *He drank a cup of tea after dinner*, the verb would be perfective (*po-*

pio je, ispio je); and in the third sentence, *He drank tea after dinner*, it would be imperfective again (pio je). The conclusion is: The English verb has no aspect distinction.

The progressive forms like *He is drinking a lot of tea* (in contrast to *He drinks a lot of tea*) obviously stand for an action and not for an act. This is not in contradiction with our conclusion. It simply means that there are ways and means to express aspect in English, as it concerns verbal forms rather than the verb itself. The progressive forms can be used with practically any verb with very few exceptions. But what do the progressive forms really mean? They normally stand for an action taking place round a definite point of time. They do not stand for pure actions as such, but for a definite type of action; in other words, they stand for Aktionsart, type of action, and not for action itself. This explains the distinction between *He drinks* and *He is drinking* on one hand, and the imperfective verb *pije* used in Croatian for both situations on the other. *He drinks* is aspectually neutral, standing for both act and action, while the progressive form only shows that the aspectually neutral present stands for a definite realization of the action at a given moment; in the same way as other combinations can stand for other types of action: *He has drunk* (final moment), *he begins to drink* (initial moment), etc. It is worth noticing that in older language (Curme, Syntax, § 38) simple forms were often used where now progressive forms would normally stand, from which it may be concluded that the ing-forms have been chosen as a convenient means to denote the actuality of an action in the same way as the verbs *to turn*, *to become*, *to come to*, *to get*, etc. (see Curme, Syntax, § 38, 2, a) are used for the ingressive Aktionsart (see F. Mossé, *Histoire de la forme périphrastique* and Curme Syntax, § 38; and the many other functions of progressive forms and their interchangeability with simple forms). The ing-forms and the present perfect tense, which seem to stand for an act or an action respectively are not used for that purpose exclusively. F. Mossé enumerates a large number of the different meanings of progressive forms, among other, which could be very important for our discussion, but unfortunately is not convincing, its ingressive value, as in: *The life into which they are entering*.

We have a similar situation with the present perfect tense which, it is true, can stand for a completed act (The wind has blown the fence down) but it also very often stands for an action (the so-called inclusive perfect): *I have lived here five years*. So that both the progressive forms and the present perfect derive their apparently aspectual value from the situation in which they are used rather than from their function, much in the same way as the the simple verb *to drink* was used.

There are verbs, like for instance *to sleep* which by their very meaning stand for an action rather than for an act. In the simple present *I sleep* nothing is said either of the beginning or the end of the action, so that we can say that the verb *to sleep* is imperfective. But does the fact that we have defined the verb *to sleep* as imperfective – does it

influence the use of the verb in any way? It does not, since the apparent imperfective value of the verb is due to its actual meaning, it does not concern its function in the least degree, and it can be used in the same syntactical situations as, for instance, the verb *to swallow up*, which appears to stand for an act, that is, may be considered perfective. The imperfective aspect of the verb *to sleep* is entirely due to the fact that we usually sleep several hours, while the perfective aspect of such verbs as *to fall* is due to the fact that we usually consider the act of falling in its last stage, that is, the subject lying on the ground. As the situation decided whether the verb *to drink* should be looked upon as perfective or imperfective, in the same way the absence of a definite situation (verb in the infinitive) makes us place the verbs *to sleep* and *to fall* in the situation in which they are most often found. So that we have again arrived at the concrete meaning in a given (or implied) situation as decisive for the aspectual value of a verb.

The aspectual value of the English verb is by no means inherent in the verb itself: it is determined by every situation in which the verb is used. Aspect is the remnant of the old Indo-European verb-system and its rôle is strictly functional. Aktionsart is a lexical value dependent on the denotation of the verb and the connotation of the context.

### III. WAYS OF EXPRESSING AKTIONSPORT IN ENGLISH

This part, strictly speaking, should not be included in the paper as it does not deal with aspect but with another characteristic of the verb usually known under the German term Aktionsart. As aspect and Aktionsart are often confused, we shall try to show what it is that causes this confusion and then proceed to discuss the question of Aktionsart in English.

The verb *to arrive* usually stands for an act (perfective aspect). It is the final link of the series *start-go-arrive*, that is, it stands for the final moment of the action of moving. In this way we have, for this particular case, the following value of the verb *to arrive*: act considered as the final moment of an action. With the verb *to start* we have an act considered as the initial moment of the action of moving, and, finally, with the verb *to go* we have the action itself considered in its duration. So the series *start-go-arrive* has this value: act:initial moment – action:duration – act:final moment. We see that in each pair we have a combination of function (act-action) and of meaning (initial moment-duration-final moment).<sup>2</sup> From this it is clear that aspect and Aktionsart are related in such a way that each of the aspects restricts the types of verbal actions to a certain number of possibilities. In the sentence *He*

<sup>2</sup> It should not be forgotten that the terms action and act as applied to English verbs must be taken in the sense discussed in the second part of the paper.

*drinks a lot of tea* the simple present *he drinks* cannot stand for the initial or final act because the verb stands for a pure action considered in its duration. In the sentence *He drank a cup of tea after dinner* the preterit *he drank* stands for the final act of drinking and cannot, in this context, stand for, say, an action considered in its duration. But if the aspect is changed by placing the verb in a different situation, like in *He drank tea after dinner*, the Aktionsart also changes and stands for a durative action. As aspect and Aktionsart depend one on the other, one being the function (in the mathematical sense) of the other, they are very likely to get confused, especially in languages where aspect depends so much on meaning and meaning is the sphere of Aktionsart. This is even true of languages with a well defined aspect system where it is sometimes difficult to say whether a verb is only a variety in the kind of action of an aspectual pair or the second member of another pair.

Separating aspect from Aktionsart we arrive to the following system:

### 1. Pure Verb

#### A. ASPECT (determined by context): action

- AKTIONART: 1. durative: *to sleep*  
 2. repeated: *to stroke*  
 3. an action performed in small measure: *to sip*  
 4. an action performed by several subjects: *to disperse*

#### B. ASPECT (determined by context): act

- AKTIONART: 1. ingressive: *begin*  
 2. effective: *end, drink up*.<sup>3</sup> In compound verbs three kinds should be distinguished: (1) those in which the adverb serves only to give the verb a definite Aktionsart: *to eat up*, (2) those in which the adverb is used to give them a new meaning: *to turn up*, and (3) those where the adverb has retained its original meaning: *to come in*. In this list we are concerned only with the compound verbs of the first group.  
 3. series of acts: *flicker, crackle*.  
 4. momentaneous (terminate, confined to one single moment: *to give, to slap, to hit, to shoot*.

### 2. Other Ways

In the above section we started from the form (verb), now we start from the meaning and show what form a meaning takes. The supposition is this: If the whole system of a language allows of a certain situation, the language will provide means to express the situation.

<sup>3</sup> Compound verbs are included among pure verbs as they are considered as one morpheme; we can make a substantive *goings-on* but we cannot say\* *beginnings-to-sing*.

## I. DESCRIPTION AND VERB-COMBINATIONS

### A. ASPECT (determined by context): action

AKTIONŠART: 1. durative: *remain, keep (on), continue, go on*, etc. plus present participle.

2. an action done on several objects: *to break several objects in two* (Ružić).

### B. ASPECT (determined by context): act

AKTIONŠART: 1. ingressive: *begin, commence, start, break out, burst out, set about, get, grow*, etc. plus infinitive or present participle.

2. effective: *to sing to the end*

3. a series of acts: *the household fell ill one person after another. He broke every bone in his body.*

It should be noted that this purely descriptive way of expressing ideas very often varies from speaker to speaker and it cannot be taken as a definite syntactical category. It ranges from combinations of an apparently aspectual verb plus another aspectually neutral verb to long descriptions, and by descriptions we can express any morphem from any language, but description does not contribute much to our discussion.

## II. VERB FORMS

### A. ASPECT (determined by context?): action

AKTIONŠART: 1. actuality: *to be singing*. I am still doubtful about the aspectual value of this form. It is not the question whether this in an expression of aspect that is difficult to decide. I am quite sure it is not aspect because aspect, by its very definition, concerns the whole verbal system and not only a part of it, it exists in the verb, not in verbal forms. As the form denotes actuality, does not actuality by its very nature always stand for an action, never for an act? If this is true, the action-value of the form would be a result of its actual meaning, like for instance the aspect-value of the verb *to sleep* in the infinitive. The question: whether we can change the aspect-value of the ing-forms by putting them in various contexts still remains open. The ingressive value – a subdivision of perfective aspect – which Mossè ascribes to the verb form in the sentence *The life into which they were entering* can very easily be interpreted as standing for an action in the state of realization rather than for an act.

### B. ASPECT (determined by context): act

AKTIONŠART: 1. effective: *to have read*.

Curme in his German Grammar gives a very interesting example of Aktionsart which can be expressed only in speech: The ingressive moment can also be expressed by giving a verb a special stress, as when

*I see it* is »an exclamation uttered upon finding a point in the landscape after a long search.« Here both the aspect of the verb *to see*, which is normally action, and the Aktionsart, which is usually durative, are changed by a special stress given to the verb. This example suffices to show to what degree aspect and Aktionsart depend on the given situation and how many possibilities there are to express them of which only a few have been listed here.

#### IV. CONCLUSION.

We have tried to show what is meant by the term »aspect« and we have contrasted it to another language phenomenon usually known as Aktionsart. Applying the definition of aspect to English verbs it has been suggested that they do not admit of any aspect distinction and that their aspectual function depends on the situation in which they are used or which is implied by the typical meaning of each verb. It changes with the change of context and therefore cannot be taken as a permanent characteristic of a verb. Although there are constructions (progressive forms) which always present a verb as standing for an action, it has been refused to accept them as bearers of aspect because they are not used in aspectual contrast to simple tenses as *I sleep: I am sleeping* both stand for imperfective aspect and they are evidently not used for two different functions of the verb *to sleep*, they both stand for an action and they differ only in the type of the action, in other words the relation *I sleep: I am sleeping* is not of the type act: action but of the type habitual action: action in progress.

Sometimes the contextual situation in which a verb is used is not clear enough to warrant the use of a perfective or imperfective verb when an English text is translated into a language with a well-defined aspect system. This seems to indicate that the English language does not feel the necessity of representing a verb as an act or an action and that aspectual differences that are found are only incidental without any effect on the linguistic feeling of an English speaker. Therefore it seems reasonably safe to conclude that the English verb is aspectually neutral. We have been confirmed in the correctness of this conclusion by a sentence from R. A. Hall's book *Leave Your Language Alone!* in which he expressly says that aspect is a category which is not found in the English language.

We have pointed out the confusion between aspect and Aktionsart and have tried to explain the reasons which have led to it by showing that a verb looked upon as standing for an act can denote certain types of verbal action and when it is considered as an action it allows of other types of verbal action. Finally, we have shown the relation between aspect and Aktionsart, various kinds of Aktionsart found in English and the ways in which they are expressed.



## Sadržaj

### GLAGOLSKI ASPEKT U ENGLESKOM JEZIKU

Aspekt treba odijeliti od Aktionsarta, jer svaki od njih pripada drugoj gramatičkoj kategoriji. Uloga aspekta je funkcionalna, a Aktionsart ima samo leksičku vrijednost. U engleskom aspektatska vrijednost glagola određena je uvijek samo kontekstom, i isti glagol u različitim kontekstima poprima obje aspektatske vrijednosti. Neki glagoli i kada se nalaze u infinitivu bez konteksta čini se, da imaju određenu vrijednost akcije ili akta, ali tome je uzrok činjenica, da se ti glagoli u takvom slučaju uzimaju u njihovom tipičnom značenju. Za glagol *to sleep* (spavati) čini se, da stoji za akciju, a glagol *to fall* (pasti) za akt. Tome je uzrok što čovjek spava obično dulje vremena, a kod glagola *to fall* mislimo obično na zadnji stadij radnje, t. j. subjekt leži na zemlji. Tu smo zapravo opet došli do zaključka, da kontekst (tipična situacija) određuje aspekt. Isto je tako i s progresivnim oblicima: progresivni oblici stoje za Aktionsart, koji bismo mogli nazvati aktuelnost, a aktuelnost znači akciju (imperfektivnost), pa je i ovdje kontekst odlučio o aspektu. Ovo vrijedi i za druge glagolske oblike (na pr. perfekt). Zaključak je, da glagolski aspekt u engleskom ovisi o određenoj situaciji, koja može biti izričito navedena, ili je natuknuta tipičnim značenjem glagola, ili je određena tipičnim značenjem glagolskog oblika, pa prema tome engleski glagol nema svojeg unutrašnjeg, funkcionalnog glagolskog aspekta.

Aspekt (funkcija) i Aktionsart (značenje) povezani s uutoliko, što aspekt ograničuje mogućnosti značenja Aktionsarta. Kako su, prema tome, te dvije kategorije funkcionalno povezane (u matematičkom smislu), razumljivo je, što se često brkaju.

Ako kontekstom odredimo aspekt, onda Aktionsart poprima različita značenja, koja se mogu izraziti ili čistim glagolom, ili pomoću kombinacije aspektatski neutralnog glagola + glagol, kojemu tipična situacija daje aspektatsku vrijednost, ili glagolskim oblikom, ili oduljim opisom, ili čak, u govoru, naročitim naglaskom.