

Introduction: Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on the Semantics of Grammatical Aspect

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1 Background

The notion of *grammatical aspect* is traditionally viewed to be a subcategory of verbal aspect together with *lexical aspect* (even though the tradition here does not trace back beyond the 1980–1990's).¹ While lexical aspect is generally assumed to reflect covert categories of situation types denoted by predicates, grammatical aspect—labeled *viewpoint aspect* by Smith (1991/2013)—rather gives a particular temporal perspective on the situation and is typically expressed by overt grammatical morphemes (hence the label *grammatical aspect*).² While categories of lexical aspect are rather objective, in that they are motivated by the inherent nature of events, categories of grammatical aspect can be looked at as providing means for conveying subjective information. They arise from the speaker's ability to choose a certain point of view on the situation (Smith 1991/2013: 10–14; cf. Verkuyl 1993: 10–11).

In line with these differences in dynamics, categories of lexical aspect are somewhat stable across languages, whereas categories of grammatical aspect display significant variation from one language to another. Cross-linguistic generalizations are therefore particularly difficult to make (see Dickey 2016). Certain aspectual oppositions, however, have been observed across languages. The most common of these is the distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect, in other words, the opposition between single events viewed as a whole and situations viewed with regard to their internal temporal structure (Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985). Yet, even these oppositions are far from being universal and always alike. For example, markedness relations are unstable, so

1 Interestingly, an exploratory search using Google Ngram Viewer shows that the expressions 'lexical aspect' and 'grammatical aspect' have been regularly progressing since the 1950s, but they both show a significant increase in frequency from 1993. One could speculate that this is due to the first edition of Smith's seminal book *The Parameter of Aspect* (Smith 1991/2013).

2 However, a well-known exception is the case of East Slavic languages in which *grammatical aspect* may be morphologically marked by lexical affixes.

that either perfective or imperfective morphemes can appear as marked (cf. Dahl 1985). Furthermore, grammatical aspect may combine differently with other tense and modal markers depending on the language. For instance, the perfective/imperfective opposition is restricted to the past tenses in Romance languages, whereas it is compatible with all tense markers in Slavic languages.

Languages also differ in the subcategories of verbal aspect they give prominence to. In Germanic languages, lexical aspect is more central, whereas in Romance and Slavic languages, grammatical aspect is more prominent. It follows that literature on these languages has naturally focused on the type of verbal aspect that is dominant in the language concerned (Dickey 2016: 338). In any case, it is clear that the two tend to interact with each other in a more or less complex way. When speakers choose a viewpoint on a situation (i. e. the grammatical expression of aspectual meaning), this choice is based on a perceptual and cognitive idealization of situation types (manifest in lexical aspectual categories) (Smith 1991/2013: 12). Moreover, the interrelationships between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect may significantly fluctuate, even within the same language family (e.g. the differences between Eastern and Western Slavic languages drawn by Dickey 2016).

Cross-linguistic variation may explain why linguists still disagree on relatively basic issues, such as the definition of aspect, the number of basic aspectual categories and their characterization. The very notion of *grammatical aspect*, although commonly used, seems to be undermined by some approaches. On the one hand, it is called into question by a few very influential works that only posit the existence of lexical aspect and thus adopt a one-dimensional conception of aspect (e.g. Langacker 1987: 255–258; Moens & Steedman 1988; De Swart 1998, 2000; Michaelis 2004). On the other hand, certain more recent approaches tend to split the traditional category of grammatical aspect into several categories (phasal aspect, quantificational aspect, perspective aspect etc., e.g. Dik 1997; Bhat 1999; Tournadre 2004), so that *grammatical aspect* is narrowed to the perfective/imperfective distinction. Equally, one may mention the debate around the aspectual nature of perfects that may be viewed to express temporal relations rather than grammatical aspect (see Ritz 2012 for an overview of the discussion). So it is quite legitimate to wonder what exactly is conveyed by the terms *grammatical aspect* and whether the notion is still relevant.

The contributions of the present volume present novel empirical data and propose original semantic analyses on items marking *grammatical aspect* (understood in the broad sense). They deal with structurally divergent languages, setting to the fore some less studied forms coding aspect, revisiting or challenging certain conventionalized views on aspectual categories and shed-