

THE CATEGORY OF ASPECT IN ENGLISH AND BULGARIAN

Mariana Gotseva

Abstract: *The aspect as a linguistic category existing in both English and Bulgarian language is of interest not only to linguists, but also to teachers of English in Bulgaria who need to employ some optimal approaches to clarify the semantic peculiarities of this category as they are manifested in a different way in the two languages. Whereas in Bulgarian verb aspect is mostly expressed through morphological means – prefixes and suffixes, in English, verbs are classified in different categories according to their semantic features of the aspect, which are not manifested on a morphological level. This article presents and compares some of the ways of expressing the grammatical and lexical aspect in both languages and points out some of the difficulties Bulgarian students experience while acquiring the English lexical aspect.*

Key words: *verb aspect; lexical aspect; grammatical aspect*

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1. Time, tense, and aspect

Time is a fundamental category of human cognition (Klein 2009) and as such it has been encoded by human languages through a variety of means. The most common devices, regularly used to encode time, include tense, aspect, and temporal adverbials.

In language, tense is a category that signifies temporal deixis, that is, it “relates the time of the situation referred to, to some other time, usually to the moment of speaking” (Comrie 1976). In other words, tense serves to locate the event to the moment of speech, using it as a temporal ‘anchor’.

Aspect, on the other hand, is non deictic; it is not concerned with relating a situation with some other time. It rather characterises “the different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976). While tense is ordering events on a timeline, situating them in reference to other events, aspect reflects the speaker’s internal perspective on a situation.

Aspect is divided into two distinct linguistic categories: grammatical aspect, called also ‘viewpoint aspect’ (Smith 1983); and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect is not concerned with the external temporal points of reference of a situation but rather with its internal temporal constituency. It is expressed through morphological markers, explicitly marked by linguistic devices, such as auxiliaries or inflections. Thus, the aspectual distinction between the perfective and the imperfective aspect in Romance languages, for instance, is realised through the inflectional morphology of the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*, in French; the *preterite* and the *imperfect* in Spanish; the *passato prossimo* and the *imperfetto*, in Italian, respectively (Bardovi-Harlig 2000: 96). While the perfective forms encode the view of a situation or event as a whole and as completed, the imperfective past forms encode explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation, without definite or bounded temporal boundaries; “viewing a situation from within” (Comrie 1976: 24). According to Comrie, the characteristics of the imperfective in all languages tend to be habituality and continuousness or durativity.

The Germanic languages, however, lack the morphological distinction of preterite and imperfect, found in Romance languages (Comrie 1976; Klein 1995; Smith

1986). In Germanic languages, such as English, German, Dutch, and Swedish, the tense-aspect categories existing include *past*, *perfect*, and *pluperfect*.

English exhibits contrast in all these tense-aspect categories like the other German languages, but it also marks grammatical aspect in the opposition between the *progressive* and the *simple*, unlike German or Dutch (Bardovi-Harlig 2000).

2. Aspect in Slavic languages.

Although Bulgarian differs from the majority of Slavic languages in terms of inflecting nouns for case, as it is an analytical language, it also shares a lot of similarities in terms of verbal morphology, which are worth investigating. Bulgarian grammatical aspect is manifested as a contrast between perfective and imperfective pairs of verbs (each Bulgarian verb can be paired for perfectivity / imperfectivity). The perfective verbs are normally formed by adding a prefix. Manova (2007) reports about 34 such prefixes in use in Bulgarian. The same pairing is observed in Russian (Gerasymova 2009), who reports about 18 such prefixes, in Polish (Młynarczyk 2004), and probably in most Slavic languages, which led Dahl (1985) to mention the “Slavic derivational aspect”. Something else, worth mentioning is that, in Slavic languages, the term *aspect* is often used to refer to the grammaticalization of a semantic aspectual distinction, while *Aktionsart* refers to the lexicalization of a semantic aspectual distinction by means of derivational morphology (Comrie 1976). Therefore, *Aktionsart* in Slavic languages is the category that captures the regularities in the semantics of aspectual prefixes (Isachenko 1960; Popova 2006; Kibort 2008). It presents temporal modifications of verb meaning through derivation, which initially expressed *totality* of an action but later on, linked with the grammatical meaning and obeying syntactic restrictions, could also express completion of an action, result, aim, sequence, condition, etc.

The two aspects interact with each other in various ways and grammatical aspect also relates to the category of tense. The domains of grammatical aspect and the category of tense are complementary and there is a considerable interaction between the two domains. While the temporal location takes an external viewpoint of a situation (tense and time adverbials locate a situation in time), aspect presents the internal temporal structure of a situation. Morphologically, tense can also express the grammatical aspect. Distributionally, there are some constraints on the occurrence of certain tenses and adverbials with aspectual categories.

Grammatical aspect is normally expressed by a grammatical morpheme associated with the main verb of a sentence. This morpheme might only indicate the grammatical aspect, or may have lexical contents as well, as is the case with Russian perfective verbs with prefixes. There are two main grammatical aspects – perfective and imperfective. The perfective aspect presents a situation in its entirety, including both an initial and an end point, whereas the imperfective aspect focuses on the internal part of a situation. An important function of the imperfective aspect might also be presenting an unbounded repetition of the situation. The two most common imperfectives are the general imperfective and the progressive. While the former can include verbs with any *Aktionsart*, the latter only applies to non-statives.

Aktionsart, on the other hand, distinguishes four different situation types, following Vendler’s classification (1967): states, activities, accomplishments and

achievements. The corresponding verb classes function as linguistic categories, but they are not marked overtly. They differ in terms of their temporal properties of *dynamism*, *durativity* and *telicity*.

Slavic languages are aspect prominent languages (Bhat 1999). Aspectual choice in these languages is salient morphologically. Most verbs occur in morphologically linked pairs, in which *perfective* is opposed to *imperfective*. The morphological means for expressing aspectuality in Slavic languages are homogeneous but interesting variations can be observed in aspect use. According to Dickey (2000), one of the main morphosyntactic differences is in the use of perfective aspect in relation to the present tense. In the languages from the South Slavic group (Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian / Croatian, Slovene), perfective verbs distinguish present and future tense, unlike North (East and West) Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, Czech, Slovak). In North Slavic languages, the perfective present form is regularly used to denote situations located in the future, viewed perfectly, and has other functions as well, depending on the language. In contrast, South Slavic languages employ perfective future forms for such purposes, whereas the perfective present forms are used in various other functions (depending on the language), such as expressing non-actual present (e.g. historical present) and after conjunctions such as *if* or *that* (Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian – *ako*, and *da*).

Slavic aspect is much less dependent on tense and time reference, compared to many other languages. For instance, Slavic aspect is expressed not only in inflected past tense forms, but also in the present and future tenses, as well as in non-finite verb forms, such as imperatives, infinitives, and gerunds. It is also obligatorily expressed in the subjunctive (derived from the past tense form). This contrasts with aspectual opposition in other languages, such as Classical Greek opposition of aorist / non-aorist, which is largely restricted to past tense; or the English progressive –non-progressive opposition, mainly restricted to finite verb forms (Trnavac 2008). Bulgarian, though, also has the opposition of aorist / imperfective, but each of these forms can be made out of both perfective and imperfective verb forms.

The morphological relationship between perfective and imperfective members of aspectual pairs in Slavic languages is derivational. There are two types of Slavic aspectual derivation: perfectivising prefixation, and imperfectivising suffixation. The latter is typical of Russian and Serbian / Croatian but rarely employed in Bulgarian. Verbal affixes contribute to both grammatical and lexical aspects. The verb stem itself can be simple (unprefixed) and then it conveys imperfective aspect; or complex. Perfective stems are formed by adding a prefix.

For example:

delat – sdelat (Russian) ‘to do’
varsha – svarsha (Bulgarian) ‘to do’

where the prefix ‘s’ is added to the imperfective verb to yield a perfective verb.

However, perfectivising prefixation is rarely just a grammatical process. Often, the addition of a prefix results in a significant change in the lexical meaning of the perfective verb, i.e. it creates a new lexical verb.

E.g. pisat – **perepisat** (Russian)
 pisha – **prepisha** (Bulgarian)
 Imperf - Perf
 ‘write’ – ‘re-write’

A much more common and regular method of deriving aspectual pairs in Slavic languages (except for Bulgarian), is the imperfectivising suffixation.

E.g. perepisat – perepis**ivat** (Russian)
 ‘re-write’- ‘being in the process of re-writing’

This imperfectivising suffixation, however, does not change the lexical meaning of the verb. It is a purely grammatical derivational process.

While the tense system in Russian is aspectually constrained, i.e. perfective verb forms in the present tense do not get the interpretation of present time as opposed to imperfective verb predicates, this is not the case with Serbian or Bulgarian, in which both aspects can appear in past, present and future tenses. However, present perfective forms do not refer to the moment of speech. They usually appear in temporal and conditional clauses or in a combination with modal verbs, such as must, can, may (Trnovac 2008).

3. Bulgarian tense - aspect system

As already mentioned, unlike other Slavic languages, which are synthetic and inflected for cases, Bulgarian is an analytical language. It does not have cases, except for a few remnants of pronoun cases from Old Bulgarian, which are nowadays treated as archaic. Instead, it has a system of prepositions and post-positioned definite articles. Bulgarian verb system is quite complex with the verbs being inflected for person, number, and in certain cases, for gender. It has two types of voice, active and passive (deiatelen and stradaten zalog); nine tenses and three conjugations (sprezenia). As far as grammatical (viewpoint) aspect is concerned, Bulgarian verbs have both perfective (finished) and imperfective (unfinished) grammatical aspect and Bulgarian verbs are paired with respect to this grammatical aspectual opposition: for each imperfective base verb form, there is a corresponding perfective one, formed by derivation (by adding a prefix, very rarely a suffix; and by stem changes).

As Bulgarian lacks infinitive, the base verb form is considered to be the 1st person Sg form in Present Simple Tense. The opposition of grammatical aspect is marked by a verb stem change and addition of affixes. What is more, the pairs of verbs have a different conjugation. The conjugation of a verb depends on the final vowel of the verb in 3rd person Sg, present simple tense: verbs from 1st conjugation end in *-e*; from 2nd- in *-u(i)*, and from 3rd conjugation – in *-a, я (a, ia)*. All the imperfective forms are from 3rd conjugation, while the perfective ones are either from the 1st or 2nd conjugation. This can be interpreted as a proof that Bulgarian has a very strict system for marking perfectivity / imperfectivity through a change in the stem and adding prefixes. Tenses, on the other hand, are marked through an inflection in the very final position of the verb form.

In Bulgarian, the grammatical aspect seems to be completely separated from tense. The nature of the verb – perfective, imperfective or secondary imperfective,

encodes the meaning expressed – whether it is in progress, finished / accomplished, or being repeated. However, there are certain rules imposed on the verb forms: perfective verbs cannot be used in past progressive; imperfective verbs cannot be used in pluperfect. There are also a few exceptions: imperfective verbs can be used in past aorist to denote that an activity was not necessarily finished; and secondary imperfective verbs can be used in pluperfect to denote an iterative activity, that it was repeated.

In comparison with the past morphology oppositions in English, there are obvious similarities in the oppositions: simple past (past aorist) vs past progressive; and simple past (past aorist) vs pluperfect.

The opposition: simple past vs present perfect in English finds partial correspondence in the Bulgarian opposition: past aorist vs past indefinite, in the cases of present perfect denoting indefinite or resultative past. Bulgarian past indefinite has no reference to the present.

To sum up, both languages, English and Bulgarian, temporality is expressed morphologically (through tense marking), lexically (through time adverbials), and syntactically (through periphrastic tenses). As already demonstrated, both languages show aspectual opposition between perfective and imperfective grammatical aspect. Perfective aspect views a situation in its entirety with its endpoints. This is best expressed with simple past in English and past aorist (past finished) in Bulgarian. The main imperfective viewpoint in both languages is the progressive. The progressive mainly occurs with dynamic verbs but not with stative verbs. Whereas imperfectivity is generally considered to include both habituality and continuousness, the English progressive is defined essentially by continuousness (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). The progressive has been described as a situation in progress at reference time (Bybee and Dahl 1989) and as ‘action-in-progress’ by Shirai and Andersen (1995) who described the prototypical progressive as [- telic] (not completed) and [+durative]. The Bulgarian progressive (past unfinished) shares the same semantic features.

A major difference observed, is that while the opposition between the non-progressive and progressive aspect can be found with all tenses in English, in Bulgarian this opposition can only be found with past reference. Another difference is that in English, the imperfective / habitual meaning in the past is considered to be expressed by simple past (Ayoum and Salaberry 2008: 561), whereas in Bulgarian the past progressive (past unfinished, also called ‘past imperfect’ by some Bulgarian linguists) contains the semantic characteristics of durativity, repetition (iteration) and habituality (Nitsolova 2008; Kutsarov 2007; Gerdzhikov 2003). In this respect, Bulgarian resembles Romance languages, whose imperfective past tense (*imparfait*, *imperfect*, *imperfetto*) has the same semantic characteristics: unfinished, iterative and habitual.

Following Salaberry’s (2008) graphical expression of the aspectual distinctions in French and English, a similar graphical expression of the aspectual distinctions in Bulgarian can be produced for the sake of comparison. When compared to the Bulgarian aspectual distinctions, presented in Fig. 2 below, it can clearly be noticed that the Bulgarian Past Progressive demonstrates close semantic similarities to the Romance *Imparfait*. The Bulgarian Past aorist does not share the habitual meaning of Simple Past in English.

Figure 1 Aspectual distinctions in French and English (Ayoun and Salaberry 2008: 561)

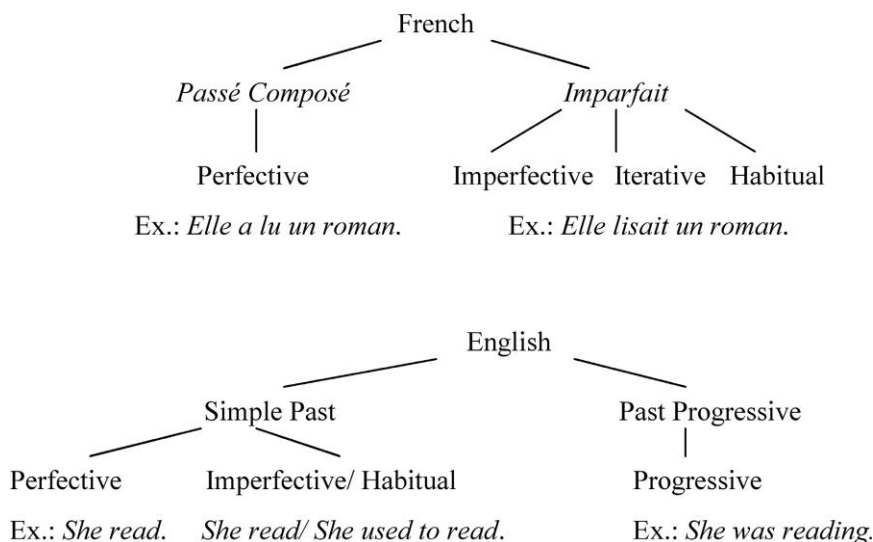
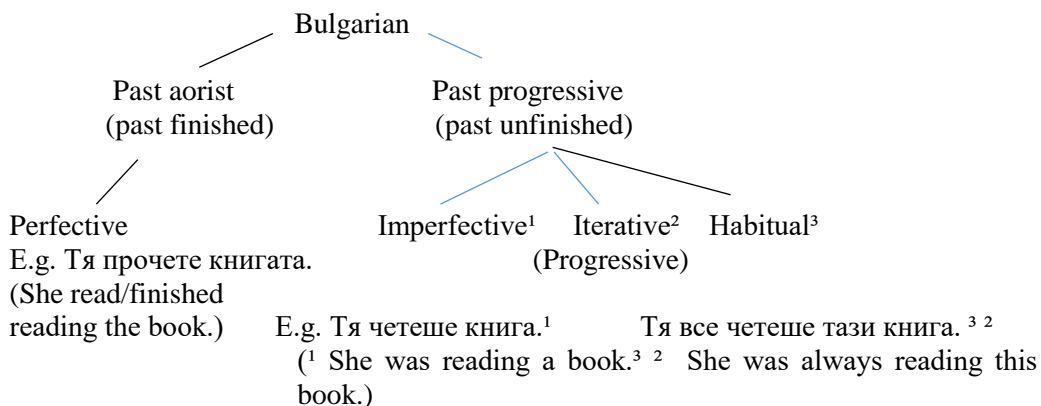


Figure 2 Aspectual distinctions in Bulgarian



Following that, some predictions about the initial stage of L2 acquisition of the English past morphology will include preference of the past progressive for expressing habitual and iterative activities instead of simple past, due to L1 influence. L2 Bulgarian learners will also definitely experience frustration in using the Present perfect to express habits up to the present moment or resultative events. For the former, they would rather choose simple present and for the latter – simple past, instead. This would be due to the influence of the L1 grammatical aspectual system, which, as demonstrated below, is slightly different from the English one.

On the other hand, due to certain similarities between the aspectual systems of English and Bulgarian, L2 learners should not experience any difficulties in marking correctly the perfective meaning of simple past; the progressive (durative) meaning of dynamic verbs in past progressive; or the indefinite past meaning of predicates in the present perfect, even at very early stages of learning.

4. Semantic (lexical) aspect in English and in Bulgarian

The inherent lexical aspect (also called *situation aspect* by Smith 1983), as defined by Shirai and Andersen (1995), “refers to characteristics inherent in the lexical items which describe the situation” (p. 744). Most researchers of the tense-aspect issue have adopted Andersen’s (1991) description of the well-known Vendler-Mourelatos hierarchy (Vendler 1957; 1967; Mourelatos 1978) to establish the following inherent semantic (lexical) aspect categories:

states which refer to situations that do not involve change over time, do not have salient endpoints or gaps (have no dynamics), are nonvolitional, and do not require any input of energy (Binnick 1991; Comrie 1985; Shirai and Andersen 1995). E.g. *know, love, hate, want*, etc. In Bulgarian: *знам (znam), обича (obicham), мразя (mrazia), искам (iskam)*.

activities – dynamic situations which have duration and involve change over time but lack a specific endpoint (i.e. have an arbitrary endpoint). E.g. *run, sing, play, dance*, etc. In Bulgarian: *тучам (tucham), нея (peia), играя (igraia), танцувам (tantsuvam)*.

accomplishments – dynamic situations which have some duration, a clear inherent endpoint, and involve an end result. E.g. *fix the car; run a mile; make a cake*, etc. In Bulgarian these are all the inherently perfective verbs which have a prefix, which makes them express accomplishment: *поправя (popravia), пробягам (probiagam), направя (napravia)*. It is worth noting that in Bulgarian, all activity verbs may turn into accomplishments when a prefix, denoting completion, is added. E.g.: *избягам (izbiagam), изпея (izpeia), изиграя (izigraia), изтанцувам (iztantsuvam), направя (napravia), довърша (dovarsha)*, etc. Such prefixes include: *iz-; na-; do-*, etc.

achievements – dynamic situations that involve an instantaneous change (takes place instantaneously) and is reducible to a single point in time. E.g. *recognise, die, reach the summit*, etc. In Bulgarian: *разпознавам (razpoznavam), умирам (umiram), достигавам (dostigam)*, etc.

A terminological difference, though, as already mentioned, is that in Bulgarian, alike other Slavic languages, Aktionsart is the category that captures the regularities in the semantics of aspectual prefixes (Popova 2006; Kibort 2008). It distinguishes between four different situation types, following Vendler’s classification (1967): states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. The corresponding verb classes function as linguistic categories, but they are not marked overtly. They differ in terms of their temporal properties of *dynamism, durativity* and *telicity*.

In both languages, each of these four categories of inherent semantic (lexical) aspect can be characterised in terms of the semantic features: *telic*, *punctual* and *dynamic*. **Telicity** denotes that the verb has an inherent end-point or outcome, **punctuality** denotes lack of duration, and **dynamics** denote the necessity of energy for a situation to exist or continue (Shirai and Andersen 1995). Thus, accomplishment and

achievement verbs are both telic but only achievements are punctual. Both of them are dynamic, and so are activities but the latter are neither telic, nor punctual. States, on the other hand, have none of these features.

This is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Semantic features of inherent lexical aspect categories

	States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
Punctual	-	-	-	+
Telic	-	-	+	+
Dynamic	-	+	+	+

5. The Aspect Hypothesis (AH) and aspect acquisition

One of the most popular and well-researched theoretical frameworks used to investigate the L2 development of tense-aspect morphology, is the Aspect Hypothesis, developed by Andersen and Shirai (1994; 1996), Shirai and Andersen (1991), Bardovi-Harlig (1992a; 2000); Robison (1995). The main claim of AH is that in the early stages of acquisition, verbal morphology does not, actually, encode tense or grammatical aspect, but it encodes inherent semantic aspectual distinctions (Andersen 1986; 1991; Andersen & Shirai 1994; Robison 1990). In other words, the AH makes a distinction between the grammatical aspect, normally marked by linguistic devices, such as verb morphology and auxiliaries, whereas the lexical aspect, which refers to the inherent temporal characteristics of verbs and to the temporal conditions of the situation that the verb designates (Sugaya and Shirai 2007). Therefore, the initial stages of tense and aspect marking are highly dependent on or constrained by the inherent semantic features of verbs: states, activities, accomplishments and achievements (Vendler 1967).

The Aspect Hypothesis has actually originated from theories of temporal semantics related to research in child language acquisition (Antinucci & Miller 1976; Bloom, Lifter & Hafitz 1980, to mention just the pioneers in the field) and in creoles (Bickerton 1975; 1981; Givon 1982; Anderson & Shirai 1996, among many others to follow). It is based on a theory of inherent, lexical aspect. Whereas the grammatical aspect is typically morphological (e.g. simple past, past progressive in English), lexical aspect is a purely non-grammatical category which refers to the inherent temporal makeup of verbs and predicates (Bardovi-Harlig 2000).

Studies in children L1 acquisition found that children were sensitive to lexical aspect in the morphological encoding of past events and that “past inflections are predominantly attached to achievement and accomplishment verbs in the early stages” (Bloom & Harner 1989; Andersen 1989).

The aspect studies in second language acquisition started at UCLA with the research of Roger Andersen (1985; 1986a; 1986b) and a group of very productive students, influenced by his work (Housen, Robison, and Shirai among others). What has come to be known as the Aspect Hypothesis in second language acquisition research (Andersen & Shirai 1994; Bardovi-Harlig 1994a) has undergone a series of revisions. In the most current formulation of AH, Andersen and Shirai (2004) maintain

the importance of the initial influence of aspect but have not set aspectual influence in opposition to encoding tense or grammatical aspect.

The Aspect Hypothesis (AH) has generated a large body of empirical data on the L2 acquisition of tense / aspect morphology. However, the AH in second language acquisition research (Andersen and Shirai 1994; Bardovi – Harlig 1994a) has undergone a series of revisions similar to its development in the L1 studies. An early version of the AH (Andersen 1986a; 1991), called “the defective tense hypothesis” following Weist et al. (1984), stated that “in beginning stages of language acquisition only inherent aspectual distinctions are encoded by verbal morphology, not tense or grammatical aspect” (Andersen 1991: 307). Such an opposition, though, seems to be too strong in second language acquisition, as well as in L1 acquisition. In their most current formulation of the AH, Andersen and Shirai (1994) have maintained the importance of the initial influence of aspect, without opposing it to the encoding of tense or grammatical aspect: “First and second language learners will initially be influenced by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs or predicates in the acquisition of tense and aspect markers associated with or affixed to these verbs” (Andersen and Shirai 1994: 133).

To sum up, the predictions of AH include the perfective past form being first used in association with telic events (achievements and accomplishments) and later spreading to atelic events and states, in that sequential order. The imperfective forms will first be used to mark states exclusively and later will gradually be spreading towards the other end of lexical aspectual continuum (activities, accomplishments and achievements, in this order). It is also expected that the imperfective form will appear after the perfective form has already entered the system of inflectional morphology of L2 learner. In addition, AH postulates that in English the progressive will not be used with states.

This sequence of acquisition has been proved to be right by research on L2 aspect acquisition, especially with stronger students with higher level of proficiency in English as L2 (Montrul and Salaberry 2003; Salaberry and Ayoun 2005; Salaberry 2008).

However, the results of a research conducted by the author (whose publication is forthcoming), demonstrated that although in principle, the production of past tense-aspect morphology by Bulgarian L2 instructed learners of English follows the pattern claimed by the Aspect Hypothesis, especially so for the learners with advanced and upper-intermediate levels of proficiency in EFL: the perfective past forms are being first used with telic events (achievements and accomplishments) and are later spreading to atelic events and states, the production of learners with lower levels of proficiency has demonstrated a serious deviation from the pattern.

The latter have used almost five times fewer verbs, marked for the aspectual classes of achievement and accomplishment, which are claimed by the AH to be the first to enter the system of L2 learners’ interlanguage. The results clearly show that the learners with lower level of proficiency have not yet reached the stage, at which to be at ease with expressing temporality by means of aspectual classes. These learners mainly used verbs not marked for any tense but accompanied by temporal and locative adverbials (e.g. now, then, here, there); connectives (e.g. and; and then); verb lexis (e.g. start, finish, continue) to express temporality, which fits the description of the

Lexical stage in expressing temporality, given by the pragmatists and the project funded by the European Science Foundation (1982 – 1988).

These findings confirm that the Bulgarian L2 learners with lower level of proficiency in EFL, represent the lexical stage of SLA, since a great number of the verbs in their narratives occur in morphologically unmarked forms - ‘base’ or ‘default’ forms, as reported by earlier studies (Meisel 1980; 1987; Bardovi-Harlig 1995a; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995; Andersen 1991; Bergstrom 1995; Ramat & Banfi 1990). Their narratives show some evidence for what Klein (1993; 1994a) claimed about the early lexical stage - the lack of verbal morphology to support the learners’ narrative and their using connectives (‘and’, ‘and then’) and temporal adverbials instead.

One of the possible explanations for this, might be the difficulty learners experience in comprehending verbal morphology, as claimed by Brindley (1987) and J. Lee (1998; 1999). As some processing studies have claimed, learners process for meaning before form, thus, they process content words first; and they prefer to process lexical items over grammatical items for semantic information (Van Patten 1996), often using adverbials, and not verb forms, to construct the past reference (J. Lee 1999).

In conclusion, although not intended, the research brought in some more evidence that learners with lower levels of proficiency in English do not necessarily follow the predictions of the AH as there is no finite verbal system in place at this stage of the development of learners’ interlanguage. However, the author of the article feels that further research, including participants with a variety of L1, and particularly ones with lower proficiency in English should be conducted, to reveal the influence of all pragmatic and non-pragmatic factors in the process of the second language acquisition of tense and aspect.

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