

КОНЦЕПТУАЛНИТЕ НЕПОСЛЕДОВАТЕЛНОСТИ И ПРЕНЕБРЕГВАНЕТО НА КОМПОЗИЦИОННИЯ ВИД МОГАТ ДА ВОДЯТ ДО ПОРАЖЕНИЕ В АСПЕКТОЛОГИЯТА

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CONCEPTUAL INCONSISTENCIES AND SIDESTEPPING COMPOSITIONAL ASPECT MAY WREAK HAVOC ON ASPECTOLOGY

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Abstract: This paper is a response to a publication in the 2022 Shumen University Yearbook which strives to explain aspect in several European languages, mainly English and Bulgarian but also French, Spanish, Italian. The attempt is generally unsuccessful despite the correct description of separate phenomena, e.g., Vendler’s aspectual schemata. The major flaw is the total disregard for the theory of compositional aspect in its different versions and for the phenomenon of compositional aspect itself – discovered half a century ago, in 1972, by the Dutch linguist Henk Verkuyl. The theory of compositional aspect, although frequently misconceptualized in linguistics, is universally recognized as the only approach that can adequately describe the phenomenon in languages that lack verbal aspect.

Key words: *perfectivity-imperfectivity; aorist-imperfect; tense and tense-aspect grammemes in European languages; verbal and compositional aspect.*

Резюме: Тази статия е реакция на публикация в Годишника за 2022 г. на Шуменския университет, която се стреми да обясни вида в няколко европейски езика, главно английски и български, но също така и френски, испански, италиански. Опитът в общи линии е неуспешен въпреки правилното описание на отделни явления, например аспектиалните схеми на Вендлер. Основният недостатък е, че по никакъв начин не са взети под внимание теорията на композиционния вид в нейните различни версии, както и самото явление композиционен вид – открито преди половин век, през 1972 г., от холандския лингвист Хенк Веркюйл. Теорията на композиционния вид, макар и често погрешно концептуализирана в езикознанието, е всеобщо призната като единствен подход, способен адекватно да опише явлението в езиците, в които липсва глаголен вид.

Ключови думи: *перфективност-имперфективност; аорист-имперфект; време и видовременни грамемати в европейските езици; глаголен и композиционен вид.*

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Published in the 2022 Shumen University Yearbook is an article dealing with aspect on Bulgarian and English data, with references to other languages – mainly Germanic and Romance (Gotseva 2022). The author argues – correctly – that all the languages mentioned in the paper feature aspect in terms of the distinction between perfectivity and imperfectivity. But the article abounds in conceptual inconsistencies in the treatment of aspect and fails to provide an adequate account of its major target, the perfectivity-imperfectivity contrast.

Relying solely on other researchers’ interpretations and definitions (mainly from the 1980s and 1990s), not on one’s own ideas and understanding, the author maintains that aspect (perfectivity vs imperfectivity) in Romance languages is realized “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”

(Gotseva 2022: 191). What strikes the eye here is that the system of aspect described in this way in the three languages is actually very different: French and Italian are claimed to effectuate aspect through their present perfect forms, while Spanish is said to do this through its preterit form (pretérito) – although Spanish also features a perfect, just like the other two languages. After this rough generalization, far from precise conceptually and terminologically and failing to explain why Spanish must be different, comes the claim that aspect in Bulgarian, which is grammaticalized unlike in the three Romance languages above, is also manifested as a contrast between perfectivity and imperfectivity (“perfective and imperfective pairs of verbs” – Gotseva 2022: 191). A few pages below, perfective aspect is said to “view a situation in its entirety with endpoints”, whereby it is “best expressed with simple past in English and past aorist (past finished) in Bulgarian” (Gotseva 2022: 195). Thus full or almost full equivalence is claimed to exist between three systems of aspect that are formally very different: (i) Bulgarian, where perfectivity and imperfectivity is grammaticalized but found in lexical entities (verbs); (ii) aspect in French, Spanish and Italian (again perfectivity-imperfectivity) where aspect is found to reside in the aspecto-temporal system; (iii) English aspect where perfectivity and imperfectivity are said to be realized mainly with the help of the preterit (the simple past).

These are wrong conjectures in several dimensions. Let us check the one about imperfectivity, by contrasting an imperfective Bulgarian sentence (1a) to its translation correspondences in the other four languages mentioned, English, French, Spanish, Italian:

- (1) a. Messi vinagi e obichal futbola [Bulgarian]
- b. Messi has always loved football [English]
- c. Messi a toujours aimé le football [French]
- d. Messi siempre ha amado el fútbol [Spanish]
- e. Messi ha sempre amato il calcio [Italian]

The Bulgarian sentence (1a) is imperfective, formed with an imperfective verb, as is the English sentence (1b). But in the former aspect is grammatically realized and in the latter it is not. In English the imperfectivity is effectuated in lexico-semantic terms but not grammatically and is represented by the Vendlerian situation “state” (Vendler 1957) in the lexical verb. The problem that arises is that while there is no doubt that the first two sentences (Bulgarian and English, respectively) display imperfectivity, the paper leads us to believe that the French, Spanish and Italian sentences (1c,d,e), semantically equivalent to the imperfective ones (1a,b), are ... perfective. Recall the claim that aspect is realized through the passé composé vs imparfait (French), preterite vs imperfect (Spanish), passato prossimo vs imperfetto (Italian), Gotseva (2022: 191), hence (1c,d,e) are perfective. Such a description, a wrong one, probably stems from the broad claim in traditional grammars and other publications in Romance languages according to which the verb forms mentioned above are “used to express completion”.

Thus the claim that the sentences in French, Spanish and Italian (1c,d,e) are perfective, simply cannot be true, for many reasons. It is common knowledge that the present perfect found in the languages above (Bulgarian, English, French, Spanish, Italian) is aspectually ambivalent from the Slavic point of view, and if in many (but not all) cases it may be associated with situations encoding completion, it **does not encode perfectivity in the Slavic sense**. This is because, apart from completion, in languages with grammaticalized aspect (through perfective verbs, as in Slavic, Greek, Georgian)

perfectivity involves a reached telos with a pragmatic result associated with it (for Slavic and Greek see Dimitrova, Kabakčiev 2021: 196-197; Dimitrova 2021: 47). Clearly, the present perfect form is aspectually ambivalent in Bulgarian too, Bulgarian being the only Slavic language that features a present perfect that does not function as a preterit (like the formally identical one in Serbian/Montenegrin). The present perfect is thus aspectually ambivalent in the Germanic and the Romance languages too, as well as in many other languages, whether genetically related (e.g., Albanian) or not (Georgian). Indeed, the present perfect cannot exactly be called aspectually ambivalent in Greek, at least nominally, because it is formed from perfective verbs only. But this does not mean that it cannot be coerced into imperfectivity, see Dimitrova (2021). Thus the conceptual inconsistencies present in the paper discussed here consist, first, in equalling perfectivity-imperfectivity in Slavic languages with the aorist-imperfect contrast (in those languages where it exists). Second, flawed is also the claim that the perfect is a tense-aspect form – because “tense-aspect” means simultaneously temporal (i.e., related to time) *and* aspectual. This claim is found in the insistence that “in Germanic languages, such as English, German, Dutch, and Swedish, the tense-aspect categories existing include past, perfect, and pluperfect” (Gotseva 2022: 192). A crucial question arises: how can a grammatical category such as the present perfect be a “tense-aspect one” if its forms are aspectually ambivalent between perfectivity and imperfectivity? As the mismatch between the conceptualization of Slavic aspect as a perfectivity-imperfectivity contrast and aspect in French, Spanish and Italian, on the one hand, and of English aspect (again as a perfectivity-perfectivity contrast), on the other, is serious and the defects in the interpretation are too many, let us discuss them one after the other.

Regarding English perfectivity, the author leads us to believe that it “views a situation in its entirety with its endpoints”, a correct claim in itself. However, the claim that it is “best expressed with simple past in English” (Gotseva 2022: 195) is defective. The readers are thus expected to accept that the English simple past verb form is not only aspectual but is specifically capable of expressing perfectivity. At the same time, the author insists, imperfectivity is also expressed through the past simple form, recall her statement about English that “the imperfective / habitual meaning in the past is considered to be expressed by simple past” (Gotseva 2022: 195). Actually, it is true in itself that in English perfectivity is best expressed with the simple past – and below it will even be shown with examples that it is true. But a very serious question now arises: what kind of an aspectual form is the English simple past if it is *equally capable* of expressing perfectivity and imperfectivity? Given that it can explicate both aspectual values, is it really aspectual at all? The paper provides no answer to such a question, and does not even ask it.

Indeed, the idea that the English simple/indefinite past verb form is an aspectual one was prevalent in English comprehensive grammars until the end of the 20th century (see, e.g., Quirk et al. 1985). But today this idea is not only discarded, it is replaced – shyly, with no supporting data and arguments – by acknowledgements that perfectivity in English in fact exists (see Huddleston, Pullum 2002: 118-125; 125; Downing, Locke 2006: 370; Langacker 2008: 147ff; Fenn 2010: 277-281), but it is not known where exactly it is and where it should be looked for. Grammars simply do not tell us. On the total failure of practically all English comprehensive grammars today to provide at least a partly acceptable rendition of the problem of aspect in English (perfectivity vs imperfectivity) and/or of at least some explanation of the hugely important article-aspect

interplay, see Bulatović (2013; 2016; 2020; 2022) and Kabakčiev (2022). On the article-aspect interplay, see also here, below.

All this means that the way in which aspect is effectuated in English remains a mystery in the publication discussed. Instead it seems to suggest, albeit indirectly, that aspect in English is realized through the tense paradigm, in a manner similar to the one found in the Bulgarian aspect system. Note that the paper describes Bulgarian aspect as a morphologically effectuated lexico-grammatical category, in line with most Bulgarianist studies (e.g., Chakarova 2003; Dimitrova 2019), and this description can be considered correct. But Bulgarian aspect is also found to be linked to the aspecto-temporal system, viz., the aorist-imperfect contrast. It is mentioned several times throughout the paper that the Bulgarian aorist-imperfect distinction is related to the perfective-imperfective distinction – but no explanation is offered on how exactly it is related. In the long run, an adequate explanation of exactly how aspect is effectuated in both Bulgarian and English (and in languages similar to English) is not provided at all. Instead of offering such an explanation – otherwise available in the literature (even if in different versions), the paper abounds in considerations about the presence of perfectivity in English based on publications mainly from the previous century. Furthermore, as regards language data to support the claims, the paper offers *only two sentences* exemplifying English aspect, both allegedly demonstrating perfectivity (Gotseva 2022: 196):

- (2) a. She read
b. She read the book

The problem, serious, is that the second sentence, (2b), is, indeed, perfective, representing a Vendlerian accomplishment – and Vendler’s schemata are well described in Gotseva (2022: 197). This sentence also matches Verkuyl’s perfective schema (on Verkuyl’s schemata see Verkuyl 1993; 2022, Kabakčiev 2019; 2022). But, strangely, sentence (2b) is actually listed as exemplifying the Bulgarian aspect system, not the English one (Gotseva 2022: 196). And as sentence (2b) is undoubtedly perfective, representing a Vendlerian accomplishment, it is actually representative of English perfectivity too, while (2a) is not perfective. It is imperfective, prototypically representing a Vendlerian state (could be an activity too) and belonging to Verkuyl’s imperfective schema.

These inconsistencies in the interpretation of aspect (conceptual and also terminological) are, in the understanding here, due to the absence in the paper discussed of the quintessence of aspect, as found in English and similar languages, namely: compositional aspect. It is worth emphasizing that although compositional aspect in general and Verkuyl’s theoretical model of it are frequently misconceptualized in the literature (see Kabakčiev 2019: 212-218), it is at the same time a phenomenon familiar to the world linguistic community, having existed for a long time (half a century since Verkuyl 1972) and having triggered large numbers of citations and discussions.¹ The strange thing in this case is that knowledge of compositional aspect involves, in principle, understanding Vendler’s schemata (Vendlerian situations), and these schemata are correctly discussed and interpreted in Gotseva (2022: 197). This circumstance ought

¹ Verkuyl, the finder of compositional aspect and author of three major monographs and countless papers on compositional aspect, is among the most frequently quoted authors in linguistics in general.

to rule out blatantly wrong statements such as “*She read* is a perfective sentence” (Gotseva 2022: 196).

Thus the discussion reaches a point where compositional aspect must enter the stage. Although this phenomenon is extremely complex, some of its conceptual framework can be demonstrated easily. For the sake of explaining the article-aspect interplay in English as part of the general compositional-aspect mechanism, the following examples, (3a-d), will be used – already employed and explained (in Kabakčiev 2019: 205-206), here they will be only summarized. These are specially constructed examples for revealing certain structural interdependences in English – yet they represent fully natural sentences:

- (3) a. The tourist visited a castle [perfective]
b. The tourist visited castles [imperfective]
c. Tourists visited a castle [imperfective]
d. Tourists visited castles [imperfective]

Sentence (3a) is perfective and the other three (3b,c,d) are imperfective. They demonstrate that, first, the English preterit verb form, used in all the sentences, is aspectually ambivalent in terms of the perfective-imperfective distinction. Hence, if we are to believe Gotseva’s conjecture that the simple past is good for expressing the perfectivity of a sentence such as *She read the book*, and if it is the preterit again that is associated with the perfectivity of *The tourist visited a castle*, an important question arises: why are sentences such as (3b,c,d), containing the same verb form (*visited*), imperfective and not perfective? How can it be that an English verb form that is good for expressing the perfectivity of a sentence, be also good for expressing imperfectivity – in similar sentences? Second, note that the sentences above, being only a handful of examples, reveal a major and extremely important phenomenon in Modern English, the article-aspect interplay – very well known in aspectology and theoretical linguistics in general but totally absent in today’s English grammars (discounting a couple of specialized ones) – in spite of both recent and older appeals (Kabakčiev 2000; Schüller 2005; Bulatović 2013; 2016; 2020) for English grammars to start taking into account progress made in aspectology and theoretical linguistics in general.

What does the article-aspect interplay consist in in the sentences in (3) and in all similar sentences? A detailed explanation is given in (Kabakčiev 2019: 205-206); here it is summarized. The perfectivity of (3a) is due to the temporal boundedness of the referents of the NPs *the tourist* and *a castle* and the presence of a telic verb (*visited*), these three elements together allowing sentence (3a) into Verkuyl’s perfective schema (see above on Verkuyl’s schemata); (3b) is imperfective because the referent of the NP *castles* is unbounded by the bare plural and this triggers non-boundedness (imperfectivity) in the referent of the verb; (3c) is imperfective because of the non-boundedness in the referent of the NP (*tourists*), which also triggers imperfectivity in the referent of the verb; (3d) is imperfective because both the subject and the object referents are non-bounded and this again triggers imperfectivity in the referent of the verb (Verkuyl 1972, 1993). For more detail, see Kabakčiev (2019; 2022).

Another problem in the paper discussed is that its author recognizes the circumstance that there exists an interplay in Bulgarian between perfectivity and imperfectivity, on the one hand, and the relevant values found in the grammemes aorist and imperfect (Gotseva 2022: 193). But, surprisingly, she fails to conclude that there must be a similar interplay between the more or less corresponding grammemes (*passé*

composé vs imparfait in French, preterite vs imperfect in Spanish, passato prossimo vs imperfetto in Italian) and the Vendlerian situations that can be combined with these grammemes. Providing examples in this respect is easy. Contrary to what Gotseva is saying – that the French passé composé is perfective and thus equals the Bulgarian perfective aspect in verbs, the French passé composé *can* explicate imperfectivity. And when it explicates it, it is because, for example, a Vendlerian state is used, as in (1c) above. And when the passé composé explicates perfectivity, it is because a Vendlerian accomplishment is used, as in (4a) below, and not because the passé composé is perfective. The same in Italian and Spanish. When perfectivity is explicated with the Italian passato prossimo, it is because a Vendlerian accomplishment is used, see (4b), and not because the passato prossimo is perfective. And when perfectivity is explicated in the Spanish pretérito, it is again because a Vendlerian accomplishment is associated with it, see (4c), not because the pretérito is perfective. Note that even with the Spanish pretérito, which Gotseva considers a “perfective tense”, we can have a sentence such as (4d) which does not explicate an accomplishment but signals another type of Vendlerian situation, an episode – a temporally bounded situation without any pragmatic result associated with its endpoint (on the episode as an additional Vendlerian situation, see Kabakčiev 2000: 279-307; Dimitrova 2021: 47).

- (4) a. Messi a botté le ballon [French]
 ‘Messi (has) kicked the ball’
 b. Messi ha calciato la palla [Italian]
 ‘Messi (has) kicked the ball’
 c. Messi pateó el balón [Spanish]
 ‘Messi kicked the ball’
 d. Messi pateó balones esta mañana [Spanish]
 ‘Messi kicked balls this morning’

When aspect is grammaticalized, this is effectuated in different ways, most common of which are morphological (as, e.g., in Slavic aspect – perfective and imperfective) and periphrastic, as in, e.g., the progressive aspect in English, Spanish, etc., the progressive being a subtype of imperfective aspect. But in the Slavic languages it is widely assumed – correctly – that aspect is a “lexico-grammatical category”, not a purely grammatical one, morphologically realized, because generally there are no special morphological markers of aspect, in particular for perfective aspect. As for the aorist-imperfect distinction found in Bulgarian and in many other languages (Greek, Spanish, Georgian, etc.), it is a mixed one, aspecto-temporal, encoding pastness plus temporal boundedness (the aorist) and temporal non-boundedness (the imperfect). It must specifically be noted that the aorist does not encode perfectivity, because perfectivity is temporal boundedness plus a reached telos and is denoted by perfective verbs (in Bulgarian, Greek, Georgian, etc.). For this reason, the aorist is capable of expressing (directly) or explicating (indirectly) both accomplishments and episodes in Greek and Bulgarian, cf. the following Greek examples (5a,b) with aorists from Dimitrova, Kabakčiev (2021: 197) and the corresponding Bulgarian examples (6) with a perfective aorist (6a) and an imperfective aorist (6b), respectively:²

² The Bulgarian imperfective aorist encodes episodes.

- (5) a. Έπαixa_{AOR} éna paichnídi ténis símera to proí
 ‘I played a game of tennis this morning’
 b. Έπαixa_{AOR} ténis símera to proí
 ‘I played tennis this morning’
- (6) a. Izigrah_{PFVAOR} edin geym tenis tazi sutrin
 ‘I played a game of tennis this morning’
 b. Igrah_{IMPVFAOR} tenis tazi sutrin
 ‘I played tennis this morning’

Aspect has always been a very difficult and controversial issue in linguistic theory. However, global research in recent decades on data from a very large number of languages brought many important insights into the understanding of this intriguing linguistic domain – as well as the generalization that aspect in English, Germanic and Romance languages, Finnish and countless other languages around the world is *not* a lexico-grammatical and morphological category as it is in the Slavic languages. It is compositional. Certainly, there are numerous serious issues in modern aspectology, one of which is that while aspect is definitely regarded as found in the sentence (or clause, or context) – following Verkuyl’s (1972) discovery of compositional aspect, its exact location continues to be misconceptualized in hundreds of publications, and many researchers offer wrong assessments, ultimately assigning aspect not to the whole sentence but only to the verb phrase.³ In any case, the paper discussed here sidesteps compositional aspect, making no mention of it and showing that this extremely significant language phenomenon is still a true *terra incognita* not only in English grammars and foreign language teaching (see the problem described in detail in Bulatović 2020; 2022) but also in other areas belonging to applied linguistics, such as language acquisition (first, second or foreign). When research is done on how infants learn language or learners of a certain language acquire knowledge in another, this must rest on a solid theoretical basis, in line with the current state of the art in theoretical linguistics. It must not rely on wrong premises, ideas and/or theses in outdated publications.

Notes in conclusion

The adequate description of English aspect and of aspect in *any* language for that matter – including Germanic or Romance languages, is impossible without the employment of a compositional aspect theory. This can be done in any of the following three possible variants (plus some other): Verkuyl’s, developed by him for six decades and still being sophisticated (Verkuyl 1972; 1993; 2022), Bulatović’s (2013; 2016; 2020; 2022), Kabakčiev’s (2000; 2019; 2022). There are, indeed, differences between these three theoretical frameworks, even some serious ones. But any of these three models is fully capable of providing a solid explanation of compositional aspect and the way it works – complex and intriguing at the same time. Without the employment of a compositional theoretical model, attempts to understand aspect – including English and Bulgarian aspect, and to explain it to others is a time-wasting and hopeless enterprise.

³ This is a topic for another publication, a larger one, but see Kabakčiev (2019: 212-218) on some of the major misconceptions of compositional aspect in theoretical linguistics.

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