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MODERN THEORIES OF ASPECT AND SERBIAN EL2 LEARNERS

Abstract

The paper analyses modern theories of aspect in English from the point of view of Serbian EL2 learners¹. The analysis mainly looks at the works of Vendler, Verkuyl and Kabaciev as the cornerstones² of what is known today as compositional aspect. An attempt is made to identify elements that could be particularly relevant for EL2 learners and that should be incorporated in English grammars. The paper points to strong arguments in favour of incorporating such content. It also shows that it is possible to create certain rules that could help EL2 learners find their way in the extremely complex category of aspect in English.

Key words: verbal and lexical aspect, perfective and imperfective aspect, determiners

0. Introduction

As in the case of many other languages, a greater interest in the category of aspect in English came as a response to insights into this category in Slavic languages. It is difficult to say whether this was a fortunate order of events.

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¹ In this paper the phrase 'Serbian EL2 learners' is used to mean 'speakers whose mother tongue is Serbian and who learn English as their second language'. For simplicity, it will be shortened to 'EL2 learners'.

² In the opinion of the author of this paper.

It has lead, among other things, to a terminological confusion which has survived decades of hard work of numerous aspectologists. For example, the perfective aspect is often interpreted to mean the perfect phase, and the imperfective aspect is regularly associated with progressive tenses. It is quite common to find vague explanations in some very good modern English pedagogical grammars where this grammatical category is confused with the category of tense. Here is an example from Swan (2005:xvii):

Grammarians prefer to talk about progressive and perfective aspect, rather than progressive and perfect tense, since these forms express other ideas besides time (e.g. continuity, completion). However, in this book the term tense is often used to include aspect, for the sake of simplicity.

Some renowned linguists even rejected the idea of introducing aspect in English. Zandvoort, for example, supports Meillet's opinion that "[we should not] admit any semantic category which does not correspond to a means of expression in the language itself" (1962: 10). Luckily, the work of many linguists has proven that aspect is a universal category and that although it is not always as clearly marked as in Slavic languages, English too has aspect.

In this paper we look at the category of aspect in English from the point of view of EL2 learners. Following a number of relatively recent aspectologists (see Verkuyl 1972, Kabakciev 2000), we see aspect in English as compositional, where the verb, arguments, adverbials and, more generally, context all play a role in creating the aspectual value of a sentence. In Serbian, aspect is dominantly a morphological category, but not without contextual influences. Maintaining our focus on EL2 learners, we want to help these learners correctly interpret the interplay of all the relevant elements and assign English sentences proper aspectual interpretation as well as help them create English sentences that will be correct equivalents of the Serbian category of aspect.

In the first section of the paper, we briefly explain the category of aspect in Serbian, and in the second the categories of lexical and verbal aspects in English. In the third section, we look at the mechanisms of compositional aspect based on Verkuyl's model and explain its usefulness for Serbian speakers. In the fourth section, we try to draw up some practical guidelines that EL2 learners can use in producing English sentences. Section number five includes conclusions.

1. A brief overview of aspect in Serbian

In Serbian, aspect is a morphological category marked on the verbal lexeme. Most verbs have two different forms, one for the perfective (*napraviti* ‘make’), and one for the imperfective (*praviti* ‘be making’) aspect. Some verbs have one form for both aspects (*doručkovati* ‘have/be having breakfast’). They are called ‘dual aspect verbs’.

The distinction between the meanings of the two aspects in Slavic languages was first made along the lines of completion/incompletion of the situation that the verbal lexeme is a representation of. This applies to some verbs only. More precise descriptions have been made since these early attempts and in the next paragraphs we will briefly present some of them.

The perfective aspect is now interpreted to represent one situation in contrast to another, with the focus on the moment of change (see Hlebec 1990: 81). For example, the perfective *oporaviti se* ‘recover’ focuses on the change of condition from being ill to being healthy again.

The selection of the imperfective form of a verbal lexeme indicates that a situation is seen as continuous and continuing without any changes (see Galton 1985a; 1985b; Hlebec 1990). The focus seems to be on the structure of the situation itself, or on the “lexicalised situation” (Hlebec 1990: 80). In other words, in selecting the imperfective form of a verb, such as *pisati* ‘write’, *znati* ‘know’, *raditi* ‘work’, the speaker focuses on the lexical meaning which denotes that a state exists or that an activity is underway.

Although it is generally accepted that the category of aspect in Serbian is a morphological category, it is also a syntactical category since other elements may have an impact on the aspect marked on the verb to potentially produce an aspectual interpretation at the sentence level which is different from that expressed by the verb. Stevanovic (1969: 529) points to the role of context in determining whether a verb is perfective or imperfective. This specific comment refers to dual aspect verbs, but he also uses the following example:

- (1) On je svoje pesme pisao samo u kasnu noć.
He wrote his poems late at night only. (ipf-was writing)³

³ Non-progressive morphemes in English may lead to both perfective and imperfective aspectual interpretations at the sentence level. Progressive morphemes may not lead

to explain that the imperfective *pisati* 'write', which does not generally imply any repetition in itself, has iterative meaning in (1) above (Stevanovic 1969: 534). There is no clash between the verb and sentence aspect interpretations since in Serbian it is normally the imperfective aspect which is used to express habitual meaning.

However, in:

- (2) Moj brat popuši 30 cigareta dnevno.
My brother smokes 30 cigarettes a day. (pf-smoke)

(example from Sgall, Theodore in Chaterjee 1988: 47), the choice of the perfective '*popuši*' 'smoke' to express habitual meaning is conditioned more by the adverbial *dnevno* 'a day' and is a less frequent selection than:

- (3) Moj brat puši 30 cigareta dnevno.
My brother smokes 30 cigarettes a day (ipf-is smoking).

Chaterjee (1988: 24) points to another feature of the imperfective aspect, namely that it puts the focus on the process and not the result. In:

- (4) Ko ti je ovo šio?
Who sewed you that dress? (ipf-was sewing)

the imperfective form *šiti* 'sew' is used although the dress is obviously the finished product of the act of 'sewing'. The focus, therefore, is on the skill and process, and not on the result. This is in line with Hlebec's explanation above that the imperfective focuses on the 'lexicalised situation'.

Novakov (see 2005; 2009:196-197) emphasizes that, with the exception of habitual meaning, perfectivity/imperfectivity of Serbian verbs is not affected by the adverbials and context in general. For example, a prefix in a perfective verb sets a boundary on the verbal situation, which makes the situation telic irrespective of the adverbials, as in:

- (5) Ona je napunila čašu vodom za deset sekundi/*deset sekundi.

to the perfective aspectual interpretation at the sentence level. To make things easier to an English reader, we adopt a convention in this paper of describing perfective and imperfective aspects in Serbian using non-progressive and progressive English morphemes respectively. This does not apply to the translation of entire sentences into English but to the bracketed translations of the verb phrases.

She filled the glass with water in ten seconds/*for ten seconds.
(pf-filled)

where the perfective 'napunila' does not lend itself to atelic interpretation, i.e. its boundedness cannot be annulled by durative adverbial 'for ten seconds'.

To conclude, when constructing an utterance in his mind, a speaker of Serbian must make a choice between the perfective or imperfective aspect by selecting one or the other form of the verbal lexeme. In most cases, this choice defines the aspectual interpretation at the sentence level. In some cases, the aspect chosen may change at the sentence level, as in (2) and (4) above, where the perfective verb form results in the imperfective meaning at the sentence level in (2), and the imperfective verb form results in the perfective meaning at the sentence level in (4).⁴

2. A short overview of aspect in English

In English, a distinction must first be made between lexical and verbal aspect.

The lexical aspect⁵ of an individual verb reflects the nature of the extra-linguistic situation that the verb represents. It is defined by binary oppositions [+/- stativity], [+/-durativity], and [+/-telicity]. Many different classifications of English verbs can be found in the literature (see Ryle 1949, Vendler 1957, Kenny 1963, Ridjanovic 1976, Brinton 1988). The best-known among them is Vendler's classification, which has caused a lot of confusion but has also paved the way for the concept of compositional aspect. What Vendler classifies are not verbs but different uses of verbs. Formally, though, he classifies them into states (*know, love, be present, drive a cab*), activities (*push a cart, work, draw, drive a cab*), accomplishments (*build a house, make a chair, write a letter*) and achievements (*recognise, spot, reach the summit*). Although it is obvious from the examples that Vendler classifies the use of verbs and not verbs

⁴ The author is not aware of any research conducted that would indicate whether this clash between aspectual interpretations at verb and sentence levels in Serbian is statistically significant and in what kinds of language uses it is more frequent.

⁵ Other terms used are *Aktionsart, lexical character, event structure, inner aspect, mode of action, inherent aspectual meaning* etc. (see Comrie 1976, Dahl 1985).

in isolation (e.g. *drive a cab* listed under states refers to a characteristic activity of a subject, i.e. habitual use of the verb), his categories have been widely accepted as categories of lexical aspect. He clearly states in his book *Linguistics in Philosophy* (Vendler 1967:97) that verbs cannot be explained without taking into account other factors, such as the presence or absence of an object (e.g. *write* first appears in the category of activities, and then, when accompanied by an object, *write a letter*, it is found in the category of accomplishments). This is confusing for many, including EL2 learners. It is not clear, for example, why the two instances of *write* in (6) are not the representations of the same extra-linguistic situation.

- (6) a) He was writing.
(Pisao je.) (ipf-was writing)
b) He was writing a letter.
(Pisao je pismo). (ipf-was writing)

However, there is no doubt that his contribution lies in the thorough description of the four situation types, the tests by which to classify verbs into the four categories, and, before all, in the idea that elements outside of the verb affect the nature of the situation.

A good description of internal aspectual features is found in Comrie 1976. They can be used to produce the following descriptions of Vendler's categories:

States are durative and atelic situations. This means that they are situations that simply last for a certain period of time, without any internal development, or movement towards a goal.

Activities are dynamic, durative and atelic. They involve internal change, a succession of segments, but since there is no indication of a goal, these situations are seen as situations that can go on for ever. For example, in (6a) above, the focus is on the process itself, not on its purpose.

Accomplishments are dynamic, durative and telic. They involve a succession of segments that develop towards a goal. The accomplishment of a goal implies a change of status. For example, *redde*n includes the moment of change of condition from not being red to being red, but also the process that has lead to this moment.

Achievements are dynamic, punctual (or [-durative]), and telic. They represent a moment of change from one state to another. For example, *lose (something)* marks a change from having something to not having

something. Unlike accomplishments, achievements have point-like structure and are exhausted within that point in time.

Verbal aspect in English is clearly marked by the progressive or non-progressive morpheme of the verb. The most widely accepted analysis of verbal aspect is that by Comrie (1976). He explains that a speaker opts for the non-progressive morpheme of a verb when he looks at a situation as a whole, and for the progressive morpheme when he focuses more on its internal structure. The sentences in (7) below, for example, are accounts of the same extra-linguistic situation.

- (7) a) He wrote (in his office).
Pisao je u kancelariji. (ipf-was writing)
b) He was writing (in his office).
Pisao je u kancelariji. (ipf-was writing)

Following Comrie's explanations, (7a) is more denotational and may be heard in real life in response to the question "What did he do this morning?", while (7b) focuses more on the internal structure of the time period spent in his office, potentially in response to the question "What was he doing there?". Activities in both (7a) and (7b) are rendered in Serbian using the imperfective verbal aspect. However, when EL2 learners want to express the same in English, they need to learn about these different verbal aspects under the category of tense. It has become a convention in English pedagogical grammars to present individual tenses in pairs, e.g. Past Simple Tense versus Past Progressive Tense, etc. During such elaboration, grammars rarely point to the role of the lexical aspect or any arguments in the sentence. For example, if we replace the verb *write* with the verb phrase *write (a letter)*, as in:

- (8) a) He wrote a letter in his office.
Napisao je pismo u kancelariji. (pf-wrote)
b) He was writing a letter in his office.
Pisao je pismo u kancelariji. (ipf-was writing)

an EL2 learner may follow the model of (7a) and (7b) above and express both verbs using their imperfective form in Serbian *pisati* 'write'. This would be wrong since in (8a) the activity of writing is temporally limited by the object 'a letter' and most native speakers would interpret the verbal phrase to refer to the moment of change, or the moment of completion

of the process of writing. To express that, a Serbian speaker needs the perfective aspect on the verb, '*napisati*'. In (8b), the focus is on the activity and its internal structure, and a speaker of Serbian needs the imperfective aspect on the verb again.

Occasionally, grammars mention processes as a category of English verbs that is not sensitive to the form of the verbal morpheme, as in:

- (9) a) It rained.
- b) It was raining.
- c) They have lived here their whole life.
- d) They have been living here their whole life.

but do not explain that this is possible only because *rain* and *live* are activities. That is, they are dynamic, durative and atelic in themselves and any emphasis of their internal structure or durativity is therefore redundant.

In addition to situations similar to (9a-d) above, grammars normally pay more attention to state verbs and provide explanations to EL2 learners as to why states are not normally used in the progressive tenses.

All other influences (in particular of the specification of arguments, adverbials, etc.) remain unaccounted for. For example if (8a) above is further modified by an adverbial, such as in:

- (10) He wrote a letter in his office the whole day.
 Pisao je pismo u kancelariji cijeli dan. (ipf-was writing)

it is left to the linguistic intuition of EL2 learners (aroused by the adverbial itself) to conclude that the aspectual value at the sentence level is imperfective again.

To conclude this section, it is true to say that grammars ignore the category of lexical aspect and do little to explain the verbal aspect systematically. As a result, EL2 learners make errors in both interpreting English aspectual meanings into Serbian and creating such meanings in English. They are not aware of the role of arguments in a sentence, but would intuitively correctly account for the impact of English adverbials. However, EL2 learners often⁶ use durative adverbials in combination with the progressive verbal aspect, the position where it is usually redundant, as in:

⁶ The examples of errors that follow are not the result of any research but are based on the author's teaching experience.

- (11) He was writing a letter the whole day.
Pisao je pismo cijeli dan. (ipf-was writing)

and would unnecessarily use the progressive aspect to express pure denotational meaning of past activities just because Serbian uses the imperfective aspect, as in:

- (12) He was speaking about his neighbours.
Govorio je o komšijama. (ipf-was speaking).

Instead of 12 above, a much more natural sentence in English would be:

- (13) He spoke about his neighbours,

probably in response to the question “What did he speak about?”.

3. Compositional aspect

In this section, we focus on an understanding of aspect in English known in literature as ‘compositional aspect’. We will call it a model. It was created by Verkuyl under the name of ‘characterisation of situation types’ but was later refined by Verkuyl himself as well as a number of other linguists (see Verkuyl 1972, Verkuyl 1989⁷, Dimitrova-Vulchanova 1999, Kabakciev 2000). No model can account for all possible combinations in real-life situations, but we believe Verkuyl’s model is extremely useful as a solid foundation for EL2 learners on which to further refine their perception and production of aspectual meanings.

Verkuyl offers the following schemes for terminativity and durativity:

terminativity:

S[NP1[SPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X]NP1 + VP[V[VERB]V + NP2[SPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X]NP2]S

⁷ This model assigns a crucial role to arguments in a sentence. Verkuyl notes that several linguists before him have noticed the link between the object and aspectual interpretation of a verb and mentions Poutsma and Jacobson in this context.

durativity:

S[NP1[(UN)SPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X]NP1 + VP[V[VERB]V+ NP2[(UN)SPECIFIED QUANTITY OF X]NP2]S

where ‘specified quantity of x’ is a specific semantic entity which restricts the temporal interval and ‘unspecified quantity of x’ is a specific semantic entity which does not restrict the temporal interval (see Verkuyl 1972:59).

This means that for a clause/sentence to have a terminative aspectual reading, both arguments must represent a ‘specified quantity of x’. If one of the arguments is not ‘specified’, terminativity is lost. Arguments are specified if they are definite, e.g. a proper noun, or a common noun determined by an article, a possessive or demonstrative adjective, or a quantifier.

As for the role of the lexical aspect, he proposes the following:

1. [+B] + ([+A] + [+B]): (terminative) event
2. [+B] + ([+A] + [-B]): process
3. [-B] + ([+A] + [+B]): process
4. [+B] + ([-A] + [+B]): state
5. [+B] + ([-A] + [-B]): state
6. [-B] + ([-A] + [+B]): state
7. [+B] + ([-A] + [-B]): state

where [+/-A] marks the “semantic predicate assigned lexically to verbs expressing change, a going through time of entities involved in the predication” (Verkuyl 1989:81). Verkuyl describes this feature as [+ADD TO]. The feature [+/-B] marks the ‘(un)specified quantity of x’.

Verkuyl illustrates the above characterisation with the following examples. On the right, we provide the translations into Serbian. In brackets, we indicate the sentence level aspectual value and the choice of aspect in Serbian.

- | | | |
|---------|------------------------------|---|
| (13) a) | She played that sonata. | Odsvirala je tu sonatu. (pf-played) |
| b) | She played sonatas. | Svirala je sonate. (ipf-was playing) |
| c) | Soldiers played that sonata. | Vojnici su svirali tu sonatu.
(ipf-were playing) |
| d) | She hated that sonata. | Mrzjela je tu sonatu.
(ipf-was hating*) |

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| e) She hated sonatas. | Mrzjela je sonate. (ipf-was hating) |
| f) Adults hated that sonata. | Odrasli su mrzjeli tu sonatu.
(ipf-were hating) |
| g) Nobody hated sonatas. | Niko nije mrzio sonate.
(ipf-was hating) |

As the above examples show, terminativity of (13a) is annulled the moment one of the arguments changes nature from 'specified' to 'unspecified' (13b and 13c). In terms of the categories of lexical aspect commented above, this means that an atelic activity, such as *play* 'svirati' may be temporally restricted by a specified object to produce an accomplishment, which is telic, e.g. *play that sonata* 'odsvirati tu sonatu'. For the same reason, identical verbs appear in both Vendler's activities and accomplishments (*write* and *write a book*, 'pisati' and 'napisati knjigu').

In Verkuyl's characterisation, however, states are not allowed to transform into achievements although Vendler offers *know* 'znati' as an example of states, and '*know suddenly*' 'shvatiti/saznati' (<*realize* and *learn/come to know* are more precise translations in Serbian) as an example of achievements. Vendler's classification is important for EL2 learners in particular since many states in Serbian have two aspectual forms. Verkuyl, on the other hand, maintains that states cannot change their nature even if both arguments are 'specified quantity of x' (item d in the characterisation above). Verkuyl does not mention the role of adverbials that could give (13a) aterminative meaning again, e.g.:

- (14) She played that sonata the whole day.
Svirala je tu sonatu cijeli dan. (ipf-was playing)

Based on Verkuyl's work, however, linguists have come to a better understanding (and description) of the interplay between the inner character of verbs and other elements in a sentence (arguments, adverbials, broader context). In his study of 2000, Kabakciev develops compositional aspect further and offers wonderful insights into this interplay. He uses the term 'bounding' to describe spatial and temporal boundaries placed on the verb by the object. His general term for the interplay between the verb and all the other elements is 'mapping temporal values', which he illustrates in the following examples (Kabakciev 2000: 130):

4. How grammars can incorporate the modern theories of aspect in English

English grammars, at least those for advanced EL2 learners, should teach the tenses as elements of a broader framework which would include a presentation of lexical and verbal aspects and of the mechanisms of compositional aspect. They should devote a lot of space to determiners in particular and their role since at present an EL2 learner sees no connection between determiners and the categories of tense and aspect. If grammars accepted this approach, all the typical uses, rules and restrictions would be natural and logical to an EL2 learner.

Pedagogical grammars of English made for EL2 learners should do the same, paying special attention to the equivalents of the perfective and imperfective aspects in Serbian and the role of articles. Developing detailed schemes for the two aspects in Serbian and their equivalents in English requires a lot of time and effort. In the next paragraph, we present just a few tentative rules.

To recreate the Serbian imperfective aspect in English, an EL2 learner can use atelic verbs (states and activities) and make sure they remain not bounded by specific arguments or adverbials. An EL2 learner may also use telic verbs (accomplishments and achievements) and unbound them by non-specific arguments or annul their boundedness by choosing the progressive morpheme of the verb or adding durative adverbials.

To recreate the Serbian perfective aspect in English, an EL2 learner can use telic verbs and make sure they are not unbounded by non-specific arguments, the progressive morpheme or durative adverbials. An EL2 learner may also use atelic verbs and bound them by specific arguments and make sure they are not used in the progressive form (where the progressive form is possible) or in combination with durative adverbials.

5. Conclusion

Modern theories of aspect in English have a lot to offer to EL2 learners. We believe this help is significant and deserves to be part of at least advanced grammars of English produced by English grammarians as well as all pedagogical grammars of English designed for Serbian EL2 learners. The presentation of the English tense system must include sections on lexical

aspect, verbal aspect, and the principles of compositional aspect. We also believe that in spite of all the differences between the two linguistic systems the similarities are greater and that it is possible to design certain rules which however tentative can help EL2 learners communicate in English with more accuracy and confidence.

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САВРЕМЕНЕ ТЕОРИЈЕ АСПЕКТА У ЕНГЛЕСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ
ИЗ УГЛА ГОВОРНИКА СРПСКОГ КОЈИ УЧЕ ЕНГЛЕСКИ
КАО СТРАНИ ЈЕЗИК

Сажетак

У раду се анализирају савремене теорије аспекта у енглеском језику из угла говорника српског који уче енглески као страни језик. Анализа се углавном бави радовима Вендлера, Феркила и Кабакчијева, који представљају основу онога што се данас назива компонентним аспектом. У раду се покушава утврдити који су то елементи који су посебно релевантни за оне који енглески језик уче као страни и које би требало унијети у граматике енглеског језика. У раду се указује на јаке аргументе у прилог укључивању таквог садржаја. Такође се показује да је могуће успоставити одређена правила која би онима који уче енглески као страни језик помогла да се снађу у изузетно сложеној категорији аспекта у енглеском језику.

Кључне речи: глаголски и лексички аспект, свршени и несвршени вид, детерминатори