

Pragmatic Dimensions of Aspects in English: Theory and Practice

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Aspect as part of the TAM system of English is both a grammatical representation of the temporal properties of a situation and a lexico-semantic designation that delimits a verb in its scope of action such as telicity. The relationship between the two, however, is not always clearly delineated when aspectual forms are used in socially constructed discourse. The progressive aspect grammatically marks a currently occurring event which may, however, semantically express a state of condition, such as “She is living with her parents”. The present perfect aspect that grammatically expresses an action supposedly completed relative to the current moment of speaking does not necessarily indicate telicity, as in “they have tasted the ugly fruit but still wanted more of it”, as telicity is more of a function of semantic properties of a verb and its syntactic environment than what its aspectual form indicates. Interpretation of intended meaning in social interactions, which is the hallmark of research in pragmatics, is predicated on the presupposition of what is said and the implicature from what is not said but still understood. This paper will, therefore, take a two-pronged approach to examining the reciprocal connections between grammatical form and its semantic outcome, not in the vacuum of purely linguistic analysis but in the context of communicative practice, with a goal of incorporating more nuanced pragmatic functions of language in both teaching and research. This is especially relevant to second language teaching where learners often focus on form rather than function of grammatical structures.

Keywords: *verb aspects, telicity, state vs. action, pragmatic function, lexico-semantic*

Introduction

Aspectuality as a grammatical phenomenon embedded overtly or implicitly in verbs in English conveys a semantic sense of time in context typically denoting either an ongoing occurrence or a state of its completion. It can be realized either morphologically or lexically, or both, depending on the informational structure of a sentence and the pragmatic context in which it occurs. It essentially accounts for a verb’s action in relation to its beginning, duration, completion, or repetition (Verkuyl, 1993). While largely valid as a conceptual explanation of what verbs generally do in a sentence involving what Kabakčiev (1984, 2019) calls “participants in situations” (typically nominal subjects and objects as well as peripheral adverbial units like prepositional phrases), recent research points to the need to further explore a nuanced connection between grammatical aspects and syntactic constructions which, combined with the former, express temporal properties of a communicative

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event when such temporal properties are by no means static even if the grammatical forms are. The role of semantics and pragmatics, both within and beyond the sentence level, needs to be studied (Binnick, 2020). An example in English may illustrate how the sentence *John has always liked Jet's pizza* may be interpreted for its intended meaning: a) John still likes Jet's pizza (or arguably in colloquial English: John is still liking Jet's pizza); b) John no longer likes Jet's pizza; or c) John will continue to like Jet's pizza in the future. *Present perfect* as the grammatical form thus renders four different temporal dimensions: present state, progressive, perfective, and future. In other words, the intended meaning of a verb in a sentence is the result of the complex interplay between grammatical and semantic components at the sentence level in a pragmatic context of language use. In other words, a grammatical form cannot be divorced from its use, as argued by Keizer (2015) in her functional-discourse approach to the tense and aspect analysis.

The three component categories in the English verb system (tense, aspect, and modality, or TAM for short) interact with each other within a sentence to mark a linear order of time, temporal relations between time points, and the mood or attitude of the speaker (Martins, 2020). These internal structural mechanisms are also intricately intertwined with external factors beyond the sentence level to reveal two types of meanings: 1) intra-sentential meaning, including grammatical meaning which, according to Cruse (2011), must logically be constrained by grammatical elements to allow lexical collocability so that grammar itself can generate intended meaning through lexical collocations, and 2) inter-sentential meaning, that is, discourse and pragmatically generated interpretation of a sentence. While intra-sentential meaning is mostly a function of syntactic categories that are traditionally defined semantically, for example, words in a sentence always refer to "something" in their designated categories—that is, nouns refer to persons or things while verbs denote action, although generative syntacticians would cite the famed Chomskyan quote "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" to argue for a separation of form from meaning. For the TAM system, though, both form and meaning, or more precisely, a form that performs various functions that result in various meanings, reveal the complexity of human communication as it makes a creative use of grammatical forms in TAM to pragmatically displace an event or activity from "here and now" to "there and then", as well as anywhere in-between and beyond. At the surface level, it is typically codified in grammar books and English teaching materials where tense specifies a point in time (*at 3:00 pm, on Wednesday, or a week ago*) while aspect connects a point in time in relation to other time frames, such as duration or the state of completion of an event (Kroeger, 2012). When these forms are deployed in everyday language interactions, how speakers actually displace an event or activity from "here and now" may very well vary in TAM forms they use, such as beginning a kitchen-counter conversation with a friend about a past occurrence by using past-tense verbs only to revert to the present tense when describing that occurrence. This is one of the central concerns about how an Aristotelian syllogistic grammatical theory could go awry when faced with human communication where pragmatic variables often override grammatical forms at times.

Divergence between Form and Function

The aspect system of English intended to stipulate semantic relations of various temporal properties in conjunction with tense and modality is by no means consistent in its description and explanation. Some grammarians propose to separate all structural categories in English into form and function—what something is vs. what something does (Klammer et al, 2013). A form can serve different functions and a function can be served by different forms:

- (1) a) All candidates **articulated** their political views.
 b) All candidates were very **articulate** about their political views.

While a single word form can be used to perform different grammatical functions, in this case, as a verb in the first sentence and an adjective in the second, different word forms (lexical categories) can serve the same function, in this case, adjectival:

- (2) a) The **happy** students celebrated the event.
 b) The **history** students studied the event.
 c) The **satisfied** students cast their vote on the event.
 d) The **protesting** students criticized the event.

Of the four sentences, the bolded verbs in the latter two convey aspectual meanings outside of the typical finite verb form in a predicate: *satisfied* as a past participle while *protesting* as a present participle, both acting adjectivally (function) to describe the noun *students*.

Likewise, a prepositional phrase can perform either an adverbial or an adjectival function in the following:

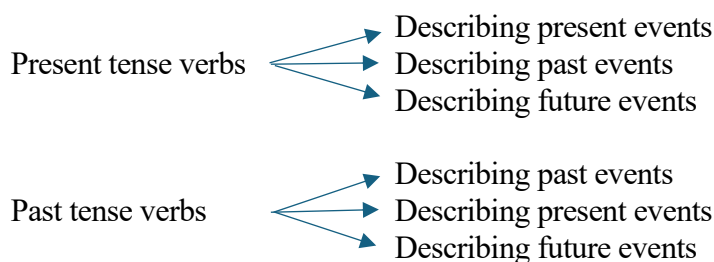
- (3) a) The students **from Côte d'Ivoire** arrived in Acra.
 (adjectival delimiting “the students”)
 b) The students arrived in Acra **from Côte d'Ivoire**.
 (adverbial delimiting the verb)

This form and function dichotomy as a feature of grammatical analysis is a natural part of TAM in English. Tense markers in English on modals and regular verbs stipulate two options of straightforward time points: present and past, but when the binary system is combined with the aspectual markers, a complex structure of what Zhang & Hudson (2018) call *temporal concepts* emerges. They argue that the structure is not merely grammatical but also cognitive as it represents mental constructs. We all live and experience time at present, in the past, or in the future, although the construct of future, incidentally, is not encoded in the English tense system. It co-resides in the modal *will*, which also denotes a degree of mental determination, as implied in *I WILL go to the concert*. It is a straightforward structural system but it is by no means a linear mental representation as the three constructs also interact with each other to demarcate temporal relations among them. For example, *John will have read the book by Wednesday* projects a completed action in the future instead of anchoring the state

of a completed action at the present moment of speaking. In other words, grammatical devices along with temporal adverbial constructions (time adverbs and adverbial clauses) are employed to describe time-related characteristics of actions (Klein 2009).

The use of grammatical structures in real-life communication can, therefore, be constrained or expanded by two factors: what words mean by dictionary definition and what they are intended to mean in pragmatic contexts, the latter prioritizing social principles of discourse over literal dictionary definitions (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). Hence, tense as an inflectional suffix falls into two separate time concepts: present and past, yet such a binary system can be expanded into a pragmatic usage paradigm that sounds perfectly normal for native speakers but confusing to those who learn English as a second language when the following is presented:

(4)



The above tense paradigm essentially discredits the very grammatical labels that most language teachers use to teach English verbs as well as elementary grammar books that describe it. Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murica (2016) report data-based studies which examine the functions of the TAM system in English discourse rather than in isolation, pointing out the divergence between tense forms and their functions in social interactions such as the following:

- (5) a) *The little girl cries her heart out. She lost her teddy bear and is convinced she will never find him.*
 b) *The little girl cried her heart out. She had lost her teddy bear and was convinced she would never find him.* (p. 162)

One can find faults with both versions in terms of grammatical form, but neither is incomprehensible from a communicative standpoint. While the first example sounds disjointed due to the lack of consistency in verb tense use, there are pragmatically plausible explanations: *cries* places the girl at the present time describing her current state of sadness by crying; *lost* conveys a past act; and *is convinced* and *will never find* describe the girl's state of the mind at the present time. The second version appears grammatically consistent in that the past participle phrase *had lost* points to an outcome or completed occurrence at the moment of the girl's crying, and *was convinced* is concurrent with *cried*, that is, the girl cried and was convinced at the same time in the past. The verb form *would never find (him)*, however, could express a hypothetical wish at the present time or a genuine belief in the past that the girl was not going to find the teddy bear. Whether or not she still holds the belief at the present moment is not known.

The two pragmatic scenarios are both communicatively clear and functionally valid albeit grammatically confusing from a pedagogical standpoint since most teachers, as Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia point out, treat the present tense as marking discrete units of time on a linear line: past, present, and the future. The divergence between grammarians who study the tense and aspect system in order to present a consistent and logical description for pedagogical convenience and those who approach the subject from a holistic point of view based on pragmatic factors may dissipate with a fuller account of how the use of grammatical functions can frame authentic communication.

One such bridge is presented by Huddleston et al (2022), who consider the concept of tense in a more nuanced way than ordinarily witnessed in traditional grammar for teachers. Their view of tense and its corresponding explanation of time is in line with the *present tense* → *past event* equation in (4) as a pragmatic possibility in addition to the more traditional *present tense* → *present event*. A verb in its present tense form can be interpreted as perfective, contrasted with the same sentence whose predicative verb is in its past tense:

- (6) a) *I **promise** to call you.* (perfective)
 b) *I **promised** to call you.* (perfective)

It's not clear at this point if it is a case in which two grammatical forms serve the same communicative function, or the interpretation is pragmatically or lexico-semantically derived if more interactional context does not contribute to the intended meaning of both sentences. What interpretation can be rendered if the modal *will* is added to the mix? Has a promise been made?

- (7) a) *I **will promise** to call you.*
 b) *I **would promise** to call you.*

This is an epistemologically intriguing question as the use of tense (*will* vs. *would*) seems to indicate only a degree of perfectiveness rather than a binary choice when fully contextualized towards a commitment to making a telephone call. Clearly, it is not the analysis of the grammatical form at stake; rather, it is the interpretation of the grammatical form and the inferences that can be drawn from the context in which it is used. A subsidiary question is whether the use of the modal is semantically proper or improper. If *promise* semantically already implies a perfective action, adding the futurate modal only obfuscates the status of time of the verb.

The present tense may also be used to relocate a situation into the future, that is, the *present tense* → *future event* part of the equation (4), as illustrated in the following:

- (8) a) *The board meeting **is** at 2:00 o'clock.*
 b) *The train **arrives** tomorrow morning.*
 c) *The new semester **starts** after Labor Day.*
 d) *The summer sun **rises** at 6:15 a.m. tomorrow according to weather forecasts.*

The standard explanation of the futurate constructions, which require a time adverbial, is habituality and pre-arrangement, a result of planning and scheduling or the order of nature. However, nothing prevents an English speaker from adding a futurate modal *will* to each of the sentences, although alternative interpretations may be interjected into the grammatical analysis, such as subjective judgment, assumption, hypothesis, or conjecture.

A futurate construction can also be embedded in subordinate and complement clauses whose verbs are in present tense form:

- (9) a) *The students should purchase the books before **they leave for class.***
(Subordinate)
b) *Don't forget your umbrella in case **it rains in the afternoon.***
(Subordinate)
c) *I hope that **you enjoy your trip to Chicago.***
(Complement)

All the present-tense verbs in the clauses denote future events, although pragmatic contexts play less of a role in interpreting how the present tense form represents the future. It is more of a grammatical constraint on the if-conditional construction. While the future modal *will* can be inserted to add modality to the clause in the third sentence (9. c), it is grammatically redundant as it does not contribute more pragmatic context than the one without it.

However, pragmatics becomes less relevant in the following contrast:

- (10) a) *My sister **will come** next week.*
b) *My sister **comes** next week.*

Huddleston et al (2022) provide a corresponding example of *The course starts next Thursday* to argue for the futurate status of the present-tense verb due to pre-arrangement. When “events are arranged or scheduled in advance” (p. 59), futurate characterizes the verb. *My sister comes next week*, therefore, implies that *my sister* probably has an airline or train ticket and is on schedule to arrive at a certain time in the future. As reasonable as it is as an explanation, the problem is not completely solved. The futurate construction *My sister is coming next week* carries much of the same pragmatic implication as *My sister comes next week*. Both are in present tense, but the verb in the former is in the progressive aspect form, which does not carry its original aspectual meaning of a continuous event or action. Two grammatical forms convey the same meaning in context.

The analysis of the form and function of grammatical constructions, therefore, necessarily involves two considerations. One is the inherent function of the form itself. The present tense is not always about the present and the past tense is not always about the past. The other is the role of pragmatic interpretation of a grammatical form. The present progressive does not always express an ongoing event or activity. Koln & Funk (2011), in describing the differences between verbs in English and those in French, place a specific emphasis on form rather than function, and delineate the tense and aspect forms with select modals to illustrate their corresponding meanings:

- (11) a) *John eats breakfast.* (imperfective)
 b) *John should eat breakfast.* (imperfective)
 c) *John ate breakfast.* (perfective)
 d) *John has eaten breakfast.* (perfective)
 e) *John might be eating breakfast.* (imperfective)

Koln & Funk use above examples to illustrate the five grammatical forms: *eats*, *eat*, *ate*, *eaten*, and *eating* (p.57), each of which has its unique meaning, but they ignore the functions of the modals and auxiliaries that render these meanings possible—an indispensable part of form and function analysis in communication as each must be *appropriately* used in interactional contexts.

Such emphasis on form reflects the view that semantic analysis of sense relations between words is central to understanding the structural nature of meaning, that is, words mean what they inherently mean and tense means what it inherently means. New meanings are generated in sense relations between words through derivation, collocation, or idiomatization (e.g., read, write, or edit the books vs. cook the books, on the books, or be read like a book) (Hurford et al, 2007). This formal perspective, of course, is pedagogically useful as form is more teachable than function. It is easier to explain a verb in its progressive aspect form as an expression of on-going action (*I'm reading the book*—literally) than it is to recast it as a state of being (*I'm reading the book* to mean possession of the book). The former is a form-induced meaning; the latter is a pragmatically generated interpretation (Wu, 2024). In other words, a speaker can always take a grammatical form to mean what it is not lexico-semantically designed or supposed to mean.

Aspect and Aspectual Meaning

Any discussion of aspect and what it exactly does in English and in other languages must entail some sort of conceptual definition and functional description of its use. Yule (2022) points out that one of the unique properties of human language as distinguished from animal communication systems is displacement, which can linguistically remove an event from the immediate context of face-to-face communication into different time frames. A sound theory of aspect necessarily must incorporate observations of its consistent applicability and practical acceptability in real-life scenarios. Aspect as a verb form, acting in concert with tense, conveys a set of complex temporal and spatial relations which captures human activities and events in a time-lapsing world. The term essentially refers to two kinds of information, progressive (ongoing action) and perfective (completed or uncompleted action), encoded into verbs through the use of inflectional suffixes in English. While tense marks the time of an event, defining aspect is more nuanced; it relates to the distribution of an event over time—its duration, state of completion, or somewhere in-between (Kroeger 2012). Verkuyl (2022) painstakingly describes the terminological problems stemming from the Latin tense system, where scholars debated the conceptual necessity of perfectum and imperfectum as natural polar opposites, and yet, the concept does not always translate into perfective or imperfective actions. In teaching and learning, as

Bulatović (2013) recognizes, such terminological confusion leads to a form being interpreted or taught as indicating a function which it may not perform, for example, an action which has not been completed does not naturally or logically mean that it is still ongoing.

From a more practical perspective when language learners are faced with making grammatical choices in everyday speaking and writing, aspect may be viewed as a linguistic category that expresses how an action or event extends over time. Or more precisely, it is about whether something has been completed (perfective) or is still ongoing or habitual (progressive), even though grammatical forms that express them may vary—back to the form and function question. Further complicating the verb aspect are the noun phrases that participate in the action or event, and the nature of participation may lead to different interpretations of perfectivity, such as

- (12) a) *John sold the car last year.* (specificity, perfective)
 b) *John sold cars last year.* (non-specificity, imperfective)

where a verb form (past tense in this case) can tell language learners that its perfectivity is contingent upon the grammatical form of a noun phrase (*the car vs. cars*) and its semantic scope. *The car* is specific in reference while *cars* is not. In fact, John could have sold many cars or zero cars last year to warrant the statement. Naturally, language teachers need to be able to explain how this happens from both a lexico-semantic and pragmatic standpoints. In this case, tense alone, with the help of time adverbials, may convey if an event or action is ongoing, recurring, or has been completed. Aspect plays little role in interpreting the implicit meaning behind each sentence.

Nevertheless, aspect as a grammatical form and phenomenon in the verb system of English presents more challenges in terms of its describability than tense, although the two are intimately connected in conveying a variety of time concepts in sentences. Kabakčiev (2000) acknowledges that a purely syntactic-semantic approach is not sufficient in accurately determining what aspect can do and how it functions in the limited context of a sentence and its immediate discourse; other grammatical components, such as noun phrases and adverbial clauses, play a semantically contributing and complementary role as situation participants in the theoretical framework of compositional aspects (Kabakčiev 2019, Verkuyl 1972, 2022). Understanding how aspect works not only involves formation of relevant concepts, such as the predefined temporal and spatial relations which verbs are supposed to exhibit (e.g., “tense marks time” and “aspect spreads or extends time”), but also contextual interpretation of interlocutor exchanges such as the following:

- (13) Mom to daughter: *Are you hungry?*
 Daughter to mom: a) *Oh, I already ate.*
 b) *Oh, I’ve already eaten.*

Whatever mental process is involved in the daughter’s reply, that is, how the daughter comprehended mom’s question and why the daughter chose (13. a) or (13. b) as her answer, is anyone’s guess without more information about the larger

context surrounding mom's question and daughter's answer and what the daughter's thought processes were. Comprehension alone as a function of language-internal mechanisms cannot account for how linguistic decisions are made. Language-external factors, such as a speaker's general knowledge of a larger social context and personal circumstances, inform the mostly unconscious decision-making process. In other words, the concept of aspect, together with tense and modality, is not merely a description of grammatical categories which occur as functional heads in a sentence (Zagona 2013). It involves morphosyntactic forms and semantic-pragmatic functions (Martins, 2020) in describing and explaining the usage patterns of aspect in real-world communications. In the above example (13), the internal mental process may be one of going back to a time in the past when the daughter ate something (activity) that she recalls and relays it to her mom as a matter of fact, or it could be one in which the daughter situates herself in the present time frame expressing a completed action of eating (state). Either way, the action of eating took place sometimes in the past. A remaining pragmatically driven question would be "to which of the two replies a follow-up statement of clarification can be attached in order to complete the discourse if the daughter wanted to eat more?"

- (14) a) *Oh, I already ate, but I didn't quite finish my plate.*
 b) *Oh, I've already eaten, but I didn't quite finish my plate.*

One may be reading the tea leaves in trying to determine what the speaker *intended* to mean by each of the tense and aspect forms. The daughter's decision to pick verb forms, one being simple past and the other present perfect, is a grammatical choice with a semantic intent. Therefore, defining tense and aspect, or the relationship between the two, is a challenge, and ultimately a semantic analysis (Footh 2023). A more controversial question is whether the simple past and present perfect forms of *eat* are telic without further lexico-semantic and pragmatic contexts, a topic to be further addressed later. It would be curious to find out, through Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) (Golato 2003, Roever 2011) from speakers of English which of the two verb constructions is semantically compatible with the amended information. Perfectivity is not at issue; telicity is.

Xu & Schmitt (2024) offer a different lens through which to further examine perfectiveness of *eat* in a different scenario:

- (15) *?She ate the cookies, but she didn't finish eating them.*

The internal structure of the predicate *ate the cookies* is perfective and telic, but the following coordinate clause says otherwise, which Xu & Schmitt consider semantically infelicitous as the cookie-eating event took place sometime earlier and the event has ended. However, as they point out at the same time, such a standard interpretation of telicity is challenged in Mandarin, as shown below with the English translation:

- (16) *Ta chi-le¹ na jikuai binggan, keshi mei chi wan.*
She eat-le those several cookies, but didn't eat finish.
Translation: She ate those cookies, but didn't finish eating them.

This raises a semantically anomalous dilemma: can a telic construction with a perfective marker end without an endpoint? Or is the concept of perfective not universal across languages due to unique internal lexico-semantic constraints or flexibility in the interpretation of the predicate, in this case, in Mandarin (Soh and Kuo 2005)? Or is *eat* semantically not considered as an accomplishment verb (see Martin, 2011 for an account of accomplishments and achievements)? Or is it a narrowly focused pragmatic context which allows for a more eclectic reading of perfectivity for *any* verb regardless of its lexico-semantic properties?

Perfect aspect is also manifested in contrast with its progressive counterpart. In English, they are each expressed as a phrase structure known as a Main Verb Phrase (Klammer et al. 2013, Koln and Funk 2011):

- (17) NP [be + {-ing} V]
 NP [have + {-en²} V]

The Main Verb Phrase (MVP) can generate two sets of sentences in a binary tense system:

- (18) a) *Deana is living with her parents.* (present progressive)
 b) *Deana was living with her parents.* (past progressive)
 c) *Deana has lived with her parents.* (present perfect)
 d) *Deana had lived with her parents.* (past perfect)

Traditional pedagogical grammar follows formal rules based on the standard terminology in explicating the internal structure of each MVP and what it means. For the verb in (18. a), it is in present progressive form and therefore, the sentence tells the reader that Deana is, at the current moment of speaking, living with her parents as a state. Likewise, the same verb in its past tense form indicates that at a certain time in the past, say, in the month of August of last year, Deana was living at her parents' house, a state of event in the past. However, the simple present, the non-progressive form of the verb, carries much the same temporal concept as its progressive counterpart:

- (19) a) *Deana lives with her parents.* (present time, progressive)
 b) *Deana is living with her parents.* (present time, progressive)

Both express a state of where Deana is, but (19. a) implies permanency while (19. b) conveys ephemerality. If more sentential context is added, such as *Deana is currently living with her parents, but she will soon move to Los Angeles*, the temporary nature of *Deana's living* becomes clearer. Likewise, the amended sentence *Deana*

¹-*le* is a perfective particle in Mandarin that marks completion of an action.

²-*en* denotes the past participle form in English.

currently lives in Los Angeles **and works for a small tech company** should ascertain the state of permanency. The verb *live* shows both stative and dynamic properties at the same time. The semantic intersection of the simple present form and present progressive form as used in (19. a) and (19.b) requires more pragmatic information than what the forms denote at the surface lexico-semantic level. Larger discourse contexts often obscure distinct grammatical boundaries in which each verb form is supposed to perform its unique function *de jure* rather than *de facto*.

Grammatical specifications based on the nature of a verb (telic or atelic) hence are not always aligned with pragmatic implications frequently derived from contextual variables in communication, resulting in a mixed reality for these specifications:

(20) Present progressive = or \neq ongoing action at the present moment of speaking:

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| a) <i>Have you seen my book?</i> | (Where is my book?) |
| <i>Oh, sorry, I'm reading it³</i> | (I have it) |

Present perfect = or \neq completed action relative to the present moment of speaking:

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| b) <i>Have you read the book?</i> | (assuming completed action) |
| <i>Yes, I have, most of it, I think.</i> | (indicating incomplete action) |

Apart from tense markers and auxiliaries (*be* and *have*), modals can also add mood and modality to aspects, such as:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| (21) a) <i>Deana will be living with her parents.</i> | (future progressive—present) |
| b) <i>Deana would be living with her parents.</i> | (future progressive—past) |
| c) <i>Deana will have written the report.</i> | (future perfect—present) |
| d) <i>Deana would have written the report.</i> | (future perfect—past) |

It is terminologically awkward to name an MVP in which a modal, a tense marker, and an aspect marker combine to convey the distribution of an event over time where form and function conflict with each other. The present tense modal *will* places an event in the future where it will be witnessed as an ongoing one; in (21.b) and (21.d), the past tense form *would* could bear no relevance to time if the tense form is used to express a hypothetical event—another form and function discrepancy in the interpretation of meaning and usage.

³ The reply is often given in a prosodic manner that puts the tonal stress on the subject “I” instead of the verb “reading” to indicate possession of the book rather than the act of reading it.

Pragmatics of Aspect and Telicity

As previously shown, there are inconsistencies between grammatical forms and their communicative functions due to lexico-semantic constraints and context-driven interpretations when meaning is determined in a given predicate structure. Verkuyl (2022), trying to disambiguate the terminology of verb aspects, differentiates what a grammatical term is from what that term means in pragmatic reality, much akin to the form and function dichotomy that Klammer et al (2013) emphasize for meaningful analysis for teachers and learners. The binary aspectual system of perfect and imperfect, as Verkuyl points out, breaks down to four terms, two of which are Latin *perfectum* and *imperfectum* referring to form while the other two, *perfective* and *imperfective*, directly address meaning in context, where context is broadly defined as a set of form and function interaction and semantic-pragmatic interface (Yao 2024). Ultimately, a holistic analysis of the semantic relations within an MVP and between an MVP and situation participants will render what is accurately intended to be said by a given sentence.

Successful communication, therefore, impinges on inflectional morphology (tense and aspect), lexical semantics (what a word means in its narrow or broad sense), and pragmatic interpretations. As long as activities, events, and actions of human society all move through time as a matter of the law of nature or are anchored in a temporal/spatial frame, tense as a conceptual construct and aspect as a marker of time relations are universally needed in human communication even if they are not explicitly realized morphologically in all languages. Languages like Spanish and French are considered morphology-rich languages while Mandarin and Vietnamese are classified as being morphology-free. Although English is somewhere in the middle as a result of Old English having shed much of its inflections over time but kept some, the basic tenet of tense and aspect has remained central to the semantic explication of its grammatical subsystems. As such, Lieber's (2022) question of "Why do languages have morphology?" should be rephrased as "How do languages have morphology?" since morphology as a language typology can manifest itself in different ways that cannot readily be compared. Croft (2003) points out, somewhat autologically, that

*the fundamental prerequisite for crosslinguistic comparison is crosslinguistic comparability, that is the ability to identify the "same" grammatical phenomenon across languages. One cannot make generalizations about **subjects** (bold added) across languages without some confidence that one has correctly identified the category of "subject" in each language and compared subjects across languages (p. 11).*

Although Croft approaches the question from the vantage point of typological universals (e.g., the concept of grammatical subject may exist in all languages as a universal feature, but it may be phonetically null, as in Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin). Similarly, aspect as a morphological concept in English may also be phonetically and orthographically realized in different ways to convey progressive and perfective meanings. The earlier example in (16) of how Mandarin can use the perfective particle *-le* to mark the completion (telic) of a yet-to-be completed action (atelic)

illustrates noncomparability with English even though both languages share the basic concept, which is arguably universal across languages.

The tense and aspect system of English relies on its inherent lexico-semantic properties to convey telicity. However, whether a verb in its past tense or participle forms conveys completion of an activity or action is often a function of its semantic features, that of its syntactic environment, and pragmatic interpretation. The earliest known systematic work on semantic classes of verbs was carried out by Levin (1993), who classified over 3000 verbs based on their shared meanings such as “verbs of sending and carrying” (e.g., *send, slide, bring, take, carry*, etc.) and “verbs of psychological state” (e.g., *amuse, annoy, distress, gratify*, etc.). It would be of value to find out what categories of verbs are lexico-semantically perfective inherently or in an accommodating pragmatic context, such as *We breathe air every day* vs. *We breathed air every day*, where the verb tense does not seem to affect perfectivity.

Nonetheless, telicity as a binary notion permits two states as a result of action: perfective and imperfective, as in

- (22) a) *Natsuko finished the project.* (past tense, perfective)
 b) *Natsuko has finished the project.* (present tense, perfective)
 c) *Natsuko will finish the project.* (future, imperfective)
 d) *Natsuko will be finishing the project.* (future progressive, imperfective)
 e) *Natsuko will have finished the project by Friday.* (future perfect, perfective?)

It seems clear that the verb *finish* lexico-semantically implies the end of an action, but its telicity is nevertheless determined by the MVP structures that it carries in a specific pragmatic context of use. There is no guarantee that (22. c) will take the action to an endpoint even if the verb is telic by design. One can also debate (22. e). The action has not been completed yet, but it will be in the future by a declared endpoint. Its telicity, therefore, is a moving target semantically and pragmatically as it could be either perfective or imperfective when a future time is involved.

“Didactic grammar”, as Verkuyl (2022) calls it, entails what he believes to be necessary but perhaps unstimulating approaches to explaining something analytically useful yet pedagogically complex. It ultimately is intellectually enlightening nonetheless when the correspondence between form and function, or a lack thereof, is examined. The first two examples in (22) are telic almost by virtue of the semantic nature of the verb; the latter three require more nuanced, and possibly perplexing explanations such as “atelic at the current moment but telic sometimes at a specified future time”.

Then come the grammatically intriguing challenges in interpreting telicity of what is known as subjunctive constructions:

- (23) a) *Natsuko should have finished that project.* (past, imperfective)
 b) *Natsuko shouldn't have finished that project.* (past, perfective)

The intuitive reaction from most speakers of English will prompt them to conclude that the subject of (23. a) did not complete the task while the subject of (23. b) did, albeit the wrong task, despite the fact that the former is not a negative

sentence while the latter is. In the meantime, (23. a) could paradoxically deem the opposite to be also true: that the subject is hypothesized to have completed the task. In other words, there are two contrary interpretations for an MVP with the same modal in the same tense form and aspectual marking. Huddleston et al (2022) address this semantic contradiction by attributing the negative reading (Natsuko did not finish the project) to the deontic interpretation and the positive reading (Natsuko DID finish the project) to the epistemic interpretation of the sentence. However, the examples they provide (*He must have overslept* vs. *He must apologize*) are analytically too perspicuous to shed a useful light on the subjunctive construction in (23 a.), which is a single aspect form that conveys two completely opposite meanings. It is attribution without a pertinent explanation.

A more convincing account is offered by Mortelmans (2023) about how epistemic modality can be triggered: evidentiality and idiosyncratic discourse-pragmatic features. There must be an indication of inferential evidence for the sentence, combined with the speaker's conjectures backed by world knowledge. If Natsuko was assigned the project by the speaker some time ago and she was told to complete it by a certain deadline, if the speaker knew the size and complexity of the project and the approximate amount of time needed to complete it, and if the speaker also knew Natsuko's good work ethic, then it would be reasonable to believe that Natsuko has finished the project by the deadline. It is evidence and knowledge based. The modal *should* expresses a conjecture based on the speaker's inferential evidence. Telicity, therefore, is not only lexico-semantically determined but perhaps more importantly, it is validated by known pragmatic factors in discourse beyond sentential semantics. This, again, shows that verbal aspect as a grammatical form is inevitably shaped by pragmatic considerations beyond the sentence level in determining meaning and interpretation.

Conclusion

The complex nature of verbal aspects does not lie only in the semantic properties of verbs; they are inherently associated with what surrounds them within and beyond the context of a sentence to facilitate pragmatically appropriate communication. Aspect is a grammatical category with its own systematicity in description such as *verbs in present perfect form describe the present state of an action which occurred in an unspecified time in the past*. However, a grammatical category does not always align with what it is designed to express in pragmatic contexts. That is, the grammatical aspect of *perfect* is not always perfective, and the *present progressive* does not always convey an ongoing action. Likewise, present-tense verbs can be used to relate past events in everyday casual conversations, and past-tense verbs can reference a future, albeit hypothetical, occurrence. Even the division between stative and dynamic verbs can be obscured by their pragmatic functions. Justin Timberlake's jingle *I'm lovin' it* as an advertising slogan for the fast-food chain McDonald's is stylistically voguish and sentimentally expressive. When tourists visiting the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in mid-October exclaim "*I'm liking it!*" when canoeing in a winding stream amidst the forest's magnificently picturesque fall colors there, a grammarian who hears it will need to come up with a category of verbs that denotes emotion, attitude, and

action simultaneously, or perhaps verbs of mental action if cognitive activity counts as action.

In general, aspect is lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic. It is lexical in that words have their own inherent, historically derived literal meanings and grammatical characteristics. It is syntactic in that the meaning of a verb is derived by situation participants. Words alone do not determine the meaning of a sentence; syntactic structures do. Aspectual meaning is also pragmatically shaped by the communicative context in which an aspect form is used by interlocutors for their intended purposes, and such interactive processes are linguistic, nonlinguistic, paralinguistic, and extralinguistic. A sound theory of aspect and aspectuality must account for all four in its analysis and pursuit of universal features.

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