The Origin of Aspect in the Indo-European Languages

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1. Aspect as a term of grammar is of fairly recent date. The Greeks did not know of it although it has often been claimed that the Stoics had perceived its existence,[1]) nor does the Romans' two-class division of the tense-system correspond to it.[2]) In fact the category was first identified in the Slavic languages: in Czech it was discovered in 1603, in Polish in 1778, and in Russian as late as 1805.[3])

The essence of the phenomenon consists in the remarkable fact that a statement like *Last night I read a novel* can in, e.g., Russian be expressed as (a) *včerá ja čitál román* or (b) *včerá ja pročitál román*; (b) informs the hearer that I read the novel to the end, while (a) does not assert this but simply states the fact of reading. In English the difference would normally be rendered by (b) *I read* and (a) *I was reading* respectively. Generalizing we can say that a Slavic verb is in actual fact a pair of verbs: two verbs are needed to describe the same action, process or state dependent on whether the action etc. is considered with reference to its continuance or to its completion. The two classes are in imitation of the Greek grammatical term *eidos* „kind, species" in Russian called *vid*, and the two kinds of verb are called *soveršennyj vid* and *nesoveršennyj vid*, the Western renderings being *perfective/imperfective*, German *vollendet/unvollendet*.[4]) The

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[1]) Lyons 1977, 704, still maintains that aspect was discovered by the Stoics but this has now been definitively disproved by Hiersche, KZ 91, 1978, 275–287, esp. 280, 283, 285. Cf. also Herbig, IF 6, 1896, 171 f., esp. 178: "im Ganzen ist die antike Theorie zu keiner Klarheit gelangt".

[2]) This has been shown by Guy Serbat in a number of studies, see further down fn. 15.

[3]) Cf. A. Mazon, L'aspect des verbes chez les grammairiens russes (Mél. E. Picot, I, 1913, 343–367), 349, 350 f., 353 f. and 358, 360; C. G. Regnéll, Ursprung des slavischen Verbalaspektes, Lund 1944, 5–11; H. Wissemann, Der Verbalaspekt in den älteren Darstellungen der russischen Grammatik, ZSP 26, 1958, 351–375; W. Pollak 1960, 30 f.

[4]) Instead of these terms in recent years the new terms *telic-atelic* (German *telisch-atelisch*) have gained a measure of acceptance; *telic* stresses that the verb implies completion of the action, while the *atelic* verb does not. Cp. Garey, Lg.

2   Oswald Szemerényi

term *vid* itself was by a happy misunderstanding rendered in Reiff's
French translation of the Russian grammar of *Greč* (1828–29) as
aspect,[5]) which became the international term.

Of the two verbs expressing the notion of reading, *čitát'* repre-
sents the imperfective aspect, *pročitát'* the perfective aspect. A fur-
ther peculiarity of the Russian system is that the present of a perfec-
tive verb, which by definition insists on the completion of the action,
cannot be a true present, in fact it is a future. Thus, e.g., beside the
imperfective verb *pisát'* "to write" there is a perfective pair *na-pisát'*;
but whereas the present of the former, *ja pišú* means "I am writing",
the present of the latter, *ja na-pišú* means "I shall write" if the end of
the writing, the completion of it is envisaged; if however I merely
wish to state that I am engaged in writing, then the expression of *I
shall be writing* is *ja búdu napisát'.*[6])

2. Georg Curtius, who was to become famous as the Leipzig pro-
fessor of Greek but 1849–1854 held a chair in Prague, acquainted
himself with this outstanding peculiarity of the Slavic verb shortly
after 1850, and soon discovered that the difference of the two Slavic
aspects found a close correspondence in the opposition of imperfect
and aorist in Ancient Greek. The new terminology made its first
appearance in 1852 in the first edition of Curtius' *Griechische Schul-
grammatik,* and was subsequently in greater detail described in the
Erläuterungen zu meiner griechischen Schulgrammatik, first published
in 1863 (p. 172 f.), and especially in the 2nd edition of 1870 (p.
178 f.). Curtius added to these two classes – for which he proposed
the terms *dauernd* and *eintretend* – a third, i.e. the system of the per-
fect, which he thought could be characterized as *vollendet.* For these
three classes Curtius suggested the common term *Zeitarten* (kinds of
time) to distinguish them from the tenses, i.e. present, past, future,
for which he proposed the term *Zeitstufe.*[7])

33, 1957, 106; and more recently Dahl, On the definition of the telic-atelic dis-
tinction (in: P.J.Tedeschi & A.Zaehnen, edd., 1981), 79–90; A.Galton 1984,
66–68. Note also Brinton 1985, 160; François 1985, 233, 236, 243 f.

[5]) See Mazon 360; Regnéll 10.

[6]) For aspect in Russian see J.Forsyth 1970, pp.8 and 29 f. (see also Flier's
review JL 8, 1972, 167–177); B.O.Unbegaun, Russische Grammatik, Göttingen
1969, 210–232; Jacqueline Fontaine, Grammaire du texte et aspect verbal en
russe contemporain, Paris 1983 (cf. Garde, BSL 80/2, 1986, 155–160); Dahl 1985,
84–89. Note also such special studies as J.Ferrell, The meaning of the perfective
aspect in Russian, Word 7, 1951, 104–135.

[7]) See Curtius, Erläuterungen² 179 f.; and cf. Herbig 185; Pollak 1960, 30 f.;
Gonda 1962, 7–53; Serbat, REL 54, 1977, 325 f.

It is clear of course that in Zeitstufe and Zeitart the word Zeit means different things: in Zeitstufe it means real, physical time, in Zeitart on the other hand it does not have this meaning since both in the imperfect and in the aorist the time is past but the aspect is different. Brugmann suggested therefore in 1886 that instead of Zeitart the term *Aktionsart* should be used, and instead of Curtius' dauernd-eintretend-vollendet the triad *imperfektiv-perfektiv-perfektisch,* terms which are actually still in use.[8])

The subsequent development was decisively influenced by Streitberg who in an impressive paper (PBB 15, 1889, 70–177) tried to show that an aspect, corresponding to that of the Slavic languages, existed in Germanic, more exactly in Gothic, too. He found, amongst others, that verbal compounds, formed with various prepositions, all acquire thereby a perfective meaning but that "die *ga*-Zusammensetzungen in quantitativer wie qualitativer Beziehung die hervorragendste Rolle spielen" (102); furthermore, he thought that he could prove that "das Präsens eines perfektiven Verbums das Futurum vertritt" (126 f.), and that the indicative of the Greek aorist and the indicative of the Gothic preterite, although not completely identical, yet are very closely related (142).

3. Employing the same methods, many scholars discovered aspect in almost all Indo-European languages, and eventually postulated as their common source the existence of aspect in the IE parent language. But this was evidently a quite *unjustifiable extension of the Slavic situation to other IE languages,* and in the last resort to IE itself. For, to begin with, there is neither in Greek nor in any other ancient IE language a system which could be regarded as reflecting the *thoroughgoing dualism of the Slavic verb.* The Slavic verb differs from the verb of any of the other IE languages in that it is in all tenses a system of paired verbs, a phenomenon that is completely unknown in the verbal system of the other IE languages. The difference between the two aspects can be said to be achieved in the Slavic languages by morphologically differentiated variants (i.e. by and large by preverbs or suffixes, only seldom by different verbal stems) while in the other languages, e.g. in Greek, a particular difference is expressed by the use of *different tenses* (i.e. imperfect and aorist) *of the same verb*; note, e.g., on the one hand, the Russian pairs *stróit'* (ipf.) – *postróit'* "to build", *ubit'* (pf.) – *ubivat'* "kill", *govorit'* (ipf.) – *skazat'* (pf.) "speak/say", on the other the absence of one of

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8) Cf. Brugmann, Griechische Grammatik, 1885.

4   Oswald Szemerényi

the aspects in the Greek present (e.g. only an imperfective ποιεῖ),
and likewise the lack of differing verbs in the past tense pair pfv.
ἐποίησε-ipf. ἐποίει.

4. Since we have quoted above Streitberg's view that in Gothic the
preverb *ga-* played an important role in the perfectivization of verbs,
a brief note on this question will not be out of place.

According to Streitberg's theory (82 f.), in contrast to the durative,
i.e. imperfective verbs *saihvan* "see" and *hausjan* "hear" the forms
compounded with the preverb *ga-*, *ga-saihvan*, *ga-hausjan*, have the
perfve. meaning "catch sight of", "perceive" ("erblicken", "verneh-
men"). Since this doctrine is even today without misgivings repeated
from one handbook to the next (cf., e.g., W. Krause, Handbuch des
Gotischen, 1956, 200), it must be stated quite bluntly that this view
has long been shown to be erroneous and untenable: *ga-* alters *not
the aspect but the meaning* of the basic verb. Thus, e.g., *sitan* means
"sit" ("sitzen"), but *ga-sitan* is "sit down" ("sich hinsetzen"); *bairan*
is "to carry" but *ga-bairan* is "carry to the end, to term = bear, to be
delivered of" ("austragen, gebären"); *standan* is "to stand", but *ga-
standan* means "to stop" ("stehen bleiben").[9] Aspect was certainly
not a morphological category in Gothic,[10] and it is beyond all doubt
that Streitberg's thesis is simply not tenable.[11] This negative verdict
applies to the other Germanic dialects also.[12]

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[9] See the excellent treatises by A. M. Lorusso, Aspetto e modo dell'azione
nella struttura funzionale del verbo gotico (Annali, Facoltà di Lettere, Univ. Pe-
rugia, 4, 1966/7, 559–583), esp. 568–570, on pairs of verbs with and without *ga-*
(cf. also 576: the preverb does not alter the aspect but the Aktionsart); and A.
Martellotti, Osservazioni sul gotico *wisan* "essere" e il presente *wisa* (RAL 27,
1973, 207–248), 222–230.

[10] See J. W. Marchand, Gotisch (in: L. E. Schmidt, ed., Kurzer Grundriß der
germanischen Philologie bis 1500, I, 1970, 94–122), 118; and see Mirowicz
quoted in fn. 11. – Since A. L. Lloyd, 1979, again tries to show the existence of
aspect in Gothic it will suffice to point to his treatment (p. 260 f.) of the pair *wri-
kan* "pursue" – *gawrikan* "punish".

[11] It verges on the comical what A. R. Wedel says in his final sentence (Lin-
guistics 123, 1974, 45–58): "Streitberg's aspectual theory is basically correct, at
least when applied to the OHG Isidor". As an antidote cp. A. Mirowicz, Die
Aspektfrage im Gotischen, Wilno 1935, 16, and Trnka's terse statement (quoted
p. 48) that the aspect theory in Germanic is "die größte wissenschaftliche Fik-
tion". Cf. also Goedsche, JEGPh 39, 1940, 189–196; and cp. fn. 10 above.

[12] See for Germanic as a whole Sravnitel'naja grammatika germanskix jazy-
kov IV, 1966, 252, 270; for Old English (and Gothic) Pilch, Das ae. Präverb *ge-*,
Anglia 71, 1953, 129–139; Lindemann, OE preverbal *ge-* (JEGPh 64, 1965,
65–83), 71 f.; and for German, Marchand (see fn. 10); W. Pollak, Aspekt und

5. But for many other IE languages, for which formerly an aspect had been assumed without further ado, it has also been proved in recent times that their alleged aspect was simply a mirage.

Thus, for instance, the oft-repeated view that, in *Middle Persian,* the particle *bē* had a perfectivizing function, has been shown to be untenable by Gilbert Lazard, an expert of unchallengeable authority: the particle has most often the clear meaning *out, away,* i. e. it modifies the meaning, but even where that is not the case, it does not bring about a change of aspect.[13])

Latvian which, being related to Lithuanian and, somewhat less closely, to Slavic, could be thought to have an aspect, has also been shown to lack a grammatical category of aspect.[14])

And even *Latin* is no exception. The thesis, especially tenaciously defended by Antoine Meillet, that Varro's oppositional pair *infectum – perfectum* had an aspectual character, has been disproved in his own homeland by the Sorbonne Latinist Guy Serbat by simply pointing out that the perfect was basically a past tense, not a present as demanded by Meillet's construct.[15]) How difficult it is to see through Varro's construct is shown by the confusion displayed by Felix Hartmann who more than half a century ago insisted that the Latin system "ist in besonderer Weise zustande gekommen und zeigt schon durch ihre Entstehung, daß sie nicht auf die Ursprache zurückgeht" and yet could go on to say: "Die eigentliche Struktur des Systems hat schon Varro im wesentlichen richtig erkannt ... Entgangen ist ihm allerdings die Doppelstellung des Perfekts".[16]) But the fact is, and it is one of Serbat's merits to have convincingly demonstrated this, that there is no such Doppelstellung: the Latin perfect is in fact a past tense, only a few forms preserve – as exceptions – the old meaning of the perfect, e. g. *memini, odi* (Serbat 337 f., esp. 348, known also to Hartmann, p. 167 f. = 343), to which some

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Aktionsart, Linguistik und Didaktik 1970 (2), 163: "Völlig irreführend wäre es jedoch, von einem 'Verbalaspekt' im Deutschen zu sprechen".

[13]) See Monumentum H. S. Nyberg II, 1975, 1–13; and cp. R. L. Fisher, KZ 91, 1978, 219–230 on *pa-.*

[14]) Cf. Hauzenberga-Šturma, KZ 93, 1980, 279–316, esp. 313. I am not discussing Lithuanian but would refer to Galton 1976, 296 f., and Coseriu, in: David – Martin 1980, 24 (both against).

[15]) Serbat, Das Präsens im lateinischen Tempussystem, KZ 90, 1976, 200–221; Les temps du verbe en latin III: Le parfait de l'indicatif actif, REL 54, 1977, 308–352 (repr. Serbat 1980, 12–54), 330 f. (= repr. 32 f.).

[16]) F. Hartmann, Die Verbalsysteme der Schulsprachen, KZ 59, 1932, 145–158 (repr. in Strunk, ed., Probleme der lat. Grammatik, 1973, 318–354), 116 (= 341).

6   Oswald Szemerényi

more exceptional turns can be added, e.g. *perii, uixerunt, fuimus Troes* (Serbat 1977, 349 = 1980, 51). It should also be mentioned that the Yugoslav scholar Miroslav Kravar has also repeatedly tackled the problem in recent times and shown that it is erroneous to ascribe an aspect to the Latin verb.[17]

In *Old Indian* the situation is so unclear that many scholars do not even mention the aspect, cf. Burrow, Sanskrit; Renou, Grammaire védique. Others simply deny the existence of an aspect.[18] There are only a few who view the problem more positively, but then sometimes in a very surprising manner. Thus, e.g., Gonda asserts: "the tendency(!) to distinguish between an 'aoristic' and an 'imperfectic' aspect though often completely absent ... is indeed unmistakable"[19] but this statement will hardly suffice to carry conviction, especially as an aspect that often remains unnoticeable and unrecognizable would be a very strange aspect indeed. But even a more detailed examination of the facts is time and again forced to admit that the ground is very uncertain and unsafe.[20] It must also be noted that, surprisingly, aorist and imperfect have practically turned into the opposite of what they seem to have been to begin with: the aorist can express what lies within the speaker's sphere of experience, what in time is near him, while the imperfect denotes that which has not "happened today",[21] that is to say the (more) remote past.

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[17] See Kravar, Zur Frage des lat. Verbalaspektes. Živa Antika 18, 1968, 49–66; L'aspect verbal en latin à la lumière d'oppositions distinctives, ibid. 25, 1976, 52–61; Problems of the verbal aspect in Latin, Skopje 1980 (in Serbian, non vidi).

[18] Cf. Vekerdi, On past tense and verbal aspect in the Rgveda (Acta Orientalia Hungarica 5, 1955, 75–100), 99: in the Rgveda there is no semantic difference between the forms derived from the present system and those belonging to the aorist system either in respect of *Zeitart* (*Aktionsart, Aspekt*) or in respect of *Zeitstufe* (recent past and remote past)".

[19] See Gonda, Old Indian, 1971, 129, and cp. Gonda 1962, 259f.

[20] Cf. K. Hoffmann, Der.Injunktiv im Veda, 1967, 270–274, and note in particular the statement (274): "die Frage nach Aktionsart und Aspekt häufig unlösbar".

[21] See Gonda 1962, 50 and 272f.; and cf. Hoffmann, o.c., 151, 153f. According to Hoffmann (43f.) the aorist injunctive expresses perfective aspect, the present injunctive the imperfective aspect. But if the injunctive is not part of the IE verbal system but only of Indo-Iranian date (cf. Watkins, Verb 45, and now Kammenhuber, Fs. W. Winter, 1985, 447), then the differentiation must be post-IE. Cf. also Szemerényi, TPhS 1985, 26.–On Ossetic as an aspect-language see Galton 1976, 299.

6. Summing up we can say that *aspect is established* with certainty *in two areas only, in Slavic and in Greek.* But the difference between the two is very great: Slavic has a thoroughgoing dual system which is present in all tenses, while in Greek we find only a difference in the past forms of the same verb.

7. Before we can go any further, we must clarify a further question. As noticed already (see § 2 above), Curtius thought that he could identify three aspects (named by him Zeitarten), the durative, the ingressive, and the perfectic (dauernd-eintretend-vollendet), expressed by the imperfect, the aorist, and the perfect respectively. Rechristened according to Brugmann's nomenclature (i. e. as imperfective, perfective, and perfectic), this system proved highly durable; Kuryłowicz defended it throughout his life, only towards the end does he seem to have changed his mind: "La distinction traditionnelle de *trois* aspects correspondant au système ie. présent-aoriste-parfait est évidemment fausse".[22]

This raises the general question whether it was justified at any time to assume three aspects for any IE language, or for IE itself. To be sure it seems fairly certain that the assumption of three aspects was prompted by the fact that three classes were assumed for the Slavic verb also.

The beginnings of a ternary system seem to go back to the Russian grammarians Vostokov (1831) and Pavskij (1842) who recognized what today would be termed imperfective, perfective, and iterative verbs; the system was codified by being adopted in the authoritative Historical grammar of Buslayev (1858).[23] The system seems to have remained without influence in the Western Slavic tradition. I mean Miklosich's Vergleichende Grammatik der slavischen Sprachen which in volume IV (1874) refers to the difference between two classes of verbs, verba perfectiva and imperfectiva, but without using a comprehensive term like aspect or vid.[24] But in Germany Leskien adopted the Russian view, and presented the tripartite division in his authoritative works,[25] and in his teaching, from which

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[22]) Kuryłowicz, Problèmes de linguistique ie., 1977, 60.

[23]) Mazon 360–365.

[24]) Miklosich, o. c., 275, and cf. Regnéll 12.

[25]) Cf. Leskien, Handbuch der altbulgarischen Sprache (1871; ⁵1910, p.170); Grammatik der altbulgarischen Sprache (1909; ³1919, 215): "von jeher drei Hauptaktionsarten, die man als perfektiv, imperfektiv, iterativ bezeichnet", but p.218 comes the perplexing statement: "Die wiederholt gedachte Handlung (=

8   Oswald Szemerényi

derive the views held by Streitberg (70-76) and Herbig (188-191:
"nach einer Vorlesung Leskiens", SS 1893).

One basic fault of this ternary system is that the iterative class is
regarded as being partly imperfective, partly perfective, and this
leaves in fact a system of two classes.[26]) The fault was eliminated in
1904 by Bogorodickij in his General course of Russian grammar, in
which the ternary system was reduced to a dualistic aspect system
based on the opposition of imperfective-perfective.[27])

This dualistic system is advocated by the Swedish Slavist Sigurd
Agrell also. In his monograph entitled Aspektänderung und Aktions-
artbildung, published in 1908, he declared (p.78): "die beiden
Hauptkategorien des slavischen Zeitwortes, die unvollendete und die
vollendete Handlungsform (das Imperfektivum und das Perfekti-
vum)-diese nenne ich *Aspekte*. Mit dem Ausdruck *Aktionsart*
bezeichne ich ... Bedeutungsfunktionen ..., die genauer ausdrücken,
wie die Handlung vollbracht wird, die Art und Weise ihrer Ausfüh-
rung markieren". According to Agrell (82,121 f.) some twenty differ-
ent Aktionsarten can be distinguished, among them momentan,
durativ, kursiv, inchoativ, präteritiv, terminativ.

Although Agrell's sharp distinction of aspect and Aktionsart
gained an influential advocate in Adolf Noreen,[28]) it has still not sec-
ured general acceptance, although it seems to be gaining ground.[29])
But Brugmann for instance treated even in the last volume of his
Grundriss (II/3, 1916, 68-86) under the heading Aktionsart such dis-
parate classes as transitive/intransitive, causative, desiderative, inco-
hative, diminutive, iterative/frequentative, intensive, imperfective,
perfective, perfectic. And even in more recent times this subsumption

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iterative) kann sein imperfektiv oder perfektiv" which must mean that there is in
fact no third class!

[26]) Streitberg presents the ternary system without taking notice of its illogical-
ity, while Herbig eliminates the fault by incorporating the iterative verbs in the
other two classes.

[27]) See Mazon 366 f.; Pollak 34.

[28]) See the German translation of Noreen's Vårt Språk, Die wissenschaftliche
Betrachtung der Sprache, Halle 1923 (repr. Hildesheim 1975), 415.

[29]) Cf. Regnéll 19; H. Ch. Soerensen, Aspect et temps en slave, 1949, 37-38,
89-99; Pollak, 34; S. Peciar, Aspekt und Aktionsart, Studia Falk, 1968, 209-221;
Raith, Aktionsart und Aspekt (1969), repr. in: Schopf 1974, 61-73; P. Krämer,
Zum Problem der Aktionsarten im Deutschen, Fs. B. Horacek, 1974, 212-225,
esp. 223; Comrie 64; Thelin 1978, 66-68; C. Platzak, The semantic interpretation
of aspect and Aktionsarten, Dordrecht 1979, esp. 67 f.; and the papers of Brinton
and François cited in fn. 4.

under one heading of very different classes seems to be presented without serious misgivings.

Thus, e.g., Lyons lists in Semantics (1977) in the chapter on aspect (703–718) the following seven oppositions (708):

    (i) stative *vs.* non-stative
    (ii) dynamic *vs.* non-dynamic
    (iii) stative *vs.* dynamic
    (iv) durative *vs.* non-durative
    (v) punctual *vs.* non-punctual
    (vi) durative *vs.* punctual
    (vii) progressive *vs.* non-progressive.

He knows, of course, that much of what is listed here is now normally regarded as Aktionsarten but for various reasons he thinks that this term has to be discarded and all the classes listed are better called aspectual characters.

And another well-known theoretician, Eugenio Coseriu also thinks[30] that aspect is not a binary system, as in Slavic, nor a ternary (or quaternary) system as in Kuryłowicz's view; aspect is a collection of "possibilités universelles du langage qui peuvent être réalisées dans les langues", i.e. an open-ended "system", from which the languages choose some, and never realize others. In Coseriu's view the Aktionsarten all are part of this collection, although he knows (18f., 24) that Agrell's main aim was to eliminate them from the problem of aspect. It seems to me that by collecting a (large) number of classes without any internal cohesion we do just as little for a better understanding of aspect as if we postulated that for tense, mood, case etc. we must also make collections extending over all the languages of the world before we can hope to say anything useful or profound about these categories in one language or in a language group.

At the present time we can, I think, take it for granted that, even if other linguistic families have very different verbal systems, for the IE family the labours of generations of scholars have produced at least

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[30] Coseriu, Aspect verbal ou aspects verbaux, in: J. David-R. Martin (edd.), La notion d'aspect, 1980, 13–25. – In this connection note O. Dahl's conclusion (1985, 182): "The major claim made in this book has been that it is possible to reduce the bewildering multitude of tense-mood-aspect categories found in the languages of the world ... to a fairly small set of cross-linguistic categories, characterized by bundles of morphosyntactic and semantic properties".

10   Oswald Szemerényi

one tangible result: aspect is for this group of the type known from
Slavic and Ancient Greek, and the Aktionsarten do not belong with
aspect.

But the situation in Greek has, as we have seen already, tempted
from the beginning to suggest that its perfect represented an inde-
pendent kind of aspect, a third aspect flanking the imperfective – per-
fective classes. But it is hard to see any justification for this view. If
the Greek perfect expressed a state resulting from a past action (e. g.
he has completed the process of dying = he is dead), then it is quite
clearly, normally, a representative of the imperfective aspect, and not
a different kind of thing. We have here the same kind of non-prob-
lem as with the Slavic iterative class which for a long time had been
regarded as a third aspect until Bogorodickij and others decided that
the time had come to declare that that was not the case.[31])

And what can be proved empirically – as has just been done – can
be proved on purely theoretical grounds also. For the opposition
between imperfective and perfective aspects is a privative opposition,
and therefore has only two members. I agree with H. Rix when he
says[32]) that only two aspects are possible since they must be con-
tradictory: "einen dritten Aspekt kann es gar nicht geben" (137); the
perfect is not an aspect but an Aktionsart: "bezüglich des Aspektes
ist das Perfekt einfach imperfektiv" (ibid.).

8. As we have seen (§ 5), so many IE languages have been shown
to have lacked aspect, and (§ 6) so few, in fact only two, have been
proved to have one that it is surprising how it could ever have been
assumed that Indo-European itself had had an aspect system. And
yet only a few years ago Cowgill voiced his view[33]) that "such a con-
trast (= aspect) is certain for Proto-IE, and in my opinion has to be
posited for a prehistoric stage of Anatolian", without offering any

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[31]) On the problem of the perfect see also Szemerényi 1985, 523 f.; and O.
Dahl 1985, 129–153. – A possible solution is presented by Ruipérez, Estructura
del sistema de aspectos y tiempos del verbo griego antiguo, 1954, 45–65 (= 1982,
51–74): perfect vs. present-aorist; and more recently by Comrie 1976, 127: "In
addition to the opposition between Perfect (e. g. *léluka* 'I have loosed') and non-
Perfect, Ancient Greek has, within the non-Perfect forms, an opposition between
Aorist ... and non-Aorist (e. g. imperfect *éluon*)". See also 95–98 on the interrela-
tions between the Ancient and Modern Greek systems.

[32]) See Rix, Das keltische Verbalsystem, in: K. H. Schmidt (ed.), Indogerma-
nisch und Keltisch, Wiesbaden 1977, 132–158; and cf. Raith, Aktionsart und
Aspekt (1969), reprinted in: A. Schopf (ed.), Der englische Aspekt, 1974, 60–73,
p. 71: "Es gibt nur die beiden Aspekte imperfektiv und perfektiv".

[33]) Cowgill, in: Neu-Meid (edd.), Hethitisch und Indogermanisch, 1979, 34 f.

evidence at all. And in view of the situation in Old Indian it is simply amazing that Gonda should have ventured the statement that he did make (see § 5), obviously oblivious of the admonitions he had made a few years earlier: "Another point which emerges from a perusal of the relevant literature is this: how have scholars been able to draw inferences with regard to the prehistoric period, to "original" Indo-European, without having instituted a minute investigation into the Vedic facts".[34])

9. At this point it must be recalled that it has been clear for quite some time now that the aspect of Slavic is demonstrably not something primeval but a fairly late innovation. Thus, in Vaillant's view,[35]) aspect "est récent en slave, et il apparaît qu'à l'époque du vieux slave il n'avait pas encore été complètement étendu aux formes nominales du verbe", and, reviewing the progress down to 1970, Birnbaum declares[36]) that in his view a "full-fledged aspect (is) a relatively recent phenomenon in Slavic (and hence also no more than an emerging category in Common and Early Slavic)". It is less important whether the innovation started with the perfective aspect entailing the grammaticalization of the imperfective counterpart or the other way round the innovation was triggered off by $\bar{a}$-enlarged durative formations used for emphasizing the process which then provoked the development of the oppositive perfective aspect, although the trend seems to be in favour of the latter variant.[37])

It would, naturally, be important to know what time depth one should envisage for the emergence of aspect in Slavic. As far as I can see Felix Hartmann was among the first to surmise that the Slavic aspect was a Slavic innovation, "die also schwerlich über das fünfte

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[34]) Gonda, 1962, 51.

[35]) Vaillant, Grammaire comparée des langues slaves III, 1966, 462.

[36]) Birnbaum, Common Slavic–Progress and Problems in its Reconstruction, Columbus Ohio 1975, 175.

[37]) For the priority of the perfective aspect, see, e.g., Meillet-Vaillant, Le Slave Commun, ²1934, 282–305, and esp. 294: "le rôle 'perfectivant' des préverbes et la constitution des imperfectifs dérivés sont les deux faits sur lesquels repose le système de l'aspect en slave", and Vaillant, o.c., 463. For the priority of the imperfective aspect note, e.g., Maslov 'Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des slavischen Verbalaspektes (ZfSlawistik 4, 1959, 560–568), 566-8; Schelesniker, WdS 4, 1959, 404: "Der slavische Verbalaspekt ist nicht durch Präfigierung, sondern durch Suffigierung entstanden"; and recently F.Kopečny, Zum frühaspektalen Stadium des slavischen Verbums, Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch 30, 1984, 43–50, with the emphatic final sentence: "der Verbalaspekt in den ältesten Phasen der slavischen Sprachen noch nicht vollständig entwickelt war".

12   Oswald Szemerényi

nachchristliche Jahrhundert zurückgeht. Aber selbst wenn diese
Neuerung viel älter sein sollte, bestünde doch kein Recht, sie unbese-
hen in die idg. Urzeit zu projizieren".[38])

Even more detailed is the picture sketched out by H. Galton in his
Aspect book (Skopje, 1976). As he says (293) "there is no evidence to
show that IE had a grammatical category like the Slavic verbal
aspect" and (296) "there is, again, nothing to show that the aspect
ever was a joint Balto-Slavic enterprise; it was a creation of Proto-
Slavic", and, in conclusion, "it is tentatively suggested to place an
area of irradiation for the genesis of the verbal aspect or perhaps
only of its propagation, somewhere in the Ukraine". More precisely,
(299 f.) "Slavs and Iranians ... were in close contact in what is now
Southern Russia (the Ukraine) ... Contact between these two IE
tribes was long and must have been fairly close ... This state of
affairs may be located from about the year 700 B.C. until 300 A.D.
or so, i.e. covering a millennium, during which there was plenty of
time for the germs of the aspect to develop and spread over a vast
territory, with which the Greeks were, as is well known, also con-
nected through their trade and colonies."

10. If all this approximates the historical reality, then it is only
Greek that could be regarded as an IE language that would reflect
an inherited aspect, and could indeed be called upon to testify to the
existence of an aspect in the IE parent language. Obviously, such a
conclusion would be hard to justify seeing that according to a well-
known principle the testimony of at least three independent lan-
guages is required for guaranteeing the ascription of any particular
fact or category to the IE parent language.

It is no doubt for such reasons that Schwyzer was unwilling to go
beyond the following cautious statement (GG II, 1950, 253):

Es geht daher nicht an den slawischen oder ... auch den chronolo-
gisch älteren griechischen Gebrauch ohne weiteres als den gemein-
indogermanischen zu betrachten ... Es ist wahrscheinlicher, daß der
Aspekt des Indogermanischen erst in Ansätzen bestand, die einzel-
sprachlich in verschiedener Weise ausgebildet wurden oder auch
verkümmerten.

Similar considerations have led me also to the conclusion (Einf.
1980, 287) that aspect could not have existed in Indo-European.

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[38]) Hartmann, o.c., 153 (= Strunk 327).

But the facts marshalled also show that it is possible for a language that has no aspect to develop one anew. This has just been demonstrated on the Slavic languages, and further examples are provided within the IE orbit by, e.g., English and Swedish.[38a]) It is therefore also possible that aspect was developed in an old IE language from a non-aspect state. That further means that the existence of aspect in several IE languages is not necessarily to be regarded as an inheritance from the IE parent language, it could have developed as a result of parallel but independent developments in every one of them.

11. Trying to elucidate the origin of the Greek (type of) aspect one cannot fail to note that the most important characteristic of *the Greek aspect,* setting it off from, e.g., the Slavic aspect, is that it *is confined to the past tenses.*

This kind of restriction is by no means rare, in fact it is found in quite a number of languages. The problem is treated in some detail by Comrie (1967: 71 f.):

One of the most interesting relationships between aspect and tense ... occurs when an aspectual distinction is restricted to one or more tenses, rather than operating across the board, independently of tense. It appears that the tense that most often evinces aspectual distinctions is the past tense. Thus ... the distinction between Spanish *hablé* "I spoke" and *hablaba* "I was speaking, used to speak", Latin *ueni* "I came" and *ueniebam* "I was coming, used to come" ... is not paralleled by any comparable distinction in the Present or Future ... In these cases the aspectual distinction is essentially between perfective meaning on the one hand and imperfective meaning on the other. Given that this is the basic distinction, it is not surprising from a functional viewpoint that there should be no similar distinction in the present, since the present, as an essentially descriptive tense, can normally only be of imperfective meaning.

If one tries to find a more precise answer to the problem, one discovers (Comrie 72) that:

Correlations between aspect and time reference in a number of African languages ... suggest that the most typical usages of verbs in

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[38a]) This would apply to Modern Greek also if, in contrast to Ancient Greek, its aspect system covers the whole verbal system, cf. Seiler, L'aspect et le temps dans le verbe néo-grec, 1952, 166: "il n'y a aucune catégorie verbale qui ne soit touchée par cette opposition".

14   Oswald Szemerényi

the present tense are those denoting actions in progress or states ...,
whereas in the past the most typical usages of verbs ... are those
with perfective meaning. If ... it is most natural for a past tense verb
to have perfective meaning, then it is natural for a language to seek
some other means of expressing a past tense that does not indicate a
single complete action, and it is here that the Imperfect/Aorist dis-
tinction enters.

On the strength of such observations Comrie suggests that:

it may well be a general characteristic of human languages to
resort to greater aspectual differentiation in the past than in other
tenses.

This generalization is, I think, to be modified and understood as
saying that in many languages we do not find the kind of aspectual
opposition known from the Slavic languages but only something
that is confined to past forms.

This is certainly the case in the Romance languages, especially in
French, where the past forms *imparfait - passé simple - passé composé*
somehow differentiate the past but find nothing corresponding to
them in the present. The difference is rightly emphasized by H. H.
Christmann:[39])

so darf man den Gegensatz, der im (literarischen) Französischen
... zwischen *présent* und *passé composé* ... besteht, nicht als Gegen-
satz im Aspekt bezeichnen. Dieser Terminus muß vielmehr
beschränkt werden auf den Gegensatz zwischen durativer und punk-
tueller Perspektive, und zu deren Ausdruck stehen den romanischen
Sprachen ... nur für die Vergangenheit zwei Formen zur Verfügung,
nämlich ... *imparfait* und *passé simple,*

and stated no less clearly by Stobitzer:[40])

Von Aspekt zu reden heißt also von den Tempora der Vergangen-
heit zu reden, denn ... nur an dieser Stelle des Tempussystems

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[39]) Christmann, Zum 'Aspekt' im Romanischen (RomForsch 71, 1959, 1–16),
6. Cf. also Pollak 1960, 205: French "bleibt im Gegensatz zur russischen Sprache
die Aspektkennzeichnung auf die Vergangenheit beschränkt"; and Pulgram
1984.
[40]) H. Stobitzer 1968, 2, and cp. p. 34. – Coseriu's view (1976, 157) that "in den
romanischen Sprachen das Imperfekt zusammen mit dem Plusquamperfekt und
dem Konditional Präsens ein Glied einer dreigliedrigen Opposition ist" is not
applicable to our problem.

verfügt die französische Sprache über zwei einfache formale Kategorien (OSz: imparfait – passé simple), die auch im Modus übereinstimmen.

The fact that the Greek aspect is confined to the past tenses, is of crucial importance. For, as is known (see my Einf. IX. 4.4.4), the *ternary system present – imperfect – aorist* is a secondary development, an innovation moreover which probably did not lead over the whole Indo-European area to the creation of the new imperfect. This ternary system was preceded by a simpler *binary system present – preterite.*

The obvious consequence of this fact is the conclusion that at that time an aspect opposition confined to the past was impossible, it could only come into being after the creation of the ternary system. We have absolutely no right to presuppose the existence of an aspect of the Slavic type for languages which do not possess it in historical times; the restriction of aspect to the past, and so the emergence of an aspect of the Greek (or French) type could only be the consequence of the bifurcation of the past form.

12. If, then, the creation of aspect in the Slavic languages was a consequence of certain developments within the present system – triggered off either by prefixation or, more likely, by suffixation – then its evolution was obviously quite different from that which led the Greek verb to its aspect system. But the latter, with the clear predominance of the past forms, reminds one very vividly of the theory developed by *Harald Weinrich* in his book Tempus – Besprochene und erzählte Welt (1964, 3rd ed. 1977). If one is not prepared to accept the thesis that: "Dann gibt es ... sprachliche Aspekte überhaupt nicht, und wir haben die Aspektlehre ohne Rest aus der Sprachwissenschaft zu vertreiben" (155), that does not necessarily mean that his other theses must also be rejected, in particular his conclusion that "der Schlüssel für das Problem des Tempuspaares Imparfait und Passé simple" is to be found "in Unterschieden des Erzählens und der *Erzähltechnik*" (157), and his doctrine that: "Das Imparfait ist in der Erzählung das *Tempus des Hintergrunds,* das Passé simple ist das *Tempus des Vordergrunds*" (159). If we ignore the excessive claim that: "die Reliefgebung nach Hintergrund und Vordergrund ist *die eine und einzige Funktion,* die Imparfait und Passé simple in der erzählten Welt haben" (162), Weinrich's thesis is so selfevident that it can be accepted without further ado for the state of affairs to be reconstructed for Indo-European, or, more precisely,

16   Oswald Szemerényi

for Early Greek. It is not applicable to Slavic whose development
was, as we have seen, not confined to the past forms but, on the con-
trary, started from the present system and took an altogether differ-
ent direction.[41])

13. To sum up. Our investigation has revealed that the two lan-
guages, for which in the IE family an aspect can be acknowledged,
show two rather disparate types of the category. The Greek variant
presupposes the existence of the tenses present-preterite, which then
by bifurcation of the past created the basis for the emergence of
aspect. For the Slavic variant, which was probably triggered off by
the iterative formations gaining the overhand, the priority of the
past forms cannot be asserted with the same confidence; but it can-
not be ruled out altogether.

14. One last problem requires a brief discussion.

A hundred years ago it was fairly commonly held that in the IE
system there were no tenses, only the aspect existed. It will suffice to
quote a relevant passage from Streitberg's often cited paper (PBB 15,
1889, 116): "In idg. Urzeit existierten überhaupt keine 'Tempora',
d.h. keine formalen Kategorien, deren ursprüngliche Funktion es
war, zur Bezeichnung der relativen Zeitstufen zu dienen ... Für die
Gegenwart war eine besondere Bezeichnung überhaupt nicht vor-
handen ... Die Vergangenheit aber ward durch ein zur Verbalform
tretendes temporales Adverbium ausgedrückt: das Augment é." Two
generations later we are still told by Schwyzer (II 253): "im frühen
Idg. eine ausgebildete grammatische Kategorie Tempus noch nicht
gab" since "ein Volk und eine Sprache, die in ihrer Gegenwart aufge-
hen, brauchen diese nicht durch besondere Verbalformen aus-
zudrücken". And in 1964 Kuryłowicz (Inflectional categories, 130)
declared: "The IE verbal system was based on the contrast of
aspects. Expression of tense was notoriously posterior to this oppo-
sition."

Naturally, there were some who disagreed. Thus, e.g. Pedersen,
cricizing some items of a system of Aktionsarten concluded: "Für die
idg. Ursprache haben wir also nicht ein System von Aktionsarten,
sondern ein System von Tempora anzusetzen."[42]) And Vaillant,

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[41]) On or against Weinrich see Szemerényi 1969, 167; W. Pollak, Le français
moderne 44, 1976, 289–311; J.-M. Adam, La 'mise en relief' dans le discours nar-
ratif, ibid. 312–330.

[42]) Pedersen, Zur Lehre von den Aktionsarten (KZ 37, 1904, 219–250), 220.
Quite recently Agud 1985, 71, has also surmised the priority of tempus but again
without proof.

faced with the surprising situation in Hittite (BSL 40, 1939, 5–30), declared: "La flexion du hittito-indoeuropéen est bâtie essentielle-ment sur une opposition du présent et du prétérit: il n'y a pas de rai-son de supposer en indoeuropéen une antériorité de la catégorie de l'aspect sur la catégorie du temps" (30), and even more decidedly in the summary (5): "en indo-européen, le temps est antérieur à l'aspect".

But in these and similar pronouncements a proof of the view advanced is wanting. It is only now that we have cogent evidence enabling us to decide the issue. As we have seen, the Slavic aspect can be dated, even if only roughly, around the beginning of our era, in any case hardly before 500 B.C. The Greek aspect must be much earlier but we can give no absolute dates. But we know that its emer-gence presupposes the split of a single past form into two: into an imperfect and an aorist.[43]) In other words: the past form was in exis-tence before the aspect. Quod erat demonstrandum.

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[43]) This split later led to the creation of corresponding modi. From our point of view it is important to note that the modi do not share with the aorist indica-tive the temporal character but do express aspectual differences as is particularly clear in the prohibitive constructions (eg. μή ποίει – μή ποιήσῃς). But these nice-ties were no doubt created rather late since originally there was only one subj., opt., impv., see on these points my Einf. 239, 284 f., and note that according to Strunk, InL 9, 1986, 144, the optative was part of the IE verbal system whereas the subjunctive was a late innovation, see now also his forthcoming paper Zur diachronischen Morphosyntax des Konjunktivs, in: A. Rijksbaron (ed.), Proceed-ings of the International Colloquium in Commemoration of the 150th anniver-sary of the publication of Raphael Kühner's Ausführliche Grammatik der grie-chischen Sprache, II. Theil: Syntax, Amsterdam, April 1–4, 1986, to appear Amsterdam 1987, ...

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