1 Aspectual studies in English: trends and problems

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this work is to provide a 'microsystemic analysis' (Friedrich 1974:1) of aspect in English, and of two aspectual subsystems in particular. It is hoped that this will lead to a clearer understanding of the function of aspect in English and, ultimately, to a better conception of the underlying semantic category of aspect. This work also provides a diachronic perspective on aspect in English which will contribute to knowledge about the development of aspectual systems and, at the same time, call into question certain assumptions about language change in general.

Aspect is a topic of current interest in many areas of language research, including linguistic theory, philosophy of language, language acquisition, and language-particular studies, yet the study of aspect presents a number of difficulties. There seems to be more uncertainty about the very definition of this grammatical category than any other. There is no consensus about the object of study: widely diverse phenomena are subsumed under the label of 'aspect'. Approaches to the study of aspect also diverge, with some focusing on overt grammatical forms and others focusing on lexical or semantic features of aspect. In English, the analysis of aspect seems to pose particularly acute problems, since formal markers of aspect are not predominant in the verb – English is a 'tense', not an 'aspect' language – and since lexical markers of aspect do not appear to constitute a coherent system.

These problems are not insurmountable. The following work will seek to demonstrate that if one recognizes the dual nature of the aspectual category, identifies the variety and pervasiveness of aspectual forms, and comes to understand their specific contribution to aspectual meaning, the study of aspect in English is a possible, and rewarding, endeavour.
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1.1 A definition of aspect

The term aspect corresponds to the Russian word vid ‘view’ introduced into Slavic grammar in the early nineteenth century (Gonda 1962:9).¹ In the history of aspect scholarship, the term has been used in diverse ways, and no single definition of the concept has come to be accepted. In the most general sense, aspect is ‘a way of conceiving the passage of time’ (Holt’s definition; see Friedrich 1974:2). On the one hand, Germanic scholars generally follow Karl Brugmann’s simple definition: ‘the manner and way in which the action of the verb proceeds’ (see Gonda 1962:12–13). Similar definitions may be found in Slavic grammars, e.g. ‘aspects expresses the way in which a process takes place in time or is placed in time’ (definition of Peškovskij; see Gonda 1962:10). Roman Jakobson (1971:130–47), writing on the Russian verb, suggests that aspect ‘deals with temporal values inherent in the activity or state itself’, whereas Paul Friedrich (1974:1), writing on aspect in Homeric Greek, suggests that aspect ‘signifies the relative duration or punctuality along a time line’. One writer, claiming to put the matter simply, says that aspect ‘is the name for the function of discriminating the kinds of temporal “things” which may be (linguistically) “located” in the sequential order of time’ (Taylor 1977:164–5).

On the other hand, a different kind of definition is also quite common. Etsko Kruijtinga (1931:221) suggests that aspect ‘expresses whether the speaker looks upon an action in its entirety, or with special reference to some part (chiefly the beginning or end)’. Such definitions may also be found in Slavic grammars, e.g. ‘aspects express the moments or stages of the process’ (Rasmussen’s definition; see Gonda 1962:11). In a monograph on aspect, Bernard Comrie (1976:3) says that ‘aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation’. More recently, Marion Johnson (1981:152) defines aspect as ‘reference to one of the temporally distinct phases in the evolution of an event through time’.

The result of this confusion of definitions for aspect scholarship is best summed up by Gonda (1962:21):

[The confusion has] led scholars to class in the same category a variety of linguistic phenomena which partly concern the grammatical function of verbal forms, partly the semantic differences between related formations different in suffix, prefix etc., partly differentiations of one and the same verb, partly lexical distinctions between different verbs.
A definition of aspect

1.1.1 Aspect vs. aktionsart

One can, in fact, make sense of this widely divergent array of definitions if one recognizes that two quite different phenomena are here being termed aspect: namely ‘aspect’ and ‘aktionsart’. The second set of definitions given above concerns ‘aspect’ in the strict sense. Aspect is a matter of the speaker’s viewpoint or perspective on a situation. The speaker may choose to portray an event as completed (perfective aspect), or as ongoing (imperfective aspect), or as beginning (ingressive aspect), continuing (continuative aspect), ending (egressive aspect), or repeating (iterative or habitual aspect). The first set of definitions given above concerns not the point of view of the speaker, but the inherent nature of the situation portrayed: whether it is static or dynamic, punctual or durative, bounded or unbounded, continuous or iterative. Aspect defined in this way is more correctly called by the German term Aktionsart or ‘kind of action’. Aktionsart is an indication of the intrinsic temporal qualities of a situation; for Comrie (1976:41–51) aktionsart is ‘inherent or semantic aspect’.

Although the distinction between aspect and aktionsart is often ignored or blurred, or made in different ways (see Comrie 1976:6–7n.), it is a useful distinction of long standing. For Gonda (1962:29), the disregarding of this distinction is ‘much to be regretted’. Throughout the history of aspect scholarship, strong arguments have been made from time to time for such a distinction (e.g. Goedsebe 1940:189–96; most recently, Smith 1983; see also Gonda 1962:23–4). The differentiation of aspect and aktionsart has, in fact, been approached from a number of different directions: in terms of the contrasts ‘grammatical’ vs. ‘lexical’ aspect, ‘subjective’ vs. ‘objective’ aspect, aspect vs. ‘character’ (Kruisinga 1931:230–7), and ‘viewpoint’ vs. ‘situation’ aspect (Smith 1983). Aspect is grammatical because, broadly speaking, it is expressed by verbal inflectional morphology and periphrases, aktionsart by the lexical meaning of verbs and verbal derivational morphology. Aspect is subjective because the speaker chooses a particular viewpoint, whereas aktionsart, since it concerns the given nature of the event and not the perspective of the speaker, is objective. Aktionsart is the character of the situation named by a verb.

This work will argue that the distinction between aspect and aktionsart is crucial, and that the aspeftual interpretation of a sentence depends on an interaction between these two categories (see 1.6).
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1.1.2 Terminological confusions
Along with the lack of a clear distinction between aspect and aktionsart, there have been many terminological confusions in scholarship on this topic. Aspect, aktionsart, and even tense terms have been used interchangeably, and few have been precisely defined. As an example, Table 1.1 presents some of the overlaps and confusions in the terminology of aspect. Aktionsart terminology has presented fewer difficulties (see 1.5), though even here there is no consensus. A consistent set of aspect and aktionsart terms will be presented in section 1.7. A further problem in terminology is that there is no cover term encompassing both aspect and aktionsart. For the purposes of this study, I will use aspectual in this inclusive sense, reserving aspect for the simple category.

1.2 Trends in aspectual studies in English
Despite the confusion in aspectual terminology, the complex nature of the aspectual category, and its apparent unimportance in English, both aspect and aktionsart are rich areas of study in English. In works on English, the clear formal markers of aspect, the progressive and perfect phrases, have traditionally been the focus of attention. The meanings of both periphrases have been the subject of much study – and considerable debate – in traditional and structural accounts of the English verb. Beyond the fully grammatical markers of aspect are several partially grammaticalized markers which have not been a central part of aspect studies, in part because they are not considered to form a coherent system of aspect marking. These include verb–particle combinations (or ‘phrasal verbs’, see 4.0) and aspectual quasi-auxiliaries (or ‘aspectualizers’, see 2.0). Phrasal verbs seem to be a productive, though not consistent, means in Modern English of expressing aspectual distinctions (see 4.1.2 and Appendix B). The addition of a particle to a simple verb is thought to lend perfective meaning (drink up, calm down, wait out, die off, pass away, carry through, bring about, put over), ingressive meaning (hurry up, lie down, doze off, set out, pitch in, go away), or continuative/iterative meaning (hammer away, drive on). Aspectualizers form a somewhat better developed system for expressing aspectual distinctions, with ingestive forms such as begin, start, or come to do something, egressive ones such as finish, quit, stop, or cease doing something, and continuative/iterative ones such as keep on, go on, or continue doing something. Because of their lack of full
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Table 1.1 Confusion of aspect terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>perfective aspect</td>
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<td></td>
<td>punctual</td>
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<td>aorist</td>
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<td>imperfective aspect</td>
<td>imperfective</td>
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<td>progressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>perfect aspect</td>
<td>perfect</td>
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<tr>
<td>ingressive aspect</td>
<td>inchoative</td>
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<td>ingressive</td>
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<td>continuative aspect</td>
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<td>progressive</td>
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<td>egressive aspect</td>
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<td>terminative</td>
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<td>habitual aspect</td>
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<td>frequentative</td>
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auxiliary status, however, the aspectualizers have received little attention within the context of aspect studies. The aktionsart of English verbs has not generally been the subject of study in traditional grammars nor, until recently, in linguistic accounts. Work on this topic has been conducted by philosophers of language, who have attempted to establish typologies of the lexical verbs of English based on their temporal meanings. The simplest such typologies distinguish between ‘durative’ verbs and ‘punctual’ verbs. Although formal criteria are often used in developing the typologies, these studies are in general fairly unsystematic accounts of verb semantics in English.

One can thus distinguish two disparate trends in aspectual studies: one concentrates on the grammatical meaning of verbal forms, while the other concentrates on the lexical meaning of verbs and their complements. The subsequent sections of this chapter will look in more detail at both of these strands of aspectual scholarship in English, pointing to shortcomings inherent in each. The separation of these two strands has led to a failure to recognize the pervasiveness of aspectual distinctions in the sentence, as well as to a neglect of the important interaction of aspect and aktionsart. This critical re-examination of earlier studies will be followed by an
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attempt to formulate a coherent framework for treating aspect and aktionsart.

1.3 Formal approaches to aspect in English

In grammatical and linguistic scholarship, the approach to aspect in English has generally been a formal one; that is, it has focused on those distinctions made by verbal inflections or auxiliaries. The aspectual categories recognized in such studies are only those given clear formal expression. Since formal distinctions of aspect are not widespread in English, this approach has limited aspect studies to the perfect and the progressive, and although there is an immense literature, there still exists little agreement about the meanings of these periphrastic forms. Surprisingly, the aspectual nature of the simple forms has been virtually ignored.

1.3.1 The perfect and the progressive

In English, the progressive is carefully distinguished from the simple form; not only does it have a wider range and greater frequency than in other Germanic languages, but it is both contrastive and obligatory:

(1)  
   a. He walks to work vs. He is walking to work 
   John is a fool vs. John is being a fool 
   b. She writes a letter vs. She is writing a letter 
   Now I see him vs. Now I am seeing him

All of the sentences in (1) contain present tense forms, but the progressive and simple forms in the sets of sentences in (1a) have different readings, whereas the sets in (1b) show that with certain verbs, either the progressive or the simple form is highly restricted contextually (see 1.6.1). Unlike perfects in other European languages, the English perfect has not become a preterite, but contrasts with it:

(2)  
   a. Bill {has lived/*lived} in this city since 1960 
   b. Mary {*has worked/worked} on the problem yesterday

Though the temporal contexts in (2) are all past, different adverbials require either the perfect or the simple form. Therefore, neither the perfect nor the progressive seems to fit simply into a tense system. If these verbal phrases do not express tense distinctions, some scholars have argued, they may express aspectual distinctions: that is, the progressive may impart durative or imperfective aspect to a verbal expression and the
perfect may impart completive or perfective aspect. However, other scholars have disputed the aspectual significance of these forms and have proposed a variety of meanings. Aspectual meanings for the progressive include duration, limited duration, and incompletion, whereas non-aspectual meanings include contingency or mere occurrence, pure or 'overt' activity, and simultaneity. Such is the controversy over the meaning of the progressive, that Jespersen (1924:277–8) prefers the neutral term ‘expanded’ tense to ‘progressive’, ‘continuous’, or ‘definite’ tense. Aspectual meanings for the perfect include result, ‘current relevance’, completion, and ‘transcendent’ aspect, whereas non-aspectual meanings include indefinite past, ‘embedded past’, and ‘extended now’. Several scholars reject the idea that the perfect in English is either a tense or an aspect, but instead consider it a distinct grammatical category.

1.3.1.1 The progressive. The progressive is a verbal periphrasis consisting of a form of the auxiliary be and the present participle of the main verb. If aspect is admitted as a category of English at all, then the progressive is generally considered the clearest, sometimes the only, exponent of that category.

As be has little meaning other than that of duration or existence, and as the present participle also carries durative force, the most widely accepted aspectual meaning of the progressive is that of duration. Paul Friedrich (1974:7, 21, 35), in arguing for the distinction durative/non-durative as the primary aspect distinction in Indo-European, points to the English progressive/perfective (simple) distinction as a convenient modern example. Poutsma (1926:290, 315–48), Curme (1931:373–7), Kruisinga (1931:237) and Palmer (1974:35, 55–8) all see duration as the primary meaning of the progressive. Other scholars, such as Joos (1964:106–15) and Twaddell (1963:9–12), have claimed that the progressive indicates not duration, but limited duration. For Joos, the progressive is a marker of the ‘temporary aspect’, as opposed to the ‘generic aspect’ of the simple form. In the temporary aspect, the limitation on duration is a matter of probability. He portrays the two aspects as follows:

![Diagram showing temporary and generic aspects]

[a] represents states and processes, [b] asservations (i.e. performative verbs) and demonstrations: I.B.
Most recently, Mufwene (1984:20ff.) has argued that the progressive assigns the meaning of ‘transient duration’. Otto Jespersen (1932:178ff; cf. Sweet 1898:97), on the other hand, suggests that the expanded tense does not express duration in itself, but rather relative duration compared with the shorter time of some other action, usually couched in the simple tense. The expanded tense forms a ‘temporal frame encompassing something else’; hence, it can also suggest the middle of something or the element of relative incompleteness.5 In the following, Jespersen graphically represents the idea of the expanded form as time frame (1932:180):

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However, the ‘temporal frame’ effect occurs only when a point of time (now) or punctual event (the moment of my entering) is contrasted with a durative situation, as Leech points out (1971:17–18). Normally there is no such frame.6

Closely connected with the meaning of duration is that of incompleteness, since a situation which is enduring is generally not complete. Thus, several scholars argue for the progressive as a marker of imperfective aspect (e.g. Close 1962:70–106). Marchand (1955) suggests that the progressive in English denotes an uncomplicated action viewed in the dynamic process of happening, i.e. an imperfective single action. More often, the proposed meanings of duration, limited duration, and incompleteness are variously combined. For Kruisinga (1931:236–7, 340–67) and Charleston (1941:116–17), duration is the primary meaning, incompleteness the secondary; duration implies incompleteness. For Sweet (1898:96–9), however, incompleteness is the basic meaning of the progressive both in Old and Modern English; the idea of duration is a ‘natural result’ of the idea of incompleteness. Leech (1971:15) explicitly combines all three meanings: the progressive indicates duration (as opposed to the ‘instantaneous present’); it indicates limited duration (as opposed to the...
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'unrestrictive present'); and it indicates that the situation need not be complete.

Several scholars have rejected the usual interpretation of progressive as a marker of durative or imperfective aspect. Their arguments rest on two premises: (a) that the present is not a mathematical point but must have duration (cf. Jespersen 1924:258); and (b) that the simple form of the verb can express duration. Hatcher (1951) argues that the progressive expresses either ‘overt’ or ‘developing’ activity or the ‘involvement of the subject’. Bødelsøn (1936/37), in a similar argument, claims that the expanded form describes actions themselves; the actions, not the progressive, may call up a sense of duration. Taking the simple tense as primary, Calver (1946) claims that the progressive expresses ‘mere occurrence’ or ‘mere activity’. For Comrie (1976:32–40), the usual description of the English progressive as ‘situation in progress’ is inadequate; even the definition of continuous meaning combined with non-stativity does not entirely capture the meaning of the form in English. Like Calver, he suggests a new definition of ‘contingent situation’.

Much of the confusion concerning the meaning of the progressive stems from the use of the term durative, which is, strictly speaking, an aktionsart term referring to an inherent temporal feature of a situation (see 1.5.1.2). Hatcher (1951:258–9) seems to see this confusion clearly:

To say that [durative aspect] is emphasized by the progressive is to say simply that this construction presents an activity as in the midst of happening: as having begun but not yet ended. It has no basic connection with the actual extent of duration of activity . . . Nor is there an inevitable connection between presentation of aspect in a given context and the aspectual suggestion of individual verbs in isolation (the ‘imperfective’ chew vs. the ‘perfective’ swallow).

The traditional name, progressive, comes much closer than durative in expressing the meaning of this form, which portrays a situation as progressing, that is, continuing, ongoing, or developing, at a certain time. Normally, a situation so portrayed must be durative in nature, though punctual situations, if repeated, may be viewed as ongoing. In addition, a situation so portrayed must be inherently dynamic (non-stative), because static situations are incapable of change or development. Finally, a situation in progress is one which is not complete. Thus, I would argue, the English progressive is indeed a marker of imperfective aspect (see 1.6.1.1 and 1.7 for a fuller discussion of the meaning of the progressive).

A second source of difficulty in discussions of the meaning of the progressive is that scholars try to account, in the basic meaning of the
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form, for special meanings which result from the combination of the progressive with the aktionsart of the verb, for example, the meaning of contingency or temporariness resulting from the combination of progressive with stative verbs. These meanings are best treated as a result of the 'compositional' nature of aspect, not as an intrinsic part of an individual form (see 1.6.1.1).

1.3.1.2 The perfect. In English, the perfect is a verbal periphrasis consisting of a form of the auxiliary have and the past participle of the main verb. Semantically, the perfect has a dual nature: 'besides the purely temporal element it contains the element of result' (Jespersen 1924:269; see also Poutsma 1926:209). In addition, the several clearly different uses of the perfect in Modern English have caused difficulty for scholars in determining the one unifying function of this verbal form. Table 1.2 categorizes the generally recognized meaning of the perfect, presenting the various names proposed by different scholars.

The resultative perfect (Type A) refers to a past situation which has present results, effects, or relevance (3a). The continuative perfect (Type B) refers to a situation which began in the past and persists up to, and perhaps even beyond, the present (3b). The perfect of experience (Type C) refers to a situation which has occurred once or repeatedly before the present (3c), and the perfect of recent past (Type D) refers to a situation which occurred in the immediate past (3d):

(3) a. I have eaten lunch (and am therefore not hungry now)
   He has caught a cold (and hence cannot come to work)
b. We have known him since he was a child
   He has sung in the choir for years
c. I have been abroad several times
   I have read that novel
d. John has just left
   Bill has recently received an award

The four types of perfect recognized by both McCawley (1971:104) and Comrie (1976:56–61) can, in fact, be reduced to two, the resultative and continuative perfects. Types C and D are best understood as subcategories of the resultative perfect. In the case of the perfect of experience, the focus is on intangible rather than tangible results. Although the intangibility of certain results has led many scholars to reject definitions of the perfect in terms of results as 'untenable' (Bauer