TENSE AND ASPECT IN ENGLISH
– WHAT DID WE LEARN BY COOPERATING?

by
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In the 1990's the author cooperated with Carl Bache on a grammar of English. It turned out that the views they had previously arrived at individually on tense and aspect could be combined by operating with a fused system involving four ordered choices resulting in sixteen tense-aspect forms. In accounting for the meanings of these forms they also agreed to operate with a functional-instructional view. As a result, their analysis of tense and aspect differs from those proposed in other grammars. If that constitutes a step forward, it illustrates that cooperation may lead to insights that it would be difficult to reach in splendid isolation.

1. Introduction

One fine day in the early 1990's I received a letter from Carl Bache in which he wrote that he would like to discuss a matter of professional interest with me. So could he come round? Already then I knew Carl well, for in the seventies and eighties we had met on and off in the home of his predecessor as professor of English language at Odense University, Hans Hartvigson. Like many others I was impressed by the quality of Carl's work, so in 1985 it felt natural to go to Odense – where I had been an external lecturer from 1970 to 1971 – to attend the defense of his doctoral dissertation. Already a year before he had been appointed professor – at the age of 31 – so it didn't come as a surprise that he handled his defense very well. At the ensuing party for family, colleagues and friends everybody was therefore in high spirits.

What Carl wanted to discuss turned out to be a matter of no small importance: Would I be interested in writing a comprehensive

grammar of English with him? In his view such a book was needed, particularly for non-native speakers, and he evidently thought that he and I would make a good pair as authors. I don't remember if I said yes right away, but I certainly knew that in case I did so, I would get the best possible partner for such a project. At any rate I soon accepted his proposal with alacrity and began to dispatch as much business from my desk as I could.

In 1993 we had a stroke of luck. That year the Danish Research Council for the Humanities launched five foreign-language projects. Carl and I were commissioned to write the English grammar for this purpose, and this meant that we were largely relieved from our teaching obligations at Odense University and the Copenhagen Business School. In periods we were also able to do our research abroad. In 1993-4 I was a visiting fellow at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, and while I was there, Carl paid me a visit and gave a guest lecture in the linguistics department of Cambridge University. Around the same time he himself went to Australia and worked at Macquarie University and the University of New South Wales.

After having collaborated for five years we published our grammar in 1997. Throughout that period of time Carl was the best collaborator I could possibly have – helpful, constructive, critical, well organized, hard-working and totally reliable. For that I am truly grateful, and I have never regretted that I went along with Carl's idea when he presented it to me many years ago. Not only was our collaboration in itself rewarding; it also led to a friendship that I greatly value.

2. A sketch of our grammatical backgrounds

While there were many areas of English grammar neither of us had done research on when we began collaborating, we had both been engaged in the study of verbal categories. In his doctoral dissertation

– *Verbal Aspect* (1985) – Carl had explored the category 'aspect', both generally and in English. Furthermore, he had begun writing a book on verbal categories, the second revised edition of which came out in 1997: *The Study of Aspect, Tense and Action.* I had written a paper on the future tense (1988) and a book on tense and mood in English (1990). The interesting question was therefore how against this background we would come up with a joint chapter on English verbals.

In my article "Has English a future?" I suggested that it is justified to recognise a future tense, not only as a universal possibility but also in English. Furthermore, I argued that in English this tense is manifested by non-volitional WILL + V, illustrated by an example like *He will be more peaceful when he wakes*, where a future state is claimed to be certain. At the time this analysis was decidedly non-mainstream, as it still is today. Most English grammars operate with only two tenses (present and past) and analyse the auxiliary WILL as a modal verb in all cases. In those cases where volition is not expressed, as in the example just given, Quirk et al. in their influential grammar (1985) state that WILL is a modal verb which expresses prediction. And according to Biber et al. (1999), similarly, there is no formal future tense in English. In examples of the type given above, WILL is assumed to express prediction, and it is claimed that the distinction between volition and prediction is often blurred. Several linguists are of the opinion that statements about the future do not have truth value, i.e. are not descriptive or assertive utterances, and that there can therefore be no future tense.

Briefly, my own arguments in favour of recognizing a future tense realised by non-volitional WILL + V were (and are) that although this auxiliary is a squatter in the modal paradigm and thus seems to belong to the class of modals together with *can, may, must, shall*, it expresses future time categorically and differs from volitional WILL by not normally occurring in conditional and temporal subclauses and by occurring in passivised sentences (e.g. *I will be brought back in disgrace*), before BE + V + *-ing* (e.g. *They will be watching telly*)

and before HAVE + V + -ed (e.g. *Jones will have finished the job*). Unlike Huddleston, who writes that "it would certainly be impossible to draw any reasonably clear boundary between an allegedly purely temporal use and others" (1984: 174), I claimed (and claim) that it is not really difficult to separate temporal from modal WILL, and I illustrated this with examples of the WILL-constructions found in an English novel – around 200, approximately two-thirds of which contain temporal WILL.

In my book from 1990 I operate with eight tenses in English: present, present perfect, past, past perfect, future, future perfect, future past and future perfect of the past. In so doing, and in my account of the meanings of these tenses, I was particularly influenced by Reichenbach (1947), but also by Comrie (1985), who defines tense as "grammaticalised location in time". Like my recognition of future tenses, my recognition of perfect tenses was clearly non-mainstream. Both Quirk et al. and Biber et al. interpret the verb forms with HAVE + V + -ed as aspectual and operate with a perfect(ive) aspect. As different members of the same category cannot appear simultaneously in the same paradigm, however, the perfect has to be an aspect of a different order from the progressive aspect. So what we typically read in mainstream descriptions of English grammar is that the distinctions made in the verb phrase are present versus past tense, perfect versus non-perfect aspect and progressive versus non-progressive aspect, to which may be added the distinction between unmarked and modal (e.g. *understands* versus *will understand* or *can understand*).

In his *Verbal Aspect* Carl Bache initially points out that both the perfect versus non-perfect forms and the expanded versus non-expanded forms are "worthy of discussion with respect to aspect" (1985: 174) in that they cannot be accounted for satisfactorily by means of other categories. According to the evaluation criteria set up by Bache, however, it is only the expanded (i.e. progressive) versus non-expanded (nonprogressive) oppositions which turn out to be aspectual. In this connection he remarks that all verbs may appear not only in the simple

forms but also in the perfect forms (e.g. *contains: has contained*, *contained: had contained*). In this respect perfect forms behave like tense forms rather than aspect forms, for while tense is usually pervasive, aspect is not (1985: 207). In the summary of *Verbal Aspect* (301) it is pointed out that on the semantically most telling criterion the perfect: non-perfect opposition does not involve aspectual distinctions.

The conclusion arrived at in Bache's dissertation is that English has aspect and that this category finds expression in the expanded/ non-expanded forms. How the opposition between perfect and non-perfect should be analysed has to be left unaccounted for: "Whether the meanings associated with the perfect forms warrant the establishing of a separate, autonomous category and whether they function at an intercategorial level are questions which clearly require further investigation" (306).

While the analysis of *future forms* is clearly outside the scope of his book on verbal aspect, Bache appears to have an open mind with respect to the recognition of a future tense: "… since …temporality is based on a psychological conception of time rather than on objective criteria I see no compelling reason to break with the traditional view that in principle futurity may be realized with or without modal content" (1985: 103f). And in his book on aspect, tense and action he comments on the status of the future like this: "For the last couple of decades, a very narrow conception of tense as a category of deictic time has received considerable attention. Scholars adhering to this theory sometimes operate with only two members of tense, the past and the non-past, and spend a lot of time discussing the status of future meaning as either temporal or modal" (1997: 34).

3. Tense and aspect in Mastering English Grammar

Not long after having begun writing our chapter on verbals, Carl and I discovered that our views on tense and aspect could in fact be

combined. Since tense and aspect are tightly interwoven in English, we decided to operate with a fused tense-aspect system involving four ordered choices:

1. present: past (*happens: happened*)
2. future: nonfuture (*will happen: happens*)
3. perfect: nonperfect (*has happened: happens*)
4. progressive: nonprogressive (*is happening: happens*)

The first of these is marked inflectionally and is deictic, i.e. relative to the place and time of the utterance. The other three distinctions are relative to the first one. The future is signaled by a form of non-volitional WILL and the nonfuture by the absence of this auxiliary. The perfect is signaled by a form of the auxiliary HAVE followed by an *-ed* verb form and the nonperfect by the absence of this combination. And the progressive is signaled by a form of the auxiliary BE followed by an *-ing* participle and the nonprogressive by the absence of this combination.

It was Carl who proposed that the distinction between progressive and nonprogressive should be dealt with together with the other three distinctions, as the last of the ordered choices. As a result of this inclusion we ended up with sixteen tense-aspect forms: present, past, present future, past future, present perfect, past perfect, present future perfect, past future perfect, present progressive, past progressive, present future progressive, past future progressive, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive, present future perfect progressive and past future perfect progressive. While some of these forms, because of their semantic complexity, are rarely encountered, e.g. *will have been happening*, they can all be attested as actually occurring.

In our book we defined tense as grammatically expressed assignment to situations of location in time (285). This definition obviously characterizes the distinction between the present and the past. But as appears from an utterance like *It matters, it has mattered*

and it will matter, it may also be assumed to cover the distinction between future and nonfuture and between perfect and nonperfect in that both these distinctions involve location in time. Aspect was defined as grammatically expressed assignment of situational focus. In an example like *It was raining in Dublin* a situation is presented as unfolding, i.e. with an internal focus. In *It rained in Dublin*, on the other hand, a situation is described as a fact, i.e. with an external focus (298).

This, then, was how we decided to cut the cake. In our section on future forms (290ff) we argued – in favour of operating with non-volitional WILL – that sentences in which this auxiliary occurs, unlike sentences with a modal like MAY, describe the real world *categorically* (i.e. as though the state referred to is certain), albeit at a time that is still ahead. In his *Essentials of Mastering English* Carl later specified that WILL is "treated as a tense-aspect auxiliary with certain modal uses, rather than as a modal auxiliary with certain temporal uses" (2000: 143). In a review of my *Tense and Mood in English* Alex Klinge draws attention to the fact that many scholars take the opposite view that the volitional meaning of WILL is more basic than the temporal meaning (1992: 156). This goes for Klinge himself too, for in a later article he has proposed a monosemantic analysis of WILL. In that article he also argues that the many different meanings expressed in utterances with this and other modal auxiliaries originate from the context in which they are used rather than from the modals themselves (1993: 355).

4. An instructional semantic approach

In my book on tense and mood I had described the meaning of tense forms from a traditional, Reichenbachian point of view. For example, the past perfect was described semantically by means of the formula E – R – S, in which E represents event time, S speech

time and R so-called reference time, and where the dashes represent separation in time, on an understood time line. In an example like *She had signed the letter (when I returned)* the event of signing can in this way be described as taking place before the reference point (that of my return), which in its turn is anterior to the point of speech (what I say now). In *Mastering English Grammar* this type of semantic description of tense forms was not used. Instead of a traditional referential point of view we adopted a *functional-instructional view* proposed by Peter Harder in his *Functional Semantics* (1996).

In Harder's analysis "The linguistically coded meaning resides in the function that tenses serve rather than in the times that the tenses come to stand for or refer to" (327). The meaning of the present tense is to direct the addressee to identify a situation as it is at the time of speech, i.e. it instructs the addressee to tag on to world-now. And the meaning of the past tense is to direct the addressee to identify a situation that lies before the time of speech, i.e. to tag on to world-before-now. Both these tenses are deictic and point from utterance time towards a function time. These tenses thus tell the addressee where to look, i.e. where to tag the descriptive content on to the world.

By means of the future tense the speaker tells the hearer to look ahead, and here it is not necessary to pick out a point of application, i.e. only aheadness is involved. And finally the perfect tense signals that a state-of-affairs is anterior to a time of reckoning and views this state-of-affairs as a property of the situation at that time. As pointed out by Harder the future and the perfect belong inside the scope of the deictic tenses, the perfect taking the narrowest scope:

Past/present (+/-future (+/-perfect (state-of-affairs)))

In *Mastering English Grammar*, where the distinction between progressive and nonprogressive is dealt with together with the other three distinctions, the scope relations look like this:

Past/present (+/-future (+/-perfect (+/- progressive (state-of-affairs))))

A verb phrase like *had been happening* accordingly has the formula [past [anterior [progressing [situation]]]] and instructs the addressee to tag on to world-before-now, then look back at an anterior time and finally look at a situation of 'happening' progressing simultaneously with the anterior-past period. And a verb phrase like *will have happened* has the formula [present [future [anterior [situation]]]] and instructs the addressee to tag on to world-now, then look ahead and finally to look back at a situation of 'happening'.

As can be seen, our analysis of tense-aspect meanings was significantly influenced by Harder's work. In an example like *Arsenal scored a crucial goal* we prefer to say not that the past form refers to a situation that precedes the moment this utterance is spoken (as I did in my *Tense and Mood in English*) but that it instructs the hearer to identify a situation before this moment as that which the description applies to.

In *Mastering English Grammar* the semantic instructions expressing relative time in the English tense-aspect forms are recapitulated at the end of our description of the individual sixteen forms. The general instructions are presented like this:

Present: tag on to world-now (general present time)

Past: tag on to world-before-now (past time)

Future: look ahead (future time, posteriority)

Perfect: look back (anteriority)

Progressive: look here (simultaneous progression)

Here we also write that there is, in our diagram of how the English tense-aspect system can be represented, a *deictic cline:* the lower one goes, the less deixis alone motivates the choice of verb form. At the

same time other factors become more relevant, such as aspectual meaning which affects the perfect and particularly the progressive forms. Nothing is said about what "other factors" are assumed to be relevant to the future forms. But to Carl Bache the other factor involved here is probably modality, for as pointed out above, he has later specified that WILL is "treated as a tense-aspect auxiliary with certain modal uses…" (2000: 143). And in his description of modal uses of tense-aspect forms in that book he accounts not only for WILL used to express predictability, as in *They will be home at this time of day*, but also to express *volition*, as in *I think today I'll stick to cheese.* That is not the analysis proposed in *Mastering English Grammar*, where volitional WILL is divorced from purely temporal WILL and dealt with in a section on modality (9.9). On this particular point, therefore, it seems that Carl and I are not now in agreement.

When between 1997 and 2004 I used *Mastering English Grammar* as textbook in my MA courses, I was pleased to discover that my students did not find it difficult to understand the instructional analysis of the tense-aspect forms, and that they even found it intuitively satisfying. Earlier on I had used *Tense and Mood in English* for my grammar course, and while the Reichenbachian approach used in that book also made sense to the students, it was not as readily accessible to them as the instructional approach put forward in *Mastering English Grammar.* The instructional analysis therefore seems to have a pedagogical advantage over the traditional analysis.

5. How many tenses?

As pointed out in section 2, the recognition of several tenses in English is clearly non-mainstream: The analysis we typically meet is that English has two tenses (present and past) and two aspectual distinctions (perfect: nonperfect and progressive: nonprogressive). The sixteen tense-aspect forms proposed in *Mastering English Gram-*

mar therefore undoubtedly gave rise to many raised eyebrows when it came out sixteen years ago. But in fact our analysis does not place us at the end of the scale characterized by many forms. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) it was proposed already in Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* from 1994 (2nd edition) that English has 36 tenses! This analysis is still retained in the revised 3rd edition by Halliday and Matthiesen from 2004. How is it possible, one may well wonder, to end up with such a torrent of tenses?

The answer to that question can be found in a death-dealing article by Carl Bache from 2005 ("En empirisk undersøgelse af Halliday's tempuskategori"). Here we read that in SFL a primary distinction is drawn between past, present and future (realized by respectively *-ed*, *-Ø* or *-s* and WILL + infinitive) and that this primary choice can be followed by a secondary choice realized by HAVE + *-ed* (past), *BE + -ing* (present) and BE *going to* (future). In other words, the tense system is regarded as *recursive*, and one can choose again, again and again. A verb phrase like *had broken* is accordingly regarded as 'past in past' and *will have been working* as 'present in past in future'.

As unbridled recursiveness results in an infinite number of tenses, however, rules are introduced which restrict the number of tenses. But 36 is still a conspicuously high number. In defense of his analysis Halliday argues that his model must be capable of handling rare examples and that it is important to take spontaneously spoken language into consideration, for example by including odd verbals like *had been going to have been taking* (present in past in future in past in past) in the analysis.

Being not surprisingly skeptical about Halliday's analysis, Carl decided to carry out an empirical investigation, and for that purpose he consulted the British National Corpus and Collins Wordbank Online. This showed that 16 of Halliday's 36 tenses are completely absent in both corpora and that 7 are very rare. His conclusion is therefore that Halliday's tense system – in spite of its limiting stop rules – overgenerates very badly by producing constructions which

are not found in actual usage. The principle of recursiveness is shown to be a heavy strain on the system and can hardly be considered valid for the category 'tense'. Furthermore, the analysis of BE *going to* + infinitive as a marker of secondary future tense seems untenable as all but two of the tenses signalled by this form are absent in both corpora. If BE *going to* were excluded from the central tense system, it is pointed out, the analysis would actually be numerically similar to the one proposed in *Mastering English Grammar.*

In Bache's article there is a particularly telling footnote: "On several occasions I have put forward my criticism of the description of tense in SFL to leading exponents of SFL … but unfortunately without succeeding in getting into constructive dialogue" (2005: 8; my translation). That is hardly surprising, for what could the SFL people really do after having heard Carl out except throwing in the towel and scrapping their analysis?

Let me finally take a look at an important article by Alex Klinge (2005). Here WILL is interpreted monosemantically as a modal auxiliary in all cases, and this obviously rules out the recognition of a future tense. Like the other modals (CAN, MAY, MUST, SHALL), WILL is assumed to express *potentiality*, but unlike these it is simultaneously held to express that the correspondence between the semantic representation and a referential state of affairs will turn out to *become verified.* This is the case whether WILL in an example like *She will help him* is used to express pure future or willingness. In either case, it is assumed, there is no verified correspondence between the representation and a referential state of affairs, but the potential is that the correspondence turns out to become verified. It is also pointed out that in a pair of examples like *I will win a stunning victory if I ever fight him again* and *I will suffer a crushing defeat if I ever fight him again*, the difference between intentional meaning and pure future time meaning has nothing to do with the semantics of WILL but is a property of the context in which WILL occurs.

Though this analysis may sound alluring, I am not convinced

that it will work in all cases. In his book on functional semantics Peter Harder gives an example of an internal paradigmatic contrast between volitional and non-volitional WILL: *Baby won't eat his mashed potatoes* (1996: 354). If it is volition which is expressed here, i.e. if the baby refuses to eat, one can go on to say *But I'm going to make him eat if it's the last thing I do.* If it is pure future which is expressed, for example if the baby has just died, such a continuation is not possible, for it would be incompatible with the statement about the future which the speaker has just committed himself to. I find it hard to see how a paradigmatic contrast like this one can be satisfactorily accounted for by claiming that the meaning of WILL is in both sentences potentiality combined with subsequent verification. If WILL is handled as in *Mastering English Grammar*, on the other hand, the two contrasting meanings are straightforwardly handled by distinguishing between volitional and non-volitional WILL.

For these reasons I still prefer to operate with two different semantic WILLs and to maintain that English has a future. I don't mind being classified as an 'exclusionist' as long as this word refers to the exclusion of non-volitional WILL from the category of modal auxiliaries.

6. Final remarks

As pointed out above, the tense-aspect cake in English can be cut in different ways, and we are unlikely ever to arrive at a point where one particular analysis has become generally accepted because it makes everything fall into harmony. Though like other analyses the one proposed of tense and aspect in *Mastering English Grammar* can certainly be queried, I would single out this part of our grammar as a fairly honourable attempt to tackle a complex area. To be sure, readers of Carl's and my book will not find answers to all the questions they may have, for example how the perfect should be analysed

with respect to tense versus aspect. It might well be worth exploring whether the establishment of a separate, autonomous category of 'phase' is warranted (Davidsen-Nielsen 1990: 67). But even in comprehensive grammars there are bound to be occasional gaps.

Our book differs from others in being largely eclectic and in that its guiding principle is a strict form/function distinction as it applies at all levels to the constituents of the sentence. If it does not compete all that badly with other grammars of English, one crucial reason is without a doubt that Carl and I were given the unique opportunity of cooperating on it for five years and to be able to keep each other up to the mark – with Carl as the particularly persevering work mate.

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Note

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