Spring 4-27-2018

The Collaborative Function of Verbal Aspect and Aktionsart: A Distributional Analysis of English Verb-Types

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The Collaborative Function of Verbal Aspect and *Aktionsart*:

A Distributional Analysis of English Verb-Types

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Abstract

This paper reviews literature in aspect studies from modern linguistics and Biblical language studies and proposes syntheses of multiple definitions given for these often-confusing verbal categories as the discussion has progressed from the Nineteenth Century to the present day. To inform these definitions, key studies such as Bache (1982), Comrie (1981), Lyons (1977), and Porter (1989) are consulted. In addition to suggesting definitions for these, this paper also discusses the best way to understand *aktionsart* as it functions in several related languages, and as it relates to aspect in usage. An analysis of evidence for this description as it functions in modern English follows. Data is given for categorizing the 100 most common verbs in English into the verb-type paradigm proposed by Comrie (1981) and Vendler (1957). From the categorization of these verbs, the distribution of aspect and *aktionsarten* in the English language is shown, and the relationship between the two as it relates to English verbal structure is suggested.

The Collaborative Function of Verbal Aspect and *Aktionsart*

Introduction

Verbal aspect is a broad and complicated linguistically-marked verbal category that refers to the speaker's semantic and syntactic depiction of an action in its context regarding its morphological and semantic constituencies. Aspect entered linguistic discussion in the nineteenth century with the progress of comparative linguistics and philology, becoming an important topic in both modern linguistics and in Biblical language studies. Its function has often been confused with other verbal categories, namely tense, mood, voice, and *aktionsart*. Historically, scholarship has especially had difficulty differing aspect from tense and from the verbal category called *aktionsart*, which refers to the "kind of action" that a verb describes, either lexically or in its semantic-grammatical context. In relevant literature, studies in verbal aspect give at times conflicting definitions of each of these categories. In addition to giving a thorough coverage of aspect in the history of linguistics it is necessary to distinguish these categories from one another and to clarify the mottled definitions of these terms found within the literature.

As discussed below, the relationship between verbal aspect and *aktionsart* in semantic use is yet to be fully defined. Aspect and *aktionsart* function differently in different languages, and must be examined in detail within an individual language to discern how they function individually and as a conjunctive pair of semantic forces. Bache (1985) and Comrie (1981) have shown that modern English uses aspect and *aktionsarten* as active semantic verbal categories. This study demonstrates that *aktionsart* functions in English as a semantic component of verbal aspect, but is semantically distinguishable, and determined by other means. Following this

demonstration, the author presents data exposing the distribution of types of verbs in English, through classifications suggested in works by Comrie (1981) and Vendler (1957).

Literature Review

Distinguishing Aspect from Other Verbal Forms

The need to distinguish aspect from other verbal categories arose from the realization that verb forms do not always communicate merely temporal semantic constituency, reality, or actor/patient, as tense, mood, and voice describe respectively. In addition to these basic categories of verb function, verbal structure in many languages communicates the perfectivity of an action. In other words, a verb in its context, at the speaker's will, can present an action as abstract or complete – the *perfective* aspect (as in "I write") – or as concrete, situationally specific, and in progress – the *imperfective* aspect ("I am writing"). These aspects are distinguished morphologically, grammatically, or lexically, depending on the language. Some verbal concepts can only appear in one or the other of these aspects (Comrie, 1981; Lyons, 1971). Some studies (Porter, 1989) have suggested that the stativity of verb, that is, its function as a state or condition, rather than a proper action, should also be considered a verbal aspect.

Aspect is often confused as conjunctive with or component to the verbal category of tense. Tense refers to the temporal deixis of the described action; it establishes the temporal setting of the action relative to an established common reference point of utterance, called the "zero-point." Some studies have conjectured that aspect is tied into the temporal nature of tense, suggesting that, descriptively speaking, certain aspects are associated with certain tenses in certain languages, and therefore innately refer to certain relative time-references (Comrie, 1981). However, others argue that, given a distinct and general definition of aspect to separate it as a category from tense, aspect does not have an internal time reference, and therefore is not innately

entwined with tense; instead, aspect only carries this time reference when used in conjunction

with tense (Bache, 1982; Porter, 1989). It is true, however, that some languages may function in

a way that ties aspect temporally with tense, and the two are inseparable.

More difficult to distinguish from aspect is *aktionsart*, a category which refers to the

"kind" of action a verb describes. *Aktionsart* has caused much confusion in discussion of aspect

because of its closeness in nature and in usage. *Aktionsart* is the semantic distinction, whether

lexically or formally, between durative and punctual situations; references to time, but not

deictically - *aktionsarten* are references to the way a situation carries out in the "flow" of time

(Comrie, 1976; Porter, 1989). *Aktionsarten* are not only concerned with durativity versus

punctuality but are concerned as well with the procedural element of a situation, including

stativity, telicity, and iterativity. Certain aspects seem to lend themselves to certain *aktionsarten*,

but they must still be distinguished as separate categories, so that they are not confused (Bache,

1982). Some, such as Comrie (1981), Waltke and O'Connor (1990), and Lyons (1977), have

considered *aktionsarten* as a type of aspect. Mounce (2009), in *Basics of Biblical* Greek, seems

to mottle the definitions of aspect and *aktionsart*, often calling certain functions aspects that

should be deemed *aktionsarten*. Wallace (1996) may give one of the best descriptions of the

distinctions and overlap between these two categories in his text, *Greek Grammar Beyond the

Basics*. Bache (1982) demonstrates that for the sake of a functional metalanguage, crossing over

aspect and *aktionsart* is inaccurate and unhelpful; instead, *aktionsart*, because of its unique

function, must be referred to as a separate category.

Aspect in the Languages

George Curtius, a nineteenth century philologist, is cited frequently as making the first

breakthroughs in the verbal system of Biblical Greek (Campbell, 2008). Curtius described the

differences in the time reference of verbal situations as durative or "quickly-passing," viewing

time in terms of points instead of using a line, as is often done. These discussions led to the

acknowledgment of *aktionsart*. Curtius's studies relied much on previous discussion of Slavic

languages, which brought the concept of aspect into the linguistic discussion (Fanning, 1990).

Scholars of Biblical Greek have expanded aspect study in Greek specifically with the goal of

more thorough Biblical translation and exegesis, but these studies have been somewhat separate

from aspect study in linguistics as a larger field.

      Slavic languages have been pivotal in aspect study because of their use of formally-

contrastive *perfective* and *imperfective* aspects. In Russian the placement of a prefix, or another

morphological transformation, distinguishes a verb's perfective form from its imperfective form;

for example, for "to write," the imperfective is *pisat'*, and the perfective is prefixed *napisat'*

(transliteration original; Dunn & Khairov, 2009, p. 75). Other Slavic languages follow similar

transformational patterns and use aspect as a primary verbal function. Where Russian uses

perfective and *imperfective* aspects, Bulgarian has a more complex aspect system, including

multiple combinations of these aspects in its tense system (Comrie, 1981).

      As well as Slavic languages, Semitic languages have been discussed regarding the

presence of aspect in verbal functions. In one text on aspect in Biblical Greek, Porter (1989)

discusses the verbal system of Biblical Hebrew and its effect on Greek. Scholars have recognized

that the Hebrew verbal system is often atemporal. Scholars of Biblical Hebrew, like Driver

(1998) in the nineteenth century proposed that its verbal system fits into the

perfective/imperfective aspect theory, while others have rejected aspect theory for Hebrew (and

other languages) and suggested a verb system based on literary usage – a "basic dichotomy" of

usage in narrative versus discourse (Bache, 1985). Driver (1998) rejected a time-based system

for the Hebrew verb and suggested, based on earlier work by Heinrich Ewald, that Hebrew verbs

used aspectual reference, using perfective and imperfective aspects instead of relative time

reference, which is instead established by other linguistic constituents of Hebrew (Driver, 1998).

Shepherd (n.d.), in agreement with Wolfgang Schneider's (Schneider & McKinion, 2016)

Hebrew verb system, which was based on distributional analysis, claims that the verb system of

Biblical Hebrew is separated into two major verb forms, which denote narrative and discursive

roles. Schneider (Schneider & McKinion, 2016), and in turn Shepherd (n.d.), come to this

conclusion based on a text-linguistic approach to the study of Hebrew, because the only

witnesses to ancient Hebrew are its written forms. Because their approach, these reject aspect

theory as descriptive of the Hebrew verb system (Schneider & McKinion, 2016; Shepherd).

Weinrich (Fanning, 1990) makes a similar suggestion about the role of tenses based on textual

functions, heavily relying on written texts. Weinrich's (Fanning, 1990) proposal came as an

attempt to get away from a dependence on deictic time reference when discerning the meaning of

verbal forms. Bache (1985) rejects Weinrich's (Fanning, 1990) proposal based on a lack of proof

and argues that though Weinrich claims freedom from temporal deixis, narrative and discursive

function may still rely on "spatio-temporal specifications."

Romance languages have also been the topic of discussion in verbal aspect. Comrie

(1981, p. 126-127) notes that French and Spanish have similar distinctions between aspects in

written discourse.

Aspect in English

Bache (1985) has written an entire monograph on aspect in English, concluding in

agreement with Comrie (1981) that English displays both perfective and imperfective aspects in

written as well as spoken English. The present study deals primarily with the function of aspect

in conjunction with *aktionsarten* in modern English.

Defining Aspect

Various definitions have been given for verbal aspect, as suggested above. The following

section covers these multiple definitions and their distinctions and proposes a standard definition

for further use in the present author's study. The most basic definition of aspect is that it

describes "how an action is viewed." This "viewpoint," however, can be represented in various

ways. Campbell (2008) suggests simply that this viewpoint is "from the outside or from the

inside" (p. 19). Comrie (1981) explains this basic definition in more technical terms, saying

"aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (p. 3),

based on a definition by the French linguist Holt. While these are helpful ways to quickly define

the term, they do not clarify exactly what the term does, and studies must go into further detail to

explain what the function of aspect is in language. Driver (1998) described aspect in Biblical

Hebrew as the opposition between a verbal situation's being "*nascent*" or "*complete,*" or in other

words "*non-completive"* versus "*whole*" (p. XLIX-LI), reflecting contemporary works to his

which are given to a description of aspect as perfective versus imperfective, the general

explanation given above. Waltke and O'Connor (1990) call this difference the speaker's

"contour" of a situation in time (p. 202). They credit their division of the binary Hebrew verbal

system as perfective and imperfective to Heinrich Ewald (p. 463), to whom Driver also referred

in constructing his *Treatise* on the Hebrew verbal system (1998). Lyons (1971) and Porter (1989)

propose, primarily in describing ancient Greek, there are not two aspects, including "stative" as a

third. Campbell (2007) rejects this viewpoint, citing Fanning (1990), who shows that Porter

(1989) calling "stative" an aspect conflicts with his own definition of aspect (p. 25). Campbell

(2007) and Fanning (1990) both claim stativity to be an *aktionsart* instead, with which Bache (1982) seems to agree.

Waltke and O'Connor's (1990) definition for aspect poses the issue that aspect apparently points to a deictic time-reference for a situation, which other studies are adamant to reject. Driver (1998) and Fanning (1990) both state that temporal reference is secondary to the viewpoint presented by aspect, while Porter (1989) claims that the verbal system of Biblical Greek does not communicate temporal reference at all, but that surrounding syntactical constituencies, instead, provide a temporal context. Attempts to separate the category of aspect from this temporal reference have been made because of these propositions of aspect as the primary vehicle for verbal meaning in some languages, particularly Greek, but also to provide a general definition for verbal aspect in order to separate it from tense for the sake of clear and functional metalinguistics (Bache, 1982). Campbell (2007) includes an insightful footnote on this difficulty in definition (p. 9, footnote 8), and Fanning (1990) (to whom Campbell refers) notes it as well (p. 18-27).

Jacobsohn and Hermann (as discussed in Bache, 1985; Fanning, 1990; Porter, 1989) have suggested that aspect, because it is based on the speaker's "contouring" (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, p. 347) of a situation, can be described as the speaker's *subjective* understanding of the situation, in opposition to *aktionsart*, which, based on the semantic facets of the lexeme in use, is apparently *objective*. This is unfounded, however; as Wallace (1996) puts it, while *aktionsart* may be able to present more descriptively the details of the "actual" event, it cannot be said that it is *objective*, as this would bar it from use in certain functions which do not refer to a situation in reality; e.g., parable, fiction, hyperbole, etc. (p. 499). Defining aspect as subjective versus the

objective *aktionsart* also assumes that aspect and *aktionsart* refer to the same or at least a very

similar verbal function, an assumption with which the present author disagrees.

In the present author's understanding, aspect is the speaker's presentation of a situation

either abstractly as a whole, through the perfective aspect, or in more concrete detail as a

situation in progress, through the imperfective aspect. Aspect is established by the choice of the

speaker through verbal form, syntax, verbal modifiers, and inherent meaning. Aspect appears

differently and has different uses in various languages, and does not appear in every language.

Defining Tense

For the purposes of this study, a thorough definition of tense is necessary to avoid this

very confusion. Robins (1989) describes tense as the crossover of two axes; time relations and

aspectual difference (p. 259). This definition does not allow for a distinct category of aspect

unrelated to time. Comrie (1981; 1985) defines tense as the category which "relates the time of

the situation referred to some other time, usually to the moment of speaking" (p. 2), or "the

grammaticalization of location in time." Fanning (1990) refers to time-reference as *primary*

tense, and describes it as indicating the "temporal relationship of the event described to the

speech event" (p. 18). In sum, tense uses a grammatical structure, usually a morpheme or

conjugation, to provide a deictic time reference for an event. Some definitions of tense, however,

whether in word or in practice, seem to be used by scholars to refer to the morphological,

syntactical, and semantic function of a verb in total within its context. This causes difficulty in

languages that the literature suggests do not lexically or morphologically grammaticalize deictic

time reference, yet studies continue to use the term "tense" in referring to verb forms; this has

caused confusion in Biblical Hebrew studies. For instance, Driver (1998) contends for a Hebrew

verbal system which does not present deictic time, but verbal aspect instead, and yet continues to

use the term "tense" for the forms of the Hebrew verb. In the view of the present author, tense

refers to a morphological transformation of a verbal root which relates the presented event to a

temporal reference point.

Defining *Aktionsart*

Finally, it is necessary to define *aktionsart*, especially in reference to tense and aspect.

Aktionsarten are descriptors referring to the procedural characteristics of a situation (Bache,

1982). They are both lexical and grammatical, often discerned notionally from context, but

primarily, especially in English, assumed by the meanings associated with a word. *Aktionsarten*

describe a situation's procedure through time, but do not present a relative point in time, as tense

does (Comrie, 1981; Waltke & O'Connor, 1990). While some *aktionsarten* may describe in

detail the internal structure of a situation, or present the situation in an abstract notion, it

describes the situation's procedural characteristics, rather than the speaker's presentation of the

event as an abstract whole or as a situation in progress, which is the purpose aspect serves.

Aktionsarten can refer to the durativity or punctuality of a situation, or describe the stativity,

telicity, and iterativity of a situation (Comrie, 1981; Lyons, 1971). Durative versus punctual is

the opposition between an event that occurs over a relatively extensive period of time in contrast

to what Curtius (Campbell, 2007; Fanning, 1990; Porter, 1989) referred to as a "quickly-passing"

event, which might be called punctual, as though it were but one point in time, even though it,

like a durative event, takes place over a period of time. Stativity is diametrically opposed to

dynamicity; that is, a verb can describe a concept, state, or condition, or it can describe a

situation that is "dynamically" moving or proceeding (Bache, 1982). Telicity refers to whether a

verb establishes an end to the situation that is described. To say "I closed the door" is telic,

whereas "I close doors" is atelic (Comrie, 1981). Iterativity is opposed to semelfactivity. To be

iterative is to a repeated action – suppose one were to say, "I drive," or, with more detail, "I drive to work every morning." This implies a habitual or repetitive action. However, if a situation is presented as semelfactive, it does not imply this habitual or repetitive nature – "I sneeze," for instance. Comrie defines a semelfactive event as one that occurs "once and once only" (Comrie, 1981, p. 42). These are some of the more common instances of *aktionsarten*, though this is far from an exhaustive list. Comrie (1981) and Vendler (1957) suggested different categories of verbs based on *aktionsarten*; Achievement, Semelfactive, Accomplishment, Activity, and State, which are demonstrated in a chart which compares telicity and change with punctuality. More *aktionsarten* can surely be given names and described toward a complete list of the functions of this category (Comrie, 1981; Porter, 1989).

The categories of verb given by Comrie (1981) and Vendler (1957), as discussed above, are Achievement, Semelfactive, Accomplishment, Activity, and State. The latter four were proposed initially by Vendler (1957), and Comrie (1981) later added State upon examination of Vendler's theory. These five categories are divided into two categories themselves; punctual and durative. Achievement and semelfactive verbs are punctual, while accomplishment, activity, and stative verbs are durative. An achievement verb is one that describes a situation which is punctual and telic; that is, the term refers to an event that happens in an instant or "quickly-passing" period, as Curtius said (Campbell, 2007), after progressing to a necessary end. Semelfactive verbs describe situations that are punctual and atelic; happening in an instant, but not necessitating a process with an end. Accomplishment verbs describe telic, durative situations; an event or situation described as occurring over a longer period and not a relative "instant" and culminating to a necessary end. Activities are similar, without a necessary end (Vendler, 1957).

Comrie (1981) suggested that "State" be added to the categories to distinguish between a progressive, dynamic activity and one that is unchanging.

Observations on the Methodology of Aspect Studies

Many works, such as Bache (1982; 1985), Comrie (1981; 1985), and Lyons (1971; 1977) and other works referenced herein, have been produced on aspect, its function, its crossover with and relationship to other categories, and whether it works in conjunction with them or opposes them. Some have proposed that grammarians and linguists should shift to an aspect-based understanding of the verbal systems of language rather than a temporal, tense-based view of language. Despite access to a multitude of definitions and categories and examples of the usage, there are not quite as many attempts to reconcile the categories while keeping their distinct semantic functions clear. This lacking may be due in part to the difficulty to demonstrate differences not only between, but within, the more semantically entangled categories, i.e. aspect and *aktionsart*, in which there may not be morphological or lexical clues to those distinctions, and syntactical clues are debatable at best. It is easy to show when a language uses morphological, phonological, or even lexical transformation to denote differing aspects with added infixes or helping verbs, and *aktionsart* can even at times be discerned clearly by similar means. Aspect is easily distinguished in the more common verb forms in English but demonstrating *aktionsarten* morphologically or grammatically is elusive. This difficulty causes inaccurate and unhelpful definitions like the opposition between subjective and objective, mentioned above. Most studies (Bache, 1982; Comrie, 1981; Lyons, 1977) that necessitate demonstrating these differences have provided diametrically-opposed lexemes modified with the necessary auxiliary lexemes or morphemes applied, followed by a description of the distinction shown. For example, Comrie (1981) demonstrates aspect usage in written French by listing the

minimal contrasting pairs for the verb "to write" (*écrire*); two forms of the perfective (past definite and prefect tenses, respectively), *j'écrivis* and *j'ai écrit*, and one for the imperfective (imperfect tense), *j'écrivais*, followed by a comment on the important distinction between the concepts of perfective versus imperfective (or "nonperfective") and perfect versus nonperfect (p. 126).

Preparing Schema

To demonstrate the collaborative function of verbal aspects and *aktionsarten*, a general statement has been discerned in the following sections as to how the two categories work together toward verbal meaning. Original examples and some from the literature have been used to show the interaction between the different aspects and *aktionsart* toward a statement about the relationship between these two. Next, the author has used a previously compiled list of the most common verbs in the English language and categorized each verb using Comrie's (1981) modified version of a chart by Vendler (1957) separating verbs of Achievement, Semelfactivity, Accomplishment, Activity, and State. A statement, then, is proposed as to whether each verb may be used in the perfective or imperfective aspect, or both. From these data, statistics are proposed as to the distribution of the different types of verbs in English based on their aspect and *aktionsart*.

Interaction between Aspect and *Aktionsart*

Because of the frequent confusion and crossover of the definitions of aspect and aktionsart, the present author proposes the following understanding to clarify how aspect and *aktionsart* are related, but distinguishable. Though aspect and *aktionsart* can, and must, be distinguished semantically, they are inseparable in function. Their collaborative nature can be described in three ways: 1) *aktionsart* as a component of aspect; 2) *aktionsart* as the exposition

of aspect; and 3) *aktionsart* as the conferral of aspect. The aim of the following proposal is to make a case for each of these descriptions and argue for the advantages and disadvantages of using it as a general understanding of the relationship between aspect and *aktionsart*. Setting aspect and *aktionsart* in central view for this study presents the difficulty of the relationship between these two and formal tense, whether tense of temporal-reference or otherwise. As a result, it may seem in the following discussion that the present author has not considered how this might affect these views of the interaction between aspect and *aktionsart*, however, the issue has simply been set aside for the purposes of the speculation herein. The question of whether formal tense inherently denotes a certain aspect is of particular importance regarding this omission, and perspective or further evidence toward solving this quandary may alter or even disqualify one or more of the claims or particular examples which follow.

Research for this study was compiled with the goal of a thorough understanding of verbal categories and aspect study in theoretical linguistics. A survey of the literature, as presented above, was key to this end. In addition to texts in linguistic and grammatical theory, some studies into various languages and examples of aspect therein were necessary; namely Russian, English, French, German, and Biblical (New Testament) Greek. Verbal examples of aspect and *aktionsart* are used from these languages in the following discussion. Examples were chosen based on ease and clarity in describing the presence and use of these categories within the situation described. The goal of the examples given is to show how aspect or *aktionsart* can be understood in one of the proposed ways in the given usage, and to project this purported usage onto the greater category; multiple languages have been used to show how aspect and *aktionsarten* are used across many languages.

As mentioned above, certain *aktionsarten* tend to appear in one aspect rather than in the other, due to the inherent semantic force carried by both; however, it would be inaccurate to say that they *only* appear in one or the other aspect. Certainly, imperfectivity shows more character in describing an action as necessitated by describing that action in a detailed progression in time. Perfective situations, however, tend to be shaded by *aktionsarten* much less often, and by fewer *aktionsarten*. Because there is not a clear delineation between which *aktionsarten* the perfective aspect can use and which the imperfective can use, determining the relationship between the two is important, and warrants the following discussion.

    ***Aktionsart* as a component or partner to aspect.** When considering *aktionsart* as a component of aspect, the difference must be clarified between a component and a category or type of aspect. As mentioned above, to deem *aktionsart* a category of aspect as, for example, Comrie, Cook, Lyons, and Waltke and O'Connor do, would be inaccurate. Calling *aktionsart* a type of aspect would be to claim that the former refers to same opposition in reference as the latter does, which, as previously established, is incorrect. Comrie's brief definition of *aktionsart* treats it as though it refers to the same sort of idea by different linguistic means. Cook's definition is more direct in calling *aktionsart* literally "phasal aspect." In contrast, to say that *aktionsart* is a *component* of aspect is to claim, rather, that *aktionsart*, while performing a different function, appears as part of the speaker's presentation of the aspect of the situation, and takes part in this presentation, in the same way past time reference is only a component of the past-perfect tense; it carries only part of the force of the verbal meaning, and works in conjunction with aspect to claim the internal or external constituency of the described event or situation. *Aktionsart* may, then, also be called a *partner* to aspect rather than a *component*,

though this depends on what other functional verbal categories one supposes are acting upon the

presentation being made by the speaker.

The *aktionsart* of *habituality* is one that shows how *aktionsart* can be a component of

aspect, and it appears in both the perfective and the imperfective aspects, because habituality is a

semantic component of the English present tense. The present progressive tense uses the

imperfective aspect, whereas the simple present is perfective. Opposing a habitual situation as

perfective and as imperfective shows that habituality communicates only one part of the

meaning, while the aspect causes a diametric distinction between the two. Here is how this

situation can happen:

1) I brush my teeth.
2) I am brushing my teeth three times a day.

While both statements use present time reference, their aspectual perspective is different.

1) uses the perfective aspect and describes a habitual activity. The speaker states that he or she

brushes his or her teeth, apparently repetitively, but the reader or hearer has no indication as to

how the activity proceeds through time, only an abstract notion that the activity is occurring at

some frequency. However, 2) uses the imperfective aspect and a habitual action, and the reader

or hearer understands at what frequency this activity is happening. While the different utterances

both present habitual activities, the aspectual perspective of the speaker onto the action is

different.

This also occurs in *dynamic* situations. The following example contrasts the *passé*

composé with the *imparfait* of French. Lyons uses the concept of a king *reigning* to discuss a

dynamic situation, comparing the same two tenses; the same example is used here (Lyons, 1977):

1) Il régna pendant trente ans. (He reigned for thirty years.)
2) Il régnait pendant trente ans. (He was reigning for thirty years.)

Both statements use past time reference, but again, present the situation with opposing

aspects. 1) presents an abstract view of the durative situation through the perfective aspect, while

2) presents a progressive, concrete, internal view as imperfective. It is clear again that the

dynamic *aktionsart* is only a part or component of the meaning expressed, working in

conjunction with the aspect and time reference used.

The above examples show how the same *aktionsart* can be a component of opposing

aspects. The following shows how describing a situation with different *aktionsarten* can cause

semantic distinction even when the same aspect is used. In his introductory text on the grammar

of Biblical Greek, Mounce provides an example of the action types possible in the perfective

aspect of the aorist tense, which is used now (Mounce, 2009, p. 124):

1) και φωνη εγενετο εκ των ουρανων… (And a voice came from heaven…)
2) ...εν σοι ευδοκησα (…with you I am well-pleased.)

In these references from Mark 1:11, both verbs use the perfective aspect. However, 1)

demonstrates the use of the perfective to describe a *punctiliar, telic* action, while 2) shows a

durative, *stative* description from the perfective aspect.

Aktionsart as the expositor of aspect. *Expositor* refers to a tool used to explain or

disclose the aspectual notion of a verbal phrase. This is not to say that aspect could not be

ascertained by other means; formal or grammatical tense or other contextual clues often give way

to aspect used in an utterance or a discourse. Rather, this view claims that by the semantic force

of an *aktionsart*, the aspectual nuance of the verb is made clear. An iterative action may disclose

by nature an action given the imperfective aspect, or a stative, by nature, a perfective aspect. The

claim that *aktionsart* expounds aspect in a verbal situation in this way, without considering the

syntactical context of the verbal situation somewhat implies that each *aktionsart*, if a

comprehensive list were made, may be tied inherently to one aspect; in other words, with

reference to *aktionsart* as expositional, if an *aktionsart* were inherently understood as one used with imperfective aspect, then if it was decided that this *aktionsart* was used, it would follow that the imperfective aspect was used, with no further investigation being necessary. This process would prove ineffective, however, if an *aktionsart* could be used in both aspect forms, which, for many *aktionsarten*, the present author would contend.

Telicity often exposes the perfectivity of a verbal situation, whereas *atelicity* imperfectivity. Telicity refers to a situation which reaches termination after a process; in contrast to punctuality, which refers only to a situation that happens in a point or brief period. The following example from German shows how telicity might disclose the aspect of a situation (Comrie, 1981, p. 46);

1) kämpfen (fight)
2) erkämpfen (achieve by means of a fight)

2) is necessarily telic; by inherent meaning, the situation has processed from a fight to an end. 1), however, is not necessarily telic; it does not *have* to give an end to the situation. Usage of 2) follows to a necessarily perfective usage; it would be inappropriate to say "I was achieving [this] by fighting…," or "I am achieving [this] by fighting…," and therefore 2) must be used with a perfective aspect. However, 1) may be used with either a perfective or imperfective aspect, because it is not bound by *telicity* as its type of action, or *aktionsart*. The perfective aspect, then, is revealed by the telicity of the verbal situation.

Stativity as an *aktionsart* refers to an action which necessitates no internal progress or change, in contrast to a dynamic situation, which, conversely, entails internal progress or change. Stativity is used in the perfective aspect because it refers to a situation without detailing its internal components, because its internal components have little detail. Because it is used

necessarily in the perfective aspect, stativity is the *expositor* of the perfective aspect. Consider

the following example (Comrie, 1981, p. 48-49);

1) He knows where I live.
2) He is knowing many things.

Only 1) is an appropriate structure in the English language, and it describes a *state* which,

from its inception to its termination, does not change. Because it is improper in English to use

this concept with the imperfective aspect, as in 2), the stative situation entails the use of the

perfective aspect, and therefore is its *expositor*. This relationship does not seem to occur in many

other instances, and therefore, it is unlikely that this view of the relationship between *aktionsart*

and aspect can be used as a general definition.

> **Aktionsart as the conferral of aspect.** Much like the previous argument, the claim that

aktionsart confers aspect to a verbal situation, without considering the syntax surrounding the

verbal situation, necessitates that each *aktionsart*, if a comprehensive list were made, is tied

inherently to one aspect, to a greater extent than before, because *aktionsart* is no longer simply

revealing the aspect used; in this case, *aktionsart* function as the *vehicle* for aspect. This claim

implies that if a hierarchy were supposed between aspect and *aktionsart*, the latter would be the

prominent of the two; this implication contradicts what seems to be the consensus of the

literature, though largely left unsaid, that aspect is somehow the higher of the two regarding the

primacy of the semantic constituents of a verb's meaning. The present author finds this

explanation of the relationship between aspect and *aktionsart* unlikely, as it seems to be accurate

only in some uses of *aktionsart*.

> *Iterativity* is a useful *aktionsart* to demonstrate *aspect conferral* as the function of

aktionsart. Before giving an example using *iterativity*, it is important to distinguish it from

habituality. While habituality can refer to the repetitive occurrence of the same action, it cannot

be equated with simple repetition. Habituality can refer to a sort of conceptual habit rather than a repetitive habit. Comrie gives the example *the Temple of Diana used to stand at Ephesus*. It is questionable whether this is truly a habitual activity, rather than simply a statement of a durative situation with past time reference, as the sentence may be restated *the Temple of Diana stood at Ephesus*, with, it seems, a similar sense. However, if one were to understand this as habitual, then this is not a habitually repeated action, but rather it might be said it is a habitual state, or concept. It may be easier to consider the example given above; *I brush my teeth*. While most would understand this to be a repeated activity, its presentation in the utterance is not as repeated, but conceptual, yet the reader still understands it to be a habitual activity, because for one to perpetually be brushing their teeth would be absurd. This may explain the difference between the perfective use of habituality and the imperfective use of habituality (Bache, 1982, p. 61; Comrie, 1981, p. 27). Iterativity, in contrast, refers to repeated instances of the same action, though not necessarily as a habit. Comrie's example is useful here, demonstrating iterativity without habituality in the statement *the lecturer…coughed five times*. It would be, again, absurd, or at least rare, to consider this repetition as a habit; *the lecturer…used to cough five times* (Comrie, 1981, p. 27).

The following example demonstrates how iterativity may be the expositor of the aspect in certain instances;

1) John sneezes.
2) John was sneezing again and again.

Both statements use present time-reference but use different *aktionsart* indicating different aspects. 1) uses the *durative aktionsart*, describing a habitual situation in a perfective aspect. 2), however, uses the *iterative aktionsart*, describing an action happening repetitively, providing detail as to its sequential constituency as the action happens. Here the *durative*

aktionsart in 1) denotes the perfective aspect and the *iterative aktionsart* in 2) denotes imperfective. The disadvantage of this example is that there are clear examples of the *durative aktionsart* in the imperfective aspect, so without using input elsewhere in the utterance, the perfective aspect cannot be supposed merely from the use of the *durative* type of action. This example is not meant to confuse the semantic opposition to *iterativity* to be durativity. The opposition to iterativity is *semelfactivity*, or momentariness.

A *punctual* situation may denote the perfective aspect alone, and it follows, then, that *punctuality* in verbal reference may be a *conferral* or *vehicle* for the perfective aspect. Comrie describes the use of punctuality in the following example (Comrie, 1981, p. 42-43);

1) John reached the summit of the mountain.
2) John is reaching the summit of the mountain.

The inherent meaning in the verbal phrase here necessitates punctuality; therefore, 2) is an inappropriate usage of this verbal concept. This situation can only occur in a point, and therefore cannot be presented with constituent parts in its progress by using the imperfective. If the situation were presented as imperfective, the semantic force would be iterative. Therefore, punctuality confers the perfective aspect because it cannot confer the imperfective aspect, which would use a different *aktionsart*. Russian, in fact, has a special class of verbs with a formally marked suffix (*-nu)* for this situation;

1) kashljanut' (cough)
2) kashljat'

Because of the semantic force of the verb itself, an imperfective sense, as described above, would result in iterativity rather than punctuality. The verb "cough", transliterated above, is part of a class of Russian verbs which refer to verbs which cannot be considered to have a duration, and there for must be punctual or semelfactive, and not durative or continuous, or else

be used in an iterative sense. 1) is the form of the verb using the *-nu* suffix which denotes this

verbal situation, while 2) is an apparently derived form used in an imperfective, non-punctual

sense.

It seems, then, that the use of *aktionsart* to show aspect only occurs in certain

circumstances when only one aspect or *aktionsart* is available for use with the verb or situation

in question. Therefore, *aktionsart* as the *conferral* or *vehicle* for aspect cannot be considered as a

general description of the relationship between these categories.

The examples discussed above are few and surely more might be proposed towards

defining the relationship between aspect and *aktionsart*. Furthermore, not every language which

uses aspect in verbal phrasing is represented here, nor in depth. The second two definitions

suggested are difficult to distinguish and it may be correct, in fact, to consider them as one and to

propose examples and descriptions of aspects and *aktionsarten*. However, the present author

contends that neither holds up as a general definition of the relationship between these two

categories. Of the proposed definitions of the interaction of these two categories, only the first is

viable in multiple examples. The present author, then, must conclude that this the best way of

viewing the relationship between aspect and *aktionsart*; that the latter is a semantic constituent of

the former, used as a conscious choice by the speaker in communicating the nature of an action,

discernable in inherent lexical meaning, by syntactical context, by morphological transformation,

or perhaps by another means.

Methods

Categorizing English Verbs

The top 100 English verbs, as compiled by *Linguasorb.com* (Brown, 2018), have been

considered abstractly, without any semantic or grammatical context, in their most common

semantic usage and as the main verb in a verbal phrase, and not as a grammatical or semantic

auxiliary of any kind, e.g. as a helping verb. Each has been assigned a category according to

Table 1 (see appendix), described in detail above. If a verb could describe a punctual or a

durative situation, it was categorized as either telic or atelic, depending on whether its inherent

meaning necessitates this type of action.

Results

Upon examining the verb list for categorization, it quickly became clear that few of the

terms could be assigned a specific category without surrounding context to discern its usage.

Many could be used in either punctual or durative ways, and had to be broadened to either

inherently telic or atelic. Only 44 of the 100 verbs could be given specific categories from Table

1 (see appendix), and most of these are terms of state, next were achievement, a few are

semelfactive or activity, and none are accomplishments. Most of the terms that could not be

categorized specifically are necessarily telic, and inherently atelic terms followed. Only seven of

the verbs are limited to use with a certain aspect, and these are limited to the perfective aspect;

these are all terms of states. However, six verbs of state can be used with either aspect, so it is

not stativity that limits a verb to the perfective aspect. Tables 2 and 3 (see appendix) give an

overview of the classifications of the 100 verbs; Table 2 shows how the verbs are distributed in

telicity, and Table 3 shows how the verbs are distributed across the types proposed by Comrie

(1981) and Vendler (1957). The total in Table 2 is 101 because one verb could be categorized as

either telic or atelic, depending on the semantic sense by which it is categorized. Table 4 (see

appendix) gives the distribution of possible aspects for these verbs.

Discussion

The distribution of the encompassing categories of verbs by *aktionsarten* is telling of a few characteristics of aspect and *aktionsart* in English. Some difficulties in the process of categorizing and describing these 100 common verbs also point out some insights into these functions of the English verbal system.

Upon considering the verbs in the list for categorization on Comrie's (1981) chart, it was immediately clear that describing these verbs by these categories without a specific context was difficult. Categorization would be more accurate if a more specific instance of the verb's usage was considered. Discerning between a verb that necessitated telicity was simpler, but many had possible punctual and durative uses, which is why so many of them could not be categorized specifically on the chart when considering only the general meaning and use of the verb, as shown in Table 3. It is clear, then, that inherent meaning cannot be the only or even the best indicator of *aktionsart*, as Comrie (1981) suggests, and defining *aktionsart* as "lexical aspect," or giving it this title, is inaccurate as well, because this verbal semantic function does not follow from the lexeme used, but from multiple sources.

Of particular difficulty to this process was the verb "to pass," because it has two common uses; "to pass" as in "to hand over an object," and "to pass" as in "to overcome or move/go alongside." The former is inherently telic, while the latter is not, it is atelic. This example demonstrates how a verb cannot be described in general, but must be categorized and defined based on its usage around other linguistic components.

Because most of the verbs could be used with either aspect and different *aktionsarten*, as shown in Table 4, both are only constituent parts of the verb's total meaning in a given context. Even when a verb could be narrowed to a specific category, or particular types of *aktionsarten*,

they still can be used with both aspects. Therefore, it seems that *aktionsart* is a partner with aspect in the multiple-constituent semantic force of a verb, as discussed above. It is interesting to note, as well, that stative verbs seem to be tied to the perfective aspect, though not exclusively.

An interesting phenomenon shown in the data, particular in Table 2, is that the most numerous of these categories are telic and stative, which may be telling of the character and function of the English language as a whole. Telic verbs clearly present a process and it endpoint, and stative verbs give a particularly descriptive dynamic. Based on the categorizations of these common verbs, English seems to be a language impressively adept at narration and storytelling.

Conclusion

By understanding *aktionsart* as a semantic partner with aspect, the distinction of *aktionsarten* from aspect in definition is maintained, as proposed by Bache (1982), while explaining its inseparable connection to aspect in verbal function, which the present author believes is necessary, considering that it does not seem that these categories can be used separately from one another (Bache, 1982). In addition, it is also clear in the data from the English verbal system and examples from multiples languages that *aktionsart* is not simply a lexical-semantic category in verbal function, but also arises from surrounding grammar and contextual semantics. Therefore, *aktionsart* should not be referred to as "lexical aspect", and, as Bache (1982) proposed, the term *aktionsart* should be maintained for semantic distinction and clear, useful metalanguage.

Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study

In this brief composition, a full and thorough representation of aspect and *aktionsart* and their uses has not been provided. To propose a responsibly general definition for *aktionsart's* use

with aspect, a longer study defining the constituency of the category, and presenting each part in its use as a constituent, in turn, of aspect, is necessary. This may be done by formalizing or extending Comrie's (1981) and Vendler's (1957) suggestions for categorizing different *aktionsarten*, or by synthesizing these with the proposals made by Lyons (1977) and Bache (1982; 1985), as well as with others referenced herein, and with further study. The scope of this sort of project is beyond the resources of the present author at the time of composition, but this sort of research would be productive in aspect studies. Academic-level proficiency in multiple languages is necessary for one who seeks to study aspect and *aktionsart* in depth, as many useful works in the topic have been written in German, Russian, French, Spanish, or otherwise; lacking these skills was a limiting factor to the present author for this study, and reliance on syntheses of these studies in English texts was a useful substitute. A collaborative cross-linguistic project or research by an author highly skilled in these languages would be indispensable for a comparative study in aspect and *aktionsart*.

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Appendix

	Punctual	Durative
Telic	Achievement	Accomplishment
Atelic	Semelfactive	Activity
Changeless		State

Table 1. Comrie's modified chart

	Number in 100 Most Common English Verbs
Telic	51
Atelic	30
Changeless	20

Table 2. Distribution in telicity

	Number in 100 Most Common English Verbs
Achievement	17
Semelfactive	3
Accomplishment	0
Activity	4
State	20
Undefined	56

Table 3. Distribution by type

	Number in 100 Most Common English Verbs
Only Perfective	7
Only Imperfective	0
Both	93

Table 4. Distribution by possible aspect