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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 aktsionsart, 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 aktsionsart, 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, aktsionsart, 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 perfect 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 *aktearten* 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 *aktearten* much less often, and by fewer
*aktearten*. Because there is not a clear delineation between which *aktearten* the perfective
aspect can use and which the imperfective can use, determining the relationship between the two
is important, and warrants the following discussion.

*Kaktearten* as a *component or partner to aspect*. When considering *aktearten* 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 *aktearten* a category of aspect as, for example,
Comrie, Cook, Lyons, and Waltke and O’Connor do, would be inaccurate. Calling *aktearten* 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 *aktearten*
treats it as though it refers to the same sort of idea by different linguistic means. Cook’s
definition is more direct in calling *aktearten* literally “phasal aspect.” In contrast, to say that
*aktearten* is a *component* of aspect is to claim, rather, that *aktearten*, 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 réigna 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) καὶ φωνὴ ἐγενετο ἐκ τῶν ουρανῶν... (And a voice came from heaven...)
2) ...ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα (...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.
References


## Appendix

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<th>Punctual</th>
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<td>Accomplishment</td>
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<td>Atelic</td>
<td>Semelfactive</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeless</td>
<td></td>
<td>State</td>
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Table 1. Comrie’s modified chart

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<th>Number in 100 Most Common English Verbs</th>
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<td>Telic</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atelic</td>
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<td>Changeless</td>
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Table 2. Distribution in telicity

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<tr>
<td>Semelfactive</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undefined</td>
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Table 3. Distribution by type

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<th>Number in 100 Most Common English Verbs</th>
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<td>Only Perfective</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Imperfective</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>93</td>
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Table 4. Distribution by possible aspect