

Hybrid aspect

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Cases such as the one in (1), containing a progressive form, are typical examples of imperfectives in most if not all papers on aspect.

(1) Hamida was reading a book.

I will show, however, that “was reading” can in fact be a form for the perfective too, as puzzling as this may look at first sight. Let us start by considering (2), where (1) has a *when*-clause modifier.

(2) Hamida was reading a book when Tim entered the room.

In the very well-established framework of Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria (2000, 2004), the *when*-clause is a modifier of the topic-time of the clause, which is located *within* the event-time over which the event of reading extends on. This relationship of inclusion is the classically associated with the imperfective and Imperfect forms. Let us now consider (3), which contains the same form (“was reading”) but a *for*-time modifier:

(3) Hamida was reading a book for three hours.

For three hours is also a modifier of the topic-time (Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria (2004). In particular, *for*-time modifiers assert the minimum interval about which the situation is true. The verbal form is the same. However, we can demonstrate that the form does not represent a, let’s say, full imperfective anymore. Let us look at (4):

(4) Myriam said that Hamida was reading a book for three hours.

The temporal relation between the interval of saying and that of reading must be one whereby the reading must be past-shifted and can never overlap with the saying, as shown in (5). The reading must obtain at an earlier time than the saying.

(5) -----was reading-----said-----utterance-time

As expected, when the *for*-modifier occurs, a *when*-clause modifying an interval included in the reading time is not possible. The only viable interpretation of a sentence like (6) below is that whereby Hamida starts reading the book and stays engaged at it for three hours after Tim entered the room.

(6) Hamida was reading a book for three hours when Tim entered the room.

We see that (6) behaves exactly the same as (7), with forms that can be considered to be perfective in an uncontroversial manner:

(7) Hamida read a book when Tim entered the room.

We have therefore to arrive at the inevitable conclusion that the Imperfect form “was reading” is quite perfective after all. Given the interpretation of (2) as well, I conclude that

the auxiliary copula is ambiguous between imperfective and perfective, as all states in English are. The periphrastic progressive can be either an imperfective or a perfective progressive then. It is worthwhile to note that while the periphrastic “was reading” is the only way English has to express imperfectivity with eventive predicates, it seems to have two ways to mark what I call “perfective progressive”: a periphrastic mode as in (4) or (6) and inflected form, as in (7). The perfective progressive can be deemed as hybrid in the sense that it has a perfective component (in the auxiliary) and an imperfective one (in the lexical verb gerund). For more of this, based on Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria’s inspirational work, see Arche 2014.

References

- Arche, M.J. 2014. The construction of viewpoint aspect: the imperfective revisited. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 32, 3: 791-831.
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