

LECTURES ON POLISH VERBAL ASPECT. SUMMARY

This monograph offers an academic course on the grammatical category of verbal aspect in Polish, and as such seeks to remedy the previous lack of any such comprehensive publication on this subject intended for students. The objective of the book is twofold: to present the essential functions of aspect in Polish and to offer an overview of the most influential linguistic theories of aspect. Additionally, the grammatical category of aspect is also analyzed from the extra-linguistic perspective of logic, as well as that of law.

Chapter 1 provides a general outlook on the aspectual opposition in Polish, discussing its basic functions, semantic parameters, formal exponents and the statistics of usage. The material is designed in such a way that this chapter can be utilized as a single lecture on aspect in a one-term course on descriptive grammar. Subsequent chapters are intended for a more detailed course on aspect, each of them covering more extensive chunks of material.

Chapter 2 focuses on the functions of prefixes and suffixes, introduces the semantic category of aspectual classes (*Aktionsart*) and describes the origins of the category of aspect in Polish and other Slavonic languages. A classification of predicates based on the fundamental opposition between events and non-events is provided in chapter 3, which is followed in chapter 4 by a detailed discussion on the meaning of the perfective and imperfective aspect resulting from the interaction of an aspectual class with the context. When all these factors are taken into account, various types of aspectual pairs can be distinguished.

Chapter 5 presents data on the occurrence of perfective and imperfective verbs in various grammatical forms in the National Corpus of Polish (*Narodowy Korpus Języka Polskiego*), and the ratio of such forms is subsequently scrutinized in theoretical terms. Chapter 6, dealing with the applications of aspectual distinctions, highlights the consequences of using a perfective vs. an imperfective form in a legal text. In the concluding chapter 7, an algorithm is proposed for the use of aspect in Polish, taking into consideration the tension between register, verb classes, particular meaning and grammatical forms.

In view of the abundance and variety of existing theories of aspect, which have produced a multitude of often inconsistent approaches and terms, a historical sketch of aspect studies is presented outside the main body of the monograph, in an extensive appendix also including a section on aspect marking in Polish dictionary entries as well as suggestions for how the category may be tagged in corpora.

The work assumes aspect to be a lexically based grammatical category. This assumption implies that the functions fulfilled by the perfective and imperfective aspect, respectively, are affected by the encoded lexical meaning of a verb, and more specifically by its membership in one of the following classes: achievements, accomplishments, states or activities (Zeno Vendler's classification and its extrapolations to Slavic languages are discussed in chapter 3). For instance, the class of accomplishments, represented by such Polish verbs as *pisać* 'write' or *rozwijać* 'unfold', includes telic predicates, i.e. actions oriented towards achieving an internal goal, expressed as a basic meaning component of the perfective form of the verb. Generally, perfective verbs denote events, or holistically-viewed situations interpreted as points on the time axis, even if they may actually extend over a time period (e.g. the event *napisałem książkę* 'I write-past-PF a book' includes the situation *pisalem książkę* 'I write-past-IPF a book').

One of the key distinctions in the analysis of aspect is the opposition between the narrative register and the discourse register. In the former, aspect is selected not only on the basis of the semantics of the situation (being an event or non-event), but also on the basis of its function in the narrative. In Stephen M. Dickey's (2000) view, the role of the invariant of the perfective aspect in East Slavic languages is played by temporal definiteness of a situation in a narrative sequence, whereas in West Slavic languages it is played by the holistic view upon the situation. What we try to demonstrate in this book is that narrative functions and strictly semantic functions may either converge or diverge within a single language and within a single text. The arguments raised herein lend support to Dickey's claim that the Polish aspectual system should be seen as a hybrid combining features of the East and West Slavic groups.

Following Yuri Maslov (1948), the fundamental condition attesting to the existence of an aspectual pair is assumed to be the ability for the imperfective verb of the pair to be used in the iterative event sense or in the historical present. Members of the category of aspect can take on primary functions, which are invariant, or secondary functions. The primary meaning of an imperfective verb is processual, but such a verb may also denote a holistically-viewed iterative event, a past event narrated in the historic present or a general fact.

An aspectual opposition proper, i.e. a pair of lexemes differing only with respect to the aspect parameter, is formed by a majority of verbs, although there is also a group

of perfectiva and imperfectiva tantum. The non-categorical character of the aspectual opposition and the heterogeneity of the functions performed by the imperfective aspect is what prompts many researchers to deny aspect the status of a grammatical category. It should not, however, be seen as an isolated phenomenon in the language system. Among all verbs, the share of those with aspectual counterparts is about 90%, exceeding by a small margin the percentage of nouns with a regular number opposition, and by a large margin the percentage of personal nouns with a gender opposition reflecting natural gender.

In this monograph, statistics on prefixal and suffixal aspectual pairs have been compiled on the basis of updated entries culled from the *PWN–Oxford Polish-English Dictionary* (*Słownik polsko-angielski PWN–Oxford*) and the *Grammatical Dictionary of Polish* (*Słownik gramatyczny języka polskiego – sgjp.pl*). Among 12 164 verbs included in *PWN–Oxford* dictionary there are 6123 imperfective verbs (51%) and 5950 perfective verbs (49%), 1000 imperfectiva tantum (8.2%), 827 perfectiva tantum (6.8%), and 91 biaspectual verbs (0.7%). 10 246 verbs (84%) form 5123 aspectual pairs, among which there are 2960 pairs with a suffixal imperfective verb (24.3% of all verbs), 1670 pairs with a prefixal perfective verb (13% of all verbs) and 493 perfective verbs with the suffix *-ną-* (4% of all verbs) (see Table 1).

This monograph is the first publication to offer statistics on the use of Polish aspectual forms. The data can be utilized in teaching Polish as a foreign language, in natural language processing and in other fields. The statistical data is also interpreted here from the perspective of aspectual semantics. The overall statistics of perfective and imperfective verbs culled from texts are significantly different from their numbers given in dictionaries: there are twice as many imperfective verbs than perfective ones in the corpus, but a large share of them are imperfectiva tantum such as *być* ‘be’ and *mieć* ‘have’, fulfilling a grammatical function. Additionally, the statistics of verbs with purely aspectual prefixes are presented (see Table 3). The most frequent Polish aspectual prefix is *z-/s-*, the second is *za-*.

This English-language summary does not present the content of chapters 1–4, which deal with the exponents of the category, semantic invariants, aspectual classes of verbs and particular meanings. All these issues, which are in fact common for all the North Slavic languages, have been extensively discussed in a number of sources. Our description of the meaning of prefixes highlights the segmentational meaning of the prefix *za-*, which stands out from its traditionally recognized ingressive meaning. New perfective verbs prefixed with *za-*, such as *zagłosować* ‘cast a vote’ or *zawalczyć* ‘make an effort’ are characteristic of the Polish language spoken at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Among the particular meanings of imperfective verbs, some have been widely discussed in aspect studies, viz. durative, iterative (habitual) and general-factual (fact stating). Here, more attention is devoted to the performative meaning couched in linguistic politeness-theoretic terms. A novel meaning of the imperfective aspect is also distinguished, referred to as definitional use, as the verb is used in definitions or in sentences explaining details of a situation. This meaning, which performs an exemplifying function of the imperfective aspect, is useful in the interpretation of the specifically Polish use of imperfective verbs in legal codes and in proverbs, as discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter 5 presents the statistics of aspectual distinctions in various personal and impersonal forms, with the data being subsequently analyzed from a theoretical perspective. As expected, the perfective aspect prevails in past tense forms, in passive participles and in impersonal forms ending in *-no/-to*, which are typically used in narrative. The perfective aspect is also more frequently attested than the imperfective in the conditional mood, which seems contrary to the claim put forward by Abraham and Leiss (2008: xiii) that epistemic predicates tend to take imperfective forms. Both the subjunctive mood and the imperfective aspect of telic verbs in their basic meaning of an ongoing event suspend the factive character of that event (i.e. its interpretation as an accomplished fact): all the Slavic languages, including Polish, avoid doubling up these two mechanisms of suspending the factivity of an event.

Perfective verbs are naturally much more frequent than imperfective verbs in the non-negated imperative mood, e.g. *otwórz okno* ‘open-PF a/the window’. The use of imperfective (*otwieraj okno* ‘open-IPF a/the window’) in such contexts may be motivated by a direct call-to-action or by a blunt, plain-speaking relationship between the speaker and hearer. Polish also follows the general Slavic rule that the negated form corresponding to a non-negated perfective imperative is a negated imperfective form (*otwórz okno* but *nie otwieraj okna* – ‘open-PF a/the window’ but ‘don’t open-IPF a/the window’). Exceptions to this rule occur when the negated imperative has the illocutionary force of a warning or when the hearer has no control over the action.

The perfective aspect is also prevalent among infinitives, especially when it is required by verbs in superordinate clauses, except in the future tense of imperfective verbs and the imperfective infinitive complementing phase verbs of the *zacząć* ‘begin’ type. This is especially evident in the factive construction of a superordinate clause with an infinitive. e.g. *pomogłem mu to zrobić* ‘I help-past-PF him do it’, which implies ‘he did it’, *zapomniałem podlać kwiaty* ‘I forget-past-PF to water the plants’, which implies ‘I did not water the plants’. This analysis recruits Martin Haspelmath’s (1989) classification of the functions of the infinitive and of verbs in superordinate clauses.

Much space in this book is devoted to certain constructions involving impersonal verb forms that have so far garnered little or no scholarly attention, not only with respect to their aspectual dimension. Such constructions include absentives, i.e. infinitives used to explain absence (*byłem się wykapać*) ‘I went to bathe myself’, literally ‘I was to bathe myself’, and the very frequent resultative “quasi-perfect” construction of the type *mam zrobione* ‘I have something done’, formally resembling past perfect forms in non-Slavic languages. Both of these constructions – the absentive and the quasi-perfect – are formed in Polish mostly from perfective verbs.

Although the quasi-perfect construction has been dealt with in a number of Polish linguistic and especially comparative Slavic-Germanic publications (albeit sometimes under different labels), it has been so far ignored in general coursebooks of Polish grammar. The quasi-perfect is a construction denoting a state resulting from an event typically expressed by means of a participle of a perfective verb. It cannot be treated as a grammatical tense, since the agent and the beneficiary of this resultant state may be two different entities. Much as *mam przeczytaną książkę*, lit. ‘I have the book read’, invariably means that it is me who read the book, *mam ugotowany obiad*, lit. ‘I have the dinner cooked’, may mean that someone else has cooked the dinner for me, *mam obiecaną książkę*, lit. ‘I have the book promised’, excludes the possibility that it was me who promised (to get) the book. Verbs implying the non-identity of the agent and the beneficiary are the most frequent in the quasi-perfect construction.

Special attention is devoted to the use of imperfective and perfective verbs in legal texts, such as criminal-law codes in Polish and other Slavic languages. In texts of this kind, the use of language units should not only conform to their intuitive understanding within the general register, but it should also yield their non-ambiguous interpretation as legal terms and quasi-terms. The formulation present in the Polish Penal Code uses the imperfective verb *Kto zabija człowieka, podlega karze* ‘Whoever kills-IPF a human being, shall be subject to penalty...’¹ (art. 148 Penal Code), and this has been so for the last 150 years. All the other West and South Slavic languages, on the other hand, apply a perfective verb in analogous contexts, e.g. Czech and Slovak *Kdo jiného úmyslně usmrtí...*, Bulgarian *umàrtvi*, Serbian *liši života*. (In East Slavic languages, the subject of the sentence is the name of the crime expressed as an aspect-free form of a deverbal noun, e.g. the Russian *Ubiystvo nakazyvayetsya...* ‘Murder shall be punishable...’).

The prevalent opinion among most Polish legal professionals is that the imperfective aspect of the Polish code is necessitated by the requirement of a present tense interpretation, as the use of perfective forms would render a future time reference.

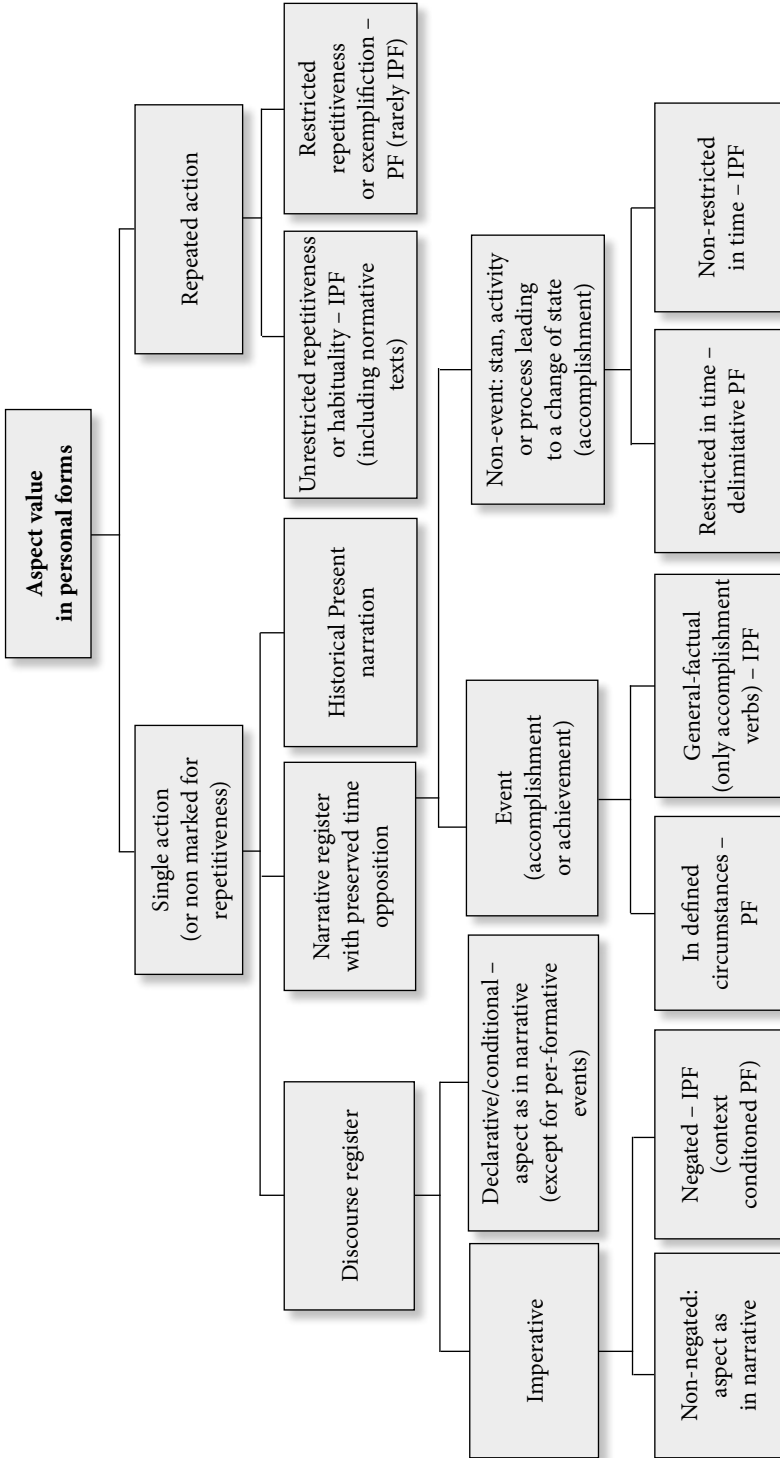
¹ The two fragments of the Polish Penal Code quoted here in English translations after legislationline.org.

Actually, however, the *praesens perfecti* forms do not obligatorily imply a future-reference interpretation in Polish, and theoretically they could be used with a universal time reference as in Czech or Slovak, especially that in these languages the primary function of *praesens perfecti* is expressing futurity, as in Polish (but unlike in the South Slavic languages). A similar use of the imperfective aspect can be also observed in Polish proverbs: *Kto sieje wiatr, zbiera burze* ‘He who sows-IPF wind, reaps storm’, while their Russian counterparts deploy the perfective aspect: *Kto poseyet veter, pozhnyot buryu*.

Contrarily to the opinion mentioned above, the use of the imperfective aspect in Polish criminal-law codes may actually pose the danger of implying an ‘attempt’ interpretation rather than ‘accomplished deed’ interpretation. In the case of achievement verbs, it is impossible to interpret the imperfective aspect as an attempt, e.g. *zabija* as ‘attempts to kill’. The other verb classes, however, do not exclude such an interpretation, cf. art. 18.2 of the Penal Code: *Odpowiada za podżeganie, kto chcąc, aby inna osoba dokonała czynu zabronionego, nakłania ją do tego* ‘Whoever, desiring for another person to commit a prohibited act, persuades-IPF that person to do so, is guilty of incitement’. Here, lawyers are not unanimous whether the punishable act should be understood solely as successfully inducing in another person an intention to commit a prohibited act (an intention which was subsequently fulfilled), or as a mere attempt to induce such an intention. The Supreme Court of Poland has ruled in favor of the former interpretation.

The Polish Penal Code, like other criminal-law codes, does explicitly distinguish between a criminal act as a deed and as an attempt and preparatory steps, but as the above-mentioned example suggests, the boundaries are not always clear-cut. More Polish examples of the semantic conflict of this sort are discussed, bearing in mind that the use of *praesens perfecti* and other forms of perfective verbs in other Slavic languages prohibits any interpretive ambiguities of this sort, even on a literal and lay reading.

It should be apparent that the prevalence of the imperfective aspect in the Penal Code is not necessitated by the present time-reference interpretation, which could also be afforded by the use of *praesens perfecti*. It is not an iterative use of the imperfective aspect either, since the code penalizes a single occurrence of a criminal act. That said, an alternative explanation is offered of this phenomenon. Namely, the use of the imperfective verbs in the criminal-law code exploits a certain function thereof, i.e. the definition of a certain situation which is subject to legal sanctions. This definitional function of the imperfective aspect has been described in chapter 4, among other particular meanings. It occurs in all Slavic languages, where it is deployed in encyclopedic and dictionary entries, with Polish being the only language which extends this use to proverbs and



The algorithm should be treated as a set of guidelines rather than a definitive formula.

legal codes. This may be due to a relatively weakly represented exemplary function of perfective verbs (as in *Jak sobie pościelesz, tak się wyśpisz* ‘As you make your bed so you must lie in it’). The definitional function of the imperfective verb in various types of texts can be also referred to as the illustrative function of the imperfective aspect.

The main body of the monograph ends with conclusions, in which an algorithm is offered, guiding the choice of aspect in personal verb forms. It takes into account aspectual classes, repetitiveness (or lack thereof), narrative or discourse register as well as other contextual and grammatical conditions, such as the imperative mood and negation. The algorithm is also presented below, with each terminal box representing an aspectual form selected on the basis of the factors presented in the higher-level boxes.

(translated by Daniel Sax)