

The aim of this paper is to make clear the differences between tense and aspect and to show that tense is a syntactic functional category and is not universally attested even in Present-day languages, while aspect is close to substantives like nouns and verbs, and then, is attested in very early languages both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. That is, tense came late into human languages.

It is rather widely accepted that the Indo-European languages had no grammatical category to express tense originally (cf. Kuryłowicz 1964, Lehmann 1974). Proto-Indo-European's verbal system was originally based on aspect, with a basic contrast between imperfective and perfective. This contrast was indicated by means of endings (*m, s, t*, versus *x, th, Ø*). Use of the perfective indicates that the action is assumed to be completed and, as a consequence, imperfective commonly indicates incomplete action. This contrast in aspect by means of affixes on verbs is clearly reflected in the following Vedic examples:

- (1) *kuvíd asya védat*
 certainly it he-will-understand
 'he will certainly understand it' (Rigveda 2.35.2, from Lehmann 1974: 107)

Unlike aspect, which had a separate form to express its function in the verbal system mentioned above, deictic time distinctions did not. They were just implied or could be expressed by temporal adverbials or particles:

- (2) *hòs eide tá t' eónta tá t' essómena pró t' eónta*
 who knew those Ptc being those Ptc will-be before Ptc being
 'Who knew the things happening now, those that will happen and those that have happened.'
 (Iliad I.70. Lehmann 1974: 139)

The past time was indicated by a particle *pró*, which means 'before', or 'earlier', while the verb *eónta* is a non-finite form and does not give deictic information.

Although aspect still remains as a semantic feature in Present-day English, a deictic temporal feature came to be realized morphologically, for example, as affixes on verbs. At that time, these features were still properties of the verbs. These features were finally extended from the VP into a higher position in the clause structure. At this stage, they are no longer only properties of the verb, but they constitute a category of the whole clause and head their own projection. A functional projection, TP, emerged in English. The emergence of TP brought about many syntactic phenomena in English such as *do*-support, grammaticalization of modal verbs as modal auxiliaries, and EPP, i.e. subject requirement.

However, as discussed in Comrie (1976: 82-84), today there are still a number of languages which have no specific markers of past versus present tense, although they have markers of aspect: West African languages including Yoruba Igbo and Chinese.

Let us turn to first language acquisition. Early English child grammars at the early multi-word stage around the age of 20 months have no Tense-system, and then children do not acquire the morphosyntactic properties associated with TP: such as *do*-support, modal auxiliaries, EPP and finite verb forms. The structures produced by English children at this stage typically involve uninflected verb forms and *-ing*-/*+(e)n* forms:

- (3) Hayley draw it (Hayley 10 months Radford 1990: 48)

- (4) Doggy barking (Bethan 21 months, Radford 1990: 148)
 (5) Tractor broken (Daniel 23 months, Radford 1990:149)

Children frequently use the *-ing/-en* forms, compared with their sporadic use of other affixes like the regular past (i.e. *-ed*) and the regular third person singular (i.e. *-s*). These *-ing/-en* forms contain aspectual information. There is much literature supporting the aspectual status of *+ing* and *+en* (cf. Comrie 1976, Smith 1991). It means that children are aware of aspectual information before the emergence of TP. This *aspect before tense* hypothesis is widely accepted by child language researchers (cf. Brown 1973, Antinucci and Miller 1976, Bloom et al. 1980).

Based on above facts, I claim that aspect is not a functional category and is close to substantives like nouns and verbs (cf. Tsimpli 1996, Smith 1991). This claim fits in naturally with the architecture of the human mind adopted by Fodor (1983) and with the account of the central system developed by Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Substantives are linked to a conceptual slot in the mental lexicon which is assumed to be part of the central cognitive system. Assuming that this conceptual lexicon reflects mental properties which are not purely linguistic, and further that it does not need to refer to language-specific differences in the syntax proper, this mental lexicon is not contained in the language module (cf. Tsimpli 1996). On the other hand, it is not equally clear that functional categories have a conceptual counterpart in the mental lexicon. There is a systematic correspondence between categories and concepts in the case of substantives, while functional categories lack such a correspondence. Hence the presence of aspectual information at the two-word stage, before the emergence of TP is not surprising at all.

References

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