

Aspect in Grammatical Variation

Studies in Language Variation

The series aims to include empirical studies of linguistic variation as well as its description, explanation and interpretation in structural, social and cognitive terms. The series will cover any relevant subdiscipline: sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, dialectology, historical linguistics, anthropology/anthropological linguistics. The emphasis will be on linguistic aspects and on the interaction between linguistic and extralinguistic aspects — not on extralinguistic aspects (including language ideology, policy etc.) as such.

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Aspect in Grammatical Variation

Edited by James A. Walker

Aspect in Grammatical Variation

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Introduction

James A. Walker
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1.1 Impetus for the volume

Since the study of linguistic variation was first extended ‘above and beyond’ phonology in the early 1970’s (Sankoff 1973), studies of grammatical variation involving verbal aspect have proliferated. However, despite the diversity of treatments of aspect in linguistics generally (e.g. Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Smith 1997) and the problem of polyvalence between grammatical form and linguistic function (Sankoff 1988a), the methodological issues involved in defining and analyzing such variables have received little explicit attention. A review of the literature on the aspectual function and interpretation of grammatical variables raises many questions about the methodological decisions made in defining the variable context, extracting tokens, and coding such frequently-cited distinctions as ‘anterior’, ‘stative’, and ‘perfect(ive)’. My reading of the semantic literature on aspect has allowed me to arrive at analytic decisions that have continued to serve me in subsequent research (Meyerhoff, Sidnell & Walker, in preparation; Van Herk & Walker 2005; Walker 2001; Walker & Sidnell, in press), but as the contributions to this volume show, there are a range of decisions that can be made on the basis of the same readings. The goal of this volume is to bring such decisions into the open in order to benefit other researchers working on similar variables.

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of aspect and common aspectual distinctions, the extent to which aspect has figured in the study of grammatical variation, and the methodological steps involved in conducting variationist analysis. This overview foreshadows questions that arise again and again in the contributions to this volume: How do we define the variable context for grammatical variables involving aspect? Should the variable context be defined on formal or functional grounds? Should aspect be coded on the basis of the lexical verb, the verb phrase, the sentence, the larger discourse context, or all of these? Should aspect be coded as one factor group or several? How many aspectual distinctions are relevant to linguistic variation? How many factors should be included in each

factor group? The chapter concludes with a brief outline of each of the contributions in relation to these questions.

1.2 Aspect and grammatical variation

1.2.1 Aspect

Aspect is a cross-linguistically common semantic distinction that, while related to tense, differs from it in a number of ways. Tense may be viewed as a form of (temporal) deixis: just as spatial deixis locates entities in relation to the speaker's 'here', tense locates events or situations in relation to the speaker's 'now' (Dahl 1985: 25; see also Comrie 1986: 9; Smith 1997: 97). In contrast, aspect is not deictic; rather, it focuses on the internal temporal structure of an event or situation (Comrie 1976: 3; Smith 1997: 97). Binnick (1991: 170) defines aspect as a "fully grammaticized, obligatory" feature of language, but in practice aspectual distinctions may not be fully grammaticized, or even grammaticized at all (Dahl 1985: 26; Smith 1997: 14), and may be conveyed morphologically (through inflectional or derivational morphology), periphrastically (through morphosyntactic constructions), lexically, or through selectional restrictions on lexical and grammatical combinations (Comrie 1976). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that 'aspect' is a cover term that may refer to semantic or grammatical distinctions.

A number of models of aspect have been proposed (e.g. Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Smith 1997), but most can be arranged in a general schema as shown in Figure 1.1 (adapted from Comrie 1976: 25), referred to by many of the contributions to this volume.

The broadest division opposes perfective and imperfective aspect (Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Smith 1997). Perfective aspect views a situation as completed (Comrie 1976: 18) or focuses on its entirety rather than its constituent parts (Smith 1997: 3), while imperfective aspect views situations as ongoing, incomplete, or

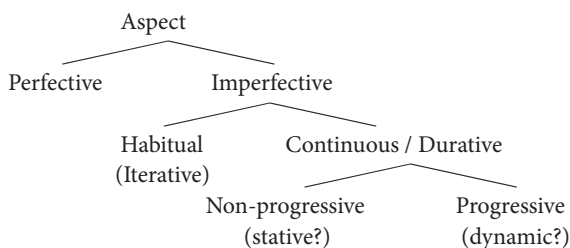


Figure 1.1 Aspectual distinctions (adapted from Comrie 1976: 25)

open-ended. Smith (1997: 2–3, 66, 73, 77) distinguishes two types of aspect: ‘view-point’ aspect, which may be perfective, imperfective, or neutral, as illustrated in (1), and ‘situation’ aspect, which refers to verbal distinctions (see Table 1.1 below) that may be subsidiary or orthogonal to viewpoint aspect, as illustrated in (2).

- (1) a. *Perfective*
Hecubus walked to school. (completed)
- b. *Imperfective*
Hecubus was walking to school. (in progress)
- c. *Neutral*
Hecubus walked in the park. (completed or in progress)
- (2) a. *State* (static, durative)
Hecubus loves tofu.
- b. *Activity* (dynamic, durative, atelic)
Hecubus ate.
- c. *Accomplishment* (dynamic, durative, telic)
Hecubus walked to school.
- d. *Semelfactive* (dynamic, atelic, instantaneous)
Hecubus tapped at the door.
- e. *Achievement* (dynamic, telic, instantaneous)
Hecubus won the race.

Imperfective aspect is commonly divided into habitual and continuous (or durative) aspect. Comrie (1976: 27–28) notes that habitual aspect views a situation as “characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended in fact that the situation [...] is viewed not as an incidental property of the moment but precisely, as a characteristic feature of a whole period.” Although habituais overlap to some extent with repetition, or iterative aspect (Comrie 1976: 42), habituais are not necessarily iterative (or vice versa; Comrie 1976: 27–28). Continuous or durative aspect also views situations as lasting for a period of time (Comrie 1976: 41; Smith 1997: 19). Durative aspect may be divided into progressive and non-progressive aspect. This latter distinction corresponds to some extent to the distinction between states and activities (dynamic situations), since stative situations are inherently continuous, and statives are therefore incompatible with progressive aspect (though see below). Other aspectual distinctions cut across the divisions in Figure 1.1: instantaneous or punctual aspect is incompatible with imperfective aspect (Comrie 1976: 42), and telic aspect views situations as having an inherent end-point (Comrie 1976: 44; Smith 1997: 19). These divisions (which Smith (1997) calls ‘situation’ aspect) have been categorized most succinctly by Vendler (1957) into four situation types distinguished by their aspectual composition, as shown in Table 1.1: states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. These

Table 1.1 Vendler's (1957) aspectual situation types (adapted from Smith 1997)

	Stative	Durative	Telic
States	+	+	–
Activities	–	+	–
Accomplishments	–	+	+
Achievements	–	–	+

situation types have provided a common point of reference in classifying verbal aspect (cf. Binnick 1991).

Analogous to the question of whether aspect is semantic or grammatical is the question of whether it derives from the verb or whether it is 'compositional', built up by elements within the VP or sentence (Smith 1997:2). Verbs describe different types of situation, so they must contain aspectual properties (Smith 1997:98) or *Aktionsarten*, defined by Binnick (1991:170) as "purely lexical categories, ungrammatical, optional, and unsystematic, defined in very specific terms such as inceptive or resumptive." Since the same verb may enter into a variety of aspectual situations, our task is to isolate the inherent aspectual properties of the verb from the aspectual properties of its context. However, Dahl (1985:27) notes the problem with this task, since "every occurrence of a verb is in a definite context, and there is no obvious way of determining what a 'neutral aspectual context' would be like". For this reason, some have argued that the properties of the verb represent an aspectual *potential*, and that the aspectual reading holds not at the level of *Aktionsart* but only at the level of the sentence (Smith 1997:4).

1.2.2 Grammatical variation

Since the term 'variation' is used in a number of senses in linguistics, we should clarify what we mean by variation in this book. In the semantic literature, variation is normally taken to refer to cross-linguistic differences in the morphosyntactic realization of semantic categories that are available to all languages as part of the human linguistic endowment (e.g. Giorgi & Pianesi 1997). However, the variationist tradition followed in this book (e.g. Labov 1972; D. Sankoff 1988; Walker 2010) uses the term 'variation' to refer to differences in the formal realizations of morphology, syntax, or discourse features to express roughly the same meaning in the same language. Semantic theory generally assumes every difference in linguistic form to correspond to a change in meaning. In contrast, the variationist approach recognizes the polyvalent nature of the relationship between grammatical form and linguistic function (D. Sankoff 1988), which means that we cannot assume that every difference in form *necessarily* entails a difference in meaning:

that is, we cannot assume a one-to-one relationship between semantic and grammatical aspectual distinctions, even within the same language.

The study of grammatical variation¹ in this sense dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with Labov's work on the copula in African American English (Labov 1969) and the agentless passive in American English (Weiner & Labov 1974), and carried forward with Sankoff's work on *que*-deletion and auxiliary alternation in Montreal French (G. Sankoff 1980: 85–90; Sankoff & Thibault 1977) and grammaticization in Tok Pisin (Sankoff & Brown 1976). Since that time, studies on grammatical variation have proliferated.

Any analysis of grammatical variation must confront a number of analytical questions. The first question is how to define the variable context, or the 'envelope of variation' (Wolfram 1993; Tagliamonte 2006): When does the speaker have a choice between forms? This question arose as a contentious issue in extending the variationist paradigm from phonology to grammar (Bickerton 1971; Lavandera 1978; Labov 1978; Romaine 1981). Variation in phonological form is relatively uncontroversial, since nobody would claim that alternatively pronouncing a word like *singing* as *singin'* changes its *referential* meaning. However, given the long-standing assumption in certain theories of linguistics, at least as far as syntax goes, that every change in form is necessarily accompanied by a change in meaning (e.g. Bolinger 1977: x; Embick 2008: 65), an early and continuing question in the study of grammatical variation is whether two (or more) forms are indeed "different ways of saying the same thing" (Sankoff 1988a).

Various approaches to this question have been taken, which I refer to broadly as 'form-based' and 'function-based' (Walker 2000, 2010). Form-based approaches begin by noting that two (or more) grammatical forms are (roughly) equivalent in meaning and alternate with each other. The problem then is to determine in what sense they are equivalent. Weiner and Labov (1974; also Labov 1978) argued for logical truth-equivalence, though it was pointed out that logical equivalence may be modified by differences in pragmatic inference (Lavandera 1978; Romaine 1981). Sankoff and Thibault (1981) noted that forms may show differential distributions across the community ('weak complementarity'), though rates of occurrence still need to be quantified using some sort of normalization (e.g. number of occurrences per 10,000 words of text). Although such normalization assumes

1. Here I am using the term 'grammatical' to cover everything 'above and beyond' phonology, though, as in the case of the copula, the boundaries are inherently fuzzy, and grammatical and phonological variation may interact. Early work (Jacobson 1979; Romaine 1981) was preoccupied with categorizing (socio)linguistic variables according to their 'level' within the linguistic system, but recent work suggests that variation may cut across different modules of the grammar (e.g. Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2009a).

that the contexts in which each form can occur are distributed evenly throughout discourse, this assumption does not necessarily hold (cf. Preston 2001:291). In contrast, function-based approaches begin by defining a particular function in discourse and noting all the different forms that convey that function. This approach, first advocated by Dines (1980) in a study of discourse 'extenders' (e.g. *and stuff*), has since been used in studies of past (Tagliamonte 1991; Poplack & Tagliamonte 1996), present (Walker 2000) and future temporal reference (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1999; Poplack & Turpin 1999; Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2009b), quotation of direct speech (Cameron 1998), and others.

Aspectual distinctions have been implicated in the study of grammatical variation almost from the beginning (cf. Sankoff & Thibault 1977). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the earliest studies of grammatical variation (e.g. Bickerton 1975) tended to prefer form-based approaches, first noting that multiple forms served to express the same (or similar) aspectual functions and then looking for contexts which would serve to disambiguate them, and/or tracking differential distribution across the community (e.g. Sankoff & Thibault 1981). However, taking a discourse-functional domain (such as reference to past time) rather than the grammatical forms as the point of departure allows us to delimit different semantic subdivisions (e.g. Poplack & Tagliamonte 1996). Thus, more recent work investigating aspect in grammatical variation has pursued a function-based approach, defining a temporal domain (e.g. present temporal reference) or a particular aspectual function (e.g. habitual aspect; Richardson 1991) and examining the range of morphosyntactic exponents and the semantic and syntactic contexts that influence their distribution (e.g. Poplack & Tagliamonte 1996; Sankoff 1990). While a function-based approach does not obviate the need to examine the question of semantic equivalence, it does sidestep or at least postpone the issue, by reconceptualizing the (socio)linguistic variable as an analytical heuristic device, as opposed to a psychological or linguistic unit.

In confronting the asymmetry of form and meaning in grammatical variation, our working hypothesis is that putative semantic distinctions between forms may be neutralized in discourse (Sankoff 1988a). That is, although we may be able to imagine contexts in which the forms convey different meanings, in practice the full panoply of meanings is not always pertinent for the speaker and/or the interlocutor. Since we do not have direct access to the speaker's intentions in the choice of form, neutralization remains a hypothesis (as does the converse view, that every difference in form necessarily involves a difference in meaning; Sankoff 1988a: 153–154), though one that may be put to empirical test (see Van Herk, this volume).

Once the variable context has been defined, the next step is to determine which factors (language-internal and/or social) condition the variation. Some

have lamented the absence of a theory dictating which factors should be included in the analysis (Bickerton 1971: 467; Romaine 1981: 11–12; Henry 2002: 277), but in my view this represents a misunderstanding of the variationist method as a theory of language. The advantage of the variationist approach is its ‘pretheoretical’ nature (Laks 1992), which allows for the analysis of factors derived from whatever theoretical framework is adopted. The only proviso is that the adopted framework needs to make predictions that can be operationalized: that is, we must be able to translate its predictions into factors that can be coded in an empirical and reliable manner. Thus, semantic distinctions that require access to the speaker’s intentions or mindset, which, as noted above, are inaccessible to empirical investigation, may be difficult or even impossible to operationalize. This consideration is especially important in the study of grammatical variation and aspect, since many of the putative semantic distinctions put forward in the literature require access to the speaker’s intention.

Another crucial element of variationist work is its quantitative nature. Rather than trying to elucidate the meaning of individual examples, we seek to discover patterns of association between variant forms and potential conditioning factors. Thus, rather than relying on categorical or deterministic distinctions, we infer semantic differences from probabilistic associations or preferences. Implicit in this probabilistic reasoning is the further assumption of the principle of multiple causes (Bayley 2002): that is, that the source of the variation may be traced to the influence of multiple factors. While it is possible to examine quantitative conditioning on a factor-by-factor basis, factors may act together in various ways, either antagonistically (i.e. weakening each other or canceling each other out) or synergistically (i.e. strengthening each other) (Sankoff 1988b). For this reason, variationist work often makes use of multivariate analysis, most commonly using the multiple regression feature of the VARBRUL family of computer applications (Guy 1993; Paolillo 2002).² Multivariate statistical applications, such as GoldVarb X (Tagliamonte, Sankoff & Smith 2006) or Rbrul (Johnson 2009), not only determine the statistical significance of factors in conditioning the choice of variant, but they also determine the relative contribution of each factor when all factors are considered simultaneously. The relative ordering of factors, known as the constraint hierarchy, allows us to infer the presence of a particular linguistic system (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001; Tagliamonte 2002). The final step in variationist analysis is perhaps the most important: interpretation and explanation

2. VARBRUL tends to be used more in North American variationist work, while in Europe the study of linguistic variation tends to make use of more general multivariate techniques, such as ANOVA, multiple regression, and multidimensional scaling, using applications such as SPSS and R.

(Guy 1993:247–248). At this point, not only does the quantitative analysis have the opportunity to support or refute our hypotheses, but our interpretation of the results can potentially inform the theory of semantics we have adopted.

1.3 Overview of the volume

The purpose of this introduction has been to contextualize the study of verbal aspect in grammatical variation through a brief history of the field, highlighting a number of problematic areas and common questions, such as:

- How do we define the variable context?
- How can we operationalize putative semantic distinctions as factor groups?
- What is the appropriate linguistic level of analysis of aspect?

The contributions have been ordered roughly around these questions, though they necessarily overlap.

Scott Schwenter and **Rena Torres Cacoullos** approach the problem of defining the variable context by returning to the notion of ‘weak complementarity’ (Sankoff & Thibault 1977). They propose a grammaticalization-path approach to examining two grammatical variables in Spanish – progressive and perfect(ive) – including in the variable context not only all the forms that fulfill a particular function, but also the set of diachronically related functions expressed by those forms.

Ronald Beline Mendes examines variation between two periphrastic constructions in Brazilian Portuguese to express durative and iterative aspect, extending the domain of compositionality beyond the sentence to include the situational and discourse context of the sentence. Arguing that the neutralization in discourse of distinctions such as ‘durative’, ‘iterative’ and ‘progressive’ makes it difficult to use them as factors, he reverses the normal procedure of studies of grammatical variation by taking the aspectual reading as the dependent variable and using the periphrastic constructions as a conditioning factor group.

Although **Gerard Van Herk** accepts that concepts that rely on speaker viewpoint, such as ‘shared knowledge’, do not lend themselves easily to empirical testing, he nevertheless argues that ‘broad but fuzzy’ semantic concepts can be tested indirectly through distinctions that are empirically verifiable. Using several different corpora of written and spoken English, he investigates the alternation of the present perfect with other past tense forms and their conditioning by contextual factors – such as adverbials, verbal objects and clause type – that can be related indirectly to aspectual features.

Similarly, in her discussion of the grammaticalization of morphosyntactic forms normally associated with the future to express habitual aspect in Québec French, **Carmen LeBlanc** takes a compositional approach to defining the variable context for habituais, examining different elements of the sentence, including not only the lexical verb but also subjects, objects and adverbial modification. She analyzes aspectual distinctions proposed in the semantic and grammaticization literature at three levels, using the Vendlerian situation types to define factor groups conditioning the progress of future forms along the path to marking habitual aspect.

Becky Childs and **Gerard Van Herk** investigate the possible syntactic roots of apparent aspectual effects in verbal *-s* in Newfoundland English, decomposing a semantic category into syntactic sub-factors and exploring potentially idiosyncratic lexical effects. Dividing habitual contexts into those marked adverbially, those that are unmarked, and those occurring in *when(ever)* constructions, they question the existence of a monolithic ‘habitual’ category.

In a similar vein, **James A. Walker** questions the nature of ‘stative’ as a single aspectual category by distinguishing between two types of ‘stative’: lexical (stative) and sentential (durative). Using this system, he explores differences in conditioning of the use of the progressive construction in early African American English and of bare verbs in Caribbean English and English-based creole.

Devyani Sharma and **Ashwini Deo** attempt to widen the focus on aspect in studies of second language acquisition by examining not only lexical but also sentential aspect, taking into account the contribution to aspectual compositionality of elements outside the verb phrase. Assessing competing hypotheses of lexical and sentential aspect in accounting for the use of past and progressive morphology in Indian English, they find extensive support for the sensitivity of second-language speakers to sentential aspect.

Hsiao-Ping Biehl examines the acquisition of a morphologically tense-prominent language (Spanish) by speakers of an aspect-prominent language (Chinese). Comparing the marking of past tense in the Spanish of older and younger adult Chinese speakers, she provides evidence that the older speakers acquire semantic distinctions before they acquire the morphology. She appeals to influence from the aspectual system of the speakers’ first language in explaining the morphological patterning of their second-language Spanish.

Although the contributions to this volume differ in some of the details of analytic decisions or findings, they necessarily converge in a number of respects. Contributions differ in their analysis of aspect as a two-level (lexical vs. sentential) system (Sharma and Deo, Walker) versus one that must take into account

multiple levels of analysis (Beline Mendes, LeBlanc). In addition, there are differences in findings for the contributions on second language acquisition, one emphasizing lexical effects (Biehl), the other underlining the greater importance of sentential aspect (Sharma and Deo). However, all contributions problematize frequently cited aspectual categories, such as 'habitual' and 'stative'; most contributions make reference to Vendler's (1957) schema of situation types; and all contributions assume the compositional nature of aspect. In addition, some contributions have in common their examination of the interplay between aspect and grammaticalization (LeBlanc, Schwenter and Torres Cacoullós), the importance of lexical effects (Biehl, Van Herk, Walker), or the use of novel approaches to the analysis of linguistic variation (Beline Mendes, Van Herk).

Apart from bringing to light a number of issues confronting anyone who conducts research on grammatical variation involving verbal aspect, this volume brings together a unique collection of original research on an array of languages and linguistic varieties: African American Vernacular English (Van Herk, Walker), Caribbean English and English-based creole (Walker), Indian English (Sharma and Deo), Newfoundland English (Childs and Van Herk), Canadian French (LeBlanc), Brazilian Portuguese (Beline Mendes), and Spanish (Schwenter and Torres Cacoullós, Biehl). We hope that the research presented in this volume will not only advance and further work on the study of grammatical variation, but will also provide insight into the nature of verbal aspect in general.

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