

*Yishai
Tobin*

ASPECT
IN THE
ENGLISH
VERB

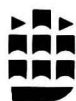
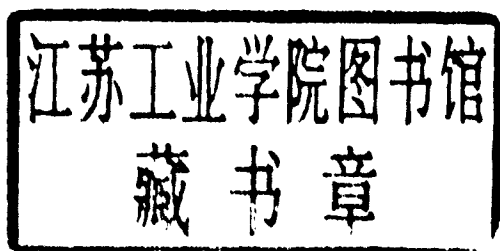


PROCESS AND
RESULT IN LANGUAGE

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Aspect in the English Verb: Process and Result in Language

Yishai Tobin



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Incessant variation in the uses to which we put the same expression is absolutely necessary if the complexity of the Universe is, even in the most imperfect fashion, to find a response in thought. If terms were counters, each purporting always to represent the whole of one unalterable aspect of reality, language would become not the servant of the thought, nor even its ally, but its tyrant.

(Right Hon. Arthur James Balfour, *The foundations of belief*, pp. 266–7)

The commonsense notion that words have synonyms or may be used synonymously is the most difficult to substantiate objectively, so much so that many philosophers have despaired of the task and declared synonymy an impossibility except in the most highly formalized languages where a rigorous definition of the notion of identity could be given. The problem is that when we write $x = y$ in formalized systems then x and y may be substituted for one another in every context in which they occur, without altering that context. In ordinary discourse there is always a change in context when we substitute synonyms, for the introduced synonym creates a new environment and an objective change in meaning. The general notion of synonym, that two words may be interchanged in a sentence without changing the meaning of the sentence, is clear, but can always be made to fail in some critical sense

(S. A. Tyler, *The said and the unsaid*, p. 339)

Preface

When I read some rules about how to speak and how to right correct English, I think: Any fool can invent a rule and all the fools will obey it.

(H. D. Thoreau)

Nothing is as easily overlooked, or as easily forgotten, as the most obvious truths. The tenet that language is a tool for expressing meaning is a case in point. Nobody would deny it – but many influential theories and trends in modern linguistics have ignored it, and have based their work on entirely different and often incompatible assumptions.

(Wierzbicka 1988:1)

This book will deal with the very ‘fuzzy’ category of Aspect in English from the point of view of the concepts of ‘Process’ and ‘Result’ in language. The theoretical and methodological foundations underlying this volume are invariant meaning versus variant discourse or contextual messages, markedness and distinctive feature theory.

Many, if not most, linguists generally associate the three principal theoretical and methodological tenets of this book (invariance versus variation, markedness and distinctive feature theory) with phonetics and phonology. And for good reason! These principles have formed the basis for a theoretical and methodological ‘revolution’ in the fields of phonetics and phonology to the point that most of the phonetic and phonological research in the last half century revolves around these three fundamental principles. It also may be said that these theoretical and methodological principles originally were inspired by work on the sounds and sound systems of language(s) from the Prague School perspective, which subsequently has been passed on to various other descriptive, structuralist, generative and ‘post-generative’ linguistic and phonological theories.

Linguistics, in turn, has been at the centre of most structuralist and post-structuralist research in the humanities and social sciences during this century. Furthermore, if linguistics always has been at the fore of structuralist research in all areas of the human and social sciences, it usually has been a ‘linguistics’ based on the same theoretical and methodological principles originally applied to phonology. Not unsurprisingly, it has been the concepts of invariance versus variation, markedness and distinctive

feature theory which have been adopted and adapted to most of the human and social sciences. It is surprising, however, that while these same 'phonological' principles have been applied freely to other disciplines, linguists generally have preferred to separate language into separate levels of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, often at the expense of these most basic 'phonological' principles.

Therefore another one of the most fundamental principles underlying this volume is *isomorphism*: i.e. the same set of theoretical and methodological principles (such as invariance, markedness and distinctive feature theory) can be applied to all levels of language. Isomorphism implies the postulation of a single set of theoretical and methodological tenets which cuts across the forced and artificial notion of language being composed of separate and autonomous levels of sound, structure, meaning and use. Thus the unofficial motto of this book may very well be: 'What is good for the phonetic-phonological goose will be just as good for the morphological-syntactic-semantic and pragmatic gander'!

One can allow for the postulation and application of an isomorphic linguistic model if one chooses to work within a theoretical and methodological framework which provides a hypothetical unit of linguistic analysis that combines and unites all of the levels of language into a single unit. The linguistic sign, as presented in Saussure (1916) and further expanded upon and developed by other semiotic or sign-oriented linguists, provides the basis for such an isomorphic theoretical and methodological model for linguistic analysis as the one found in this volume.

This book will compare sign-oriented with various sentence-oriented views of language. Each chapter will follow a similar expository line of presenting previous analyses taken from well-known traditional and modern (or neotraditional) sentence-oriented grammatical analyses, and contrast them with a Saussurian or semiotic approach. Many of the traditional and neotraditional approaches were taken from grammars that are highly respected, well accepted and most frequently used by university students and from articles that have been considered to be 'classic' by modern scholars of English and linguistics. Much of the data in this book has been taken from these grammars and articles as well as from a large corpus of spoken and written texts.

In addition to the traditional and neotraditional grammar book data, we also have relied on a corpus of literary and non-literary texts. The corpus, although composed of mostly American and British novels, also contains literary and non-literary works by native speakers of Canadian, Irish and Australian English as well as 'Black English' (at least as it appears in the earlier work of James Baldwin). It represents contemporary as well as older modern texts dating back to the past 125 years. We believe that working with 'real' data in the form of spoken and written texts (which reflect speakers' intuitions no less than contrived or made-up examples so rampant today in formal linguistic research) provides a wide and exhaustive range of data. Indeed, just as 'real life is more interesting than fiction', our experience consistently has shown that 'real' language data is far more creative and challenging than merely making up one's own examples to support one's own analysis.

The aim of this book is to provide an explanation of *why* we choose one member of a difficult lexical pair as opposed to the other (e.g. *do/make, look/see, listen/hear, say/tell, speak/talk*) based on the concept of Process and Result in language. This book also applies the concept of process and result in language to the development of 'aspectual' verbs (e.g. *begin/start, end/finish, shut/close*) as well as to the 'grammaticalization' of the 'auxiliary' verbs *do, be, have* and *get* in interrogative, negative and emphatic sentences marked by *do*, passive sentences containing *be* versus *get*, and sentences containing the progressive and perfect tenses (or aspects) marked by *be* versus *have* respectively. Finally, this book will postulate that the same semantic features of 'Process' and 'Result' may also provide a principled and isomorphic way to explain the so-called phonologically 'irregular' strong verbs in English and similar 'exceptional' form classes in the Hebrew triconsonantal (CCC) root system which are realized as phonologically 'defective' or 'irregular' infinitives, as well as provide a possible alternative explanation for the different infinitive forms and verb classes in Spanish, French and Italian.

Our analysis will centre on a specific sign-oriented view of language as a system of systems (revolving around the notion of the linguistic sign) – that are organized internally and systematically related to each other – which are used by human beings to communicate. Furthermore, the invariant meanings underlying these signs and their systems presented in this book will be marked for specific distinctive features related to the concepts of 'Process' and 'Result'.

The present analysis and the data we have collected indicate that the concept of Process versus Result, when studied systematically in its own right as an independent marked semantic feature, might even be viewed as (at least partially) forming the underlying basis and motivation for: (a) distinguishing troublesome lexical pairs, (b) explaining the grammatical development of aspectual and auxiliary verbs, and (c) providing a possible road for further research to explain what was previously viewed as arbitrary 'form classes' or phonologically inspired 'irregular' verbal paradigms in English as well as other 'exceptional' linguistic phenomena in other languages. If our study suggests a simpler and more principled way to distinguish between synonyms, explain the diachronic processes of aspectualization and grammaticalization and classify 'irregular' linguistic forms, then this volume may also be beneficial to teachers and students of English and other languages as well.

The primary theoretical rationale for this volume is to present a further explication of the Saussurian, semiotic or sign-oriented approach to linguistic analysis as an alternative means to explain seemingly disparate linguistic phenomena, both in the lexicon and the grammar, by a single, unitary set of theoretical principles such as invariance, markedness and distinctive feature theory. This volume thus provides an argument for a more natural and holistic analysis of language based on the notion of isomorphism which includes: (a) being able to apply the same set of theoretical principles to all levels of language, as well as (b) the fundamental hypothesis of 'one form/one meaning'.

The primary methodological rationale for this volume is to exemplify and

advocate the use of real, 'performance' data culled from a large corpus of both spoken and written language representing different dialects, styles, registers and genres. The data employed in this volume is taken from a wide range of both spoken and written discourse and texts reflecting people's actual use of language (as well as their intuitive 'feelings' about language) presented in their relevant linguistic and situational contexts. It illustrates the need to rely on context and discourse and textual analysis exemplifying the 'from sign to text' and 'from text to sign' approaches found in *Semiotics and linguistics* (Tobin 1990a). I would also like to add that the specific troublesome lexical pairs and the aspectual, auxiliary and irregular verbs studied in this volume are probably among the most frequently used forms in the language and have presented a particularly enjoyable challenge to the author, a 'language lover' kind of linguist, who has spent many pleasant hours in the past few years poring over texts and recording conversations in order to collect the data presented in this book.

There is a plethora of past, present and – from what I see at conferences and from reading dissertation abstracts – most probably a future literature on the topic of aspect or *Aktionsart* and related topics in English and other languages which only mentions the concept of 'Process versus Result' in a peripheral way. Therefore this volume will try to go beyond the traditional categories of aspect and *Aktionsart* and other established lexical and grammatical categories by using sign and discourse theory and methodology in general and by placing a greater emphasis on problems related to Process and Result in particular, both in English as well as in other languages. In short, the concept of Process versus Result in language will be examined theoretically and methodologically as part of a larger semiotic system used by human beings to communicate.

At this point of linguistic research, it is impossible to know whether one's linguistic theory truly reflects how language works in the human mind. Perhaps, when we know more about the human brain, we will then be able to see which (if any!) linguistic theory has come close to capturing the 'psychological reality' behind language. In the meantime, we can only continue to create new theories and compare and contrast the different theories already available to us by testing them against language data. Perhaps, in this way we may begin to approach any understanding of the 'psychological reality' of linguistic theory, if such a thing is possible.

The reason *why* we may choose one member of a difficult lexical pair over the other, or how certain lexical verbs have been classified as 'aspectual' verbs, or *why* the verbs *do*, *get*, *be* and *have* have been grammaticalized as different kinds of auxiliaries, most probably lies in the realm of what we intuitively know about our language. Regardless of which linguistic theory one may follow, at the moment, we have no truly objective and scientific way of verifying our analyses and probably will not have until we know more about how the human mind works. Although I will be making no claim as to whether the semiotic view of language presented in this volume does have 'psychological reality', or whether it is 'innate', I can only share my amusement at one of my students' dogged insistence on referring to the concept of *distinctive* features with her own folk-etymological malapropism: *instinctive* features. Whether they are 'distinctive' or 'instinctive' is a moot

point. However, the reader is invited to explore the possibilities that the sign-oriented theoretical and methodological hypotheses may have for the better understanding of the linguistic phenomena discussed in this book.

To my three sons
Ithai, Hagai and Yohai
the results
of my very own processes

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