

# TOWARD A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF TENSE AND ASPECT IN POLISH AND ENGLISH

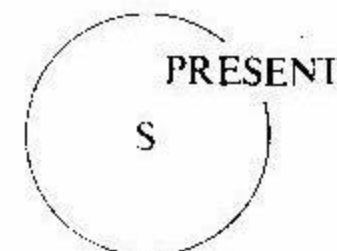
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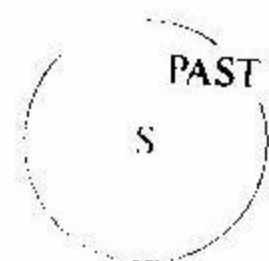
1. *Aspect and Tense.* The three main aspectual distinctions holding from language to language are those of completive, progressive, and generic action. The aspects are amenable to a localistic definition in terms of the notions "at"/"in" and "away from". Action located in or at a point along the time axis is progressive; action located away from a point is completive; action holding outside point reference is generic. The notion of tense precedes from the notion of aspect by identifying the point of reference as the present moment. In this way, 'present' and 'progressive' become two names for, or ways of looking at, the same thing, while the notion 'away from' (completive) becomes split into 'before' (past) and 'after' (future). Diagrammatically, this differentiation may be represented as follows:

- 1) aspect → specified or nonspecified (generic)
- 2) specified → away from (completive) or at/in (progressive)
- 3) away from → before (past) or after (future)

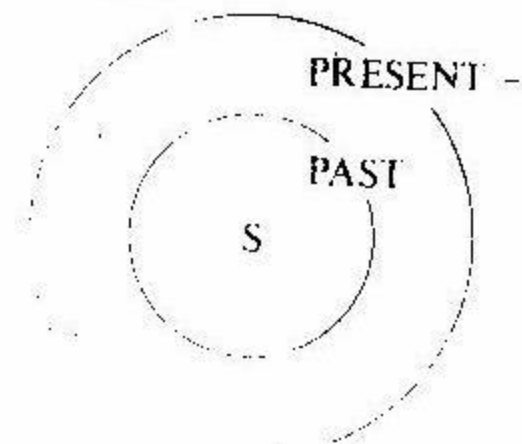
The tense-aspect systems of languages like English and Polish can be generated by allowing the four tense-aspect specifications (general, progressive, past, future) to occur either singly or in compounds with one another. Tense compounds are formed locatively, one tense embedding into another. For illustrative purposes, tense compounds can be represented with circle diagrams. The *present*, *past*, *present-past*, and *past-present* are illustrated below. The sign S represents the sentence, itself embedded in the tense matrix.



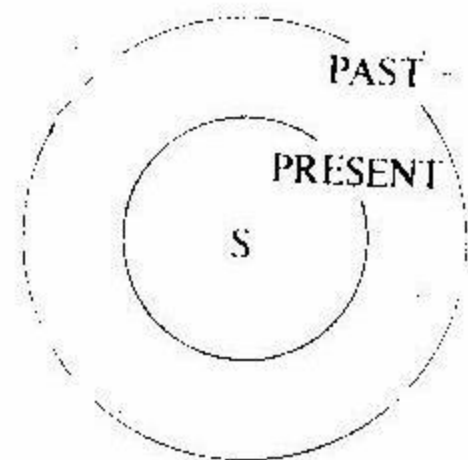
S: *biore*, I am taking (action *at* the reference time-point)



S: *wziąłem*, I took (action *before* the reference time-point)



S: *wziąłem*, I have (just) taken (past action carried forward to the present reference point).



S: *brałem*, I was taking (present = progressive action placed in the past)

Tense compounds of up to three members can be found, for example, the *present-past-present* (progressive action placed in the past with present relevance), as in

*I have been reading* (for four hours)  
*Czytam* (już cztery godziny).

The described generative mechanism provides a simple system for an initial comparison of the tense-aspect meanings and expressions of English and Polish. The most important tense-aspect meanings in English and Polish are the following:

<i>present</i> I am taking	}	biore
<i>general</i> I (often) take		
<i>present-past-present</i> I have been taking	}	brałem
<i>past-present</i> I was taking		
<i>past-general</i> I (often) took		
<i>past-past-present</i> I had been taking		
<i>past-past-general</i> I had (often) taken		
<i>present-past-general</i> I have (often) taken		
<i>general-past</i> I have (already, at some time or another) taken		

<i>future-present</i> I will be taking	}	będę brał
<i>future-general</i> I will (often) take		
<i>general-future</i> I am going to take (sometime)		
<i>future-past-present</i> I will have been taking	}	wziąłem
<i>past</i> I took (once)		
<i>present-past</i> I have (just) taken		
<i>past-past</i> I had taken		
<i>future</i> I will take (once)		
<i>present-future</i> I am about to take		
<i>future-past</i> I will have taken		
	}	wezmę

The above meanings are the simple denotative tense-aspect meanings of English and Polish. The chart implies that, for example, the English expression *I have (just) taken* will normally be translated by the Polish *wziąłem* and that, conversely, Polish *wziąłem*, when used to express past action with present relevance, will be translated by English *I have (just) taken*. As is obvious from the juxtaposition of the two languages, English tends to be more formally explicit than Polish as to the underlying tense-aspect meaning. In addition, English can express in the verb certain meanings which in Polish can usually only be expressed by some kind of paraphrase, cf.

*He will have left by four o'clock* (future-past)  
*O czwartej go już nie będzie.*

2. The main place where the English student learning Polish will be led astray by employing the above chart is in the expression of the simple past tense; where the imperfective (e.g., *brałem*) will often be used instead of the expected perfective (*wziąłem*). In this section we will examine reasons for this alternation.

2.1. The choice of the Polish perfective versus imperfective in the expression of the simple past tense seems to be determined by three factors, namely, 1) the semantic class of the verb (whether result, completive, telic, progressive, habitual, or generic); 2) whether the propositional information is old or new; 3) whether the given aspect form is expected (unmarked) or unexpected (marked).

2.2. Assuming that the proposition expresses new information (the unmarked case), we find that the perfective form is usual only when expressing the simple past of result verbs like *kupić* (buy). With telic verbs like *czytać* (read); the imperfective is usual. (Progressive, habitual, and generic verbs do not have simple, non-meaning altering perfectives, so they may be left out of present consideration). The following sentences illustrate unmarked uses:

*kupiłem wczoraj książkę* "I bought-perf. a book yesterday"  
*czytałem wczoraj książkę* "I read-imperf. a book yesterday."

2.3. Still assuming that the proposition expresses new information, a formal distribution opposite the normal distribution will produce connotative, or marked, meanings.

2.3.1. The use of the imperfective of a result verb produces a connotative meaning of either intended but not completed, or of unusually complex action:

*kupowałem wczoraj książkę* I bought-imperf. (tried to buy, bought complexly) a book yesterday.

It is important to distinguish such uses from the simple past progressive expression, i.e., the same sentence in the meaning "I was buying a book yesterday (at a particular time)."

2.3.2. The use of the perfective of a telic verb produces a connotation of getting something done or out of the way:

*przeczytałem wczoraj książkę* I read-perf. (got read) a book yesterday.

It should be noted that such uses illustrate the Polish prefixed perfective in its classic use, that of stressing the completion of a potentially incomplete action.

2.4. When the verb is used to update old information (information mentioned recently enough to be relevant to the discourse), the perfective is expected with both result and telic verbs:

*kupiłem wczoraj książkę* I bought-perf. the book yesterday (as I said I would).

*przeczytałem wczoraj książkę* I read-perf. (finished reading) the book yesterday (as I said I would).

3. The Polish learner of English must learn to deal with the following peculiarities of the English *be + -ing* expression.

3.1. The English *be + -ing* expression is not usually used when a present progressive verb refers to an involuntary mental state, e.g., *want*:

*John is eating a sandwich* (present progressive)

*John wants to leave* (present progressive, verb of involuntary mental state).

3.2. When used with habitual and generic verbs, *be + -ing* conveys vividness or immediacy:

*Where do you live?* (unmarked)

*Where are you living?* (marked, conveys immediacy, short duration).

*I hate him more and more* (unmarked)

*I am hating him more and more* (marked, conveys vividness).

3.3. *Be + -ing* is marked in the generic aspect where it expresses excessive or inveterate activity:

*John always dresses neatly* (unmarked)

*John is always dressing neatly* (marked, conveys excessive tidiness on John's part).

3.4. *Be + -ing* occasionally "discovers" new meanings for adjectives, cf.

*John is nice* (unmarked)

*John is being nice* (marked, conveys insincerity on part of John).

The latter use is idiomatically conditioned, i.e., it is not open to all adjectives, but primarily to behavioral adjectives, cf.

\**John is being hungry.*

4. In the present paper, we have outlined the major features of tense-aspect use in the English and Polish finite verb. We have seen that, as disparate as the languages seem to be on the formal level, for the most part they deal with the same semantic substance. This is true above all in regard to the simple denotative level of tense-aspect expression. Important semantic differences between English and Polish appear when either language's aspect forms are used out of normal context for the expression of subtle and essentially untranslatable shades of meaning.

From the present study it follows that when teaching the tense-aspect system of either language to speakers of the other, one should begin by matching denotative tense-aspect uses. Connotative uses, which are not easily matched from one language to the other, should be recognized for what they are and should be taught later.