

## IMPERFECTIVE VERSUS PROGRESSIVE — AN EXERCISE IN CONTRASTIVE PEDAGOGICAL LINGUISTICS

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The present paper is concerned with one particular problem in relating English and Polish which arises out of error analysis and which is best discussed at a level above that of the sentence. The reason for starting from actual recorded errors rather than from a purely theoretical model is a subject for discussion in itself. Suffice it to say here that, as the aim is primarily pedagogical the starting point is a pedagogical requirement, namely to correct a misinterpretation on the part of Polish students of English regarding the use of the English Past Progressive (or Past Continuous as it is often called) Tense. The hypothesis is that there is interference from Polish and in particular from its Perfective/Imperfective system. Apart from the pedagogical framework in which this contrastive paper is undertaken, there is a practical reason for starting from recorded errors. As Peter Robinson pointed out in a paper given recently in Dublin, contrasting two languages is a task of such enormity especially if one takes into consideration the limitations of time and resources, that error analysis is a very useful basis for choosing which areas of the two languages one should concentrate on. It certainly does not rule out theoretical models since the detection and analysis of language errors presupposes some kind of linguistic theory.

The reason for dealing with the present problem on the level of text i.e. interrelated sentences, will become apparent later. One might however reflect how much text as a level of analysis is profitable if not vital to contrastive analysis. This is especially true of a Polish-English contrastive project where the article necessarily figures as a major problem. Features such as the article, comparatives, demonstratives and pronominals need to be examined as features of text, i.e. as phenomena occurring supra-sententially. A sentence-based

grammar is inadequate to cope with this type of problem unless it goes beyond sentence-embedding to units of text where *sentence* is a sub-unit. However the discussion here will not deal with the technicalities of text grammar but rather informally, with the problem as it confronts Polish students of English and a suggestion will be made for presenting this particular difference between the two languages in a readily comprehensible way.

The perfective/imperfective distinction in Polish is summed up in general terms in the well-known beginner's course *Mówimy po polsku*, thus:

"Almost all Polish verbs make their appearance in two forms (so-called imperfective and perfective form). A distinction should be made between their meanings. Imperfective verbs express the fact of the duration of an action as well as the fact of its incompleteness. Perfective verbs on the contrary, express the completeness of an action" (Bisko 1966 : 271).

Certainly some kind of link may be made between the meaning expressed by imperfective verbs in Polish and English verbs in their Progressive forms. The *Grammar of contemporary English* (Quirk et al., 1972) describes the features of the progressive aspect as firstly temporariness, as in:

1. *John is playing the banjo.*

Then it lists as "overtones", limited duration as in:

2. *The professor is typing his own letters (these days).*

incompletion as in:

3. *I was reading a book that evening.*

simultaneity, vividness of description and emotional colouring and emphasis, an example of the last overtone being:

4. *He was always getting his hands dirty (my example).*

Certain features held in common might induce the Polish learner of English to relate English progressive forms with imperfective verbs generalizing the meaning of incompleteness and a certain duration to form an ad-hoc equivalence in spite of the different formal realizations in the two languages. This would not be particularly surprising as language learners tend to start from the semantic end first and see how meanings are realized formally. They also like to make short cuts — according to the law of least effort. This at least seems feasible when we deal with past tenses. Thus:

5. *Czytałem list wczoraj.*

may be translated as:

6. *I was reading the letter yesterday (but did not finish it).*

and:

7. *Przeczytałem list wczoraj.*

is equivalent to:

8. *I read the letter yesterday (to the end).*

If we move upwards to the unit text we may cite an example which also seems to offer no problem:

9. *He opened his eyes. The sun was shining. He sat up. He looked through the window. The children were playing in the garden.*

The Polish equivalent would read as follows:

10. *Otworzył oczy. Słońce świeciło. Usiadł. Wyjrzał przez okno. Dzieci bawily się w ogrodzie.*

Here the verbs expressing completed nondurative events are perfective in Polish and nonprogressive in English. The verbs expressing durative (i.e. lasting) event are imperfective in Polish and progressive in English. Thus:

COMPLETED

*opened/otworzył*

*sat up/usiadł*

*looked/wyjrzał*

INCOMPLETE

*was shining/świeciło*

*were playing/bawily się*

Such examples confirm the ad-hoc rule of equivalence. However if we now take example 11, we come to the snag:

11. (*Biedny Jan*), *przez pierwsze trzy kilometry szedł a przez następne dwa biegl.* Here the durative character of the walking and running is signalled through the use of the imperfective verbs *szedł* and *biegl.* First there was a long period of walking and then there was a long period of running. The Polish learner of English would be tempted as often seems to be the case to translate this as follows:

12. \**For the first three kilometers he was walking and for the next two he was running.*

This is an erroneous translation. It is just feasible that a native speaker might assign some kind of dramatic descriptive interpretation to it but the normal equivalent would be as follows:

13. *For the first three kilometers he walked and for the next two he ran.*

The use of the nonprogressive Past Simple Tense does not in any way obliterate the idea that the two events seemed to last a long time and we could certainly begin the sentence with some such expression as: *poor old Jan* to make this clearer. What does seem to matter here is that the event signalled by the nonprogressive verb moves the narrative on one step, chronologically speaking. That the event seemed to "have duration" is not important. The fact is, it is a completed action and one step in the narrative. This does not hold true for Polish where you can separate two imperfective verbs with a time expression like *potem*.

The English nonprogressive Simple Past, then, performs a certain function

in a narrative text. Three instances grouped side by side represent three steps in the narration as for example in Caesar's famous statement:

14. *I came. I saw. I conquered. (Veni. Vidi. Vici.)*

If, on the other hand, we group three instances of the progressive form of the verb side by side, then it is clear that the events described are to some degree simultaneous as in:

15. *His legs were shaking. His hands were trembling and his left cheek was twitching uncontrollably.*

These two facts can also be illustrated within one sentence as in the following two examples:

16. *When they arrived on the beach, they leapt ashore and ran towards the islanders.*

17. *When I was laughing, John was shouting and Mary was crying.*

We may say that the English nonprogressive tense fulfils a *narrative function* moving the action on chronologically. The progressive tense on the other hand fulfils a *descriptive function* describing "what was going on" at a given point in time. Interestingly enough, the progressive form depends on this point in time being given by the context (linguistic or situational) usually in the form of a time adverbial like *yesterday at 5 p.m.*, or by a nearby nonprogressive verb. In a simple narrative text the nonprogressive verbs form the basic framework on which the progressive verbs, rather like bound morphemes, depend for their existence. Although both *I went home* and *I was going home* demand some context to explicate the full meaning, *I was going home* somehow impels the listener or reader immediately to search for some specific time or some action with which to relate it directly. It is describing or filling out a point in the narrative without which it is meaningless. If we take a text with a string of progressive verbs, all the states or actions described by these verbs relate to a part of the narrative establishing a point in time. This is often a nonprogressive verb which lies adjacent to the progressive verbs. It may come before them as in:

18. *I drew the curtains apart. The sun was shining. The children were playing in the yard. Some women were hanging clothes on the washing lines.*

or it may come afterwards as in:

19. *The coach was coming round the bend. Its wheels were bumping against the side of the road. The driver was shouting. Hoss Cartwright drew his gun.*

In both cases the actions described progressively are understood to be more or less simultaneous and taking place during the event described by the nearest nonprogressive verb *drew*. This is obviously not a characteristic of the Polish imperfective verb which can appear next to another imperfective verb and

signal a move in the narrative on to the next step as is exemplified in 11. (*Biedny Jan*, etc.) In other words, Polish imperfective verbs seem just as capable of performing what has been called the narrative function as perfective verbs. Yet in a text like the following:

20. *I took the child to the clinic. The doctor examined him for a long time very carefully. Finally he pronounced him healthy.*

many Polish learners would be tempted to write or say *was examining* and would be surprised to learn that the result sounds very odd to the native speaker of English.

As far as pedagogical solutions are concerned, there is obviously a remedial problem here to counteract Polish interference and as far as university students are concerned and sophisticated adult learners as a whole, there is no reason why the problem should not be explained in notional terms in much the same manner has been done here, as a small sample of contrastive pedagogical grammar. In an experimental written English exercise devised last year in Poznań to remedy the problem, the symbol (N) was used to represent the narrative function and the symbol (D) to represent the descriptive function. Students are asked to write short texts based on a sequence of these symbols together with a corresponding sequence of suggested verbs. At first simple sequences of (N) are required, for example, (N.N.N) using, say, the verbs, *run, climb* and *jump*. A realization of this pattern would be as follows:

21. *The prisoner ran to the wall. He climbed to the top and jumped down to the other side.*

Then the required pattern can be varied and dependent (D) verbs brought in. For example one pattern is (N.D.D.) with all the D's of course dependent on the N. Using the same verbs as before we might arrive at the following small text:

22. *The prison guard ran to the wall. Two convicts were climbing to the top. Another was already jumping down to the other side.*

A freer section gives a pattern but, instead of verbs, just a general situation such as "A prison escape" or "A teacher collapses in class".

Pedagogical solutions need not contain such overtly contrastive statements as the exercises here suggest. Adult learners probably appreciate this cognitive approach to materials construction. However a more concealed planning of materials of the pattern drill type certainly profit from contrastive insights. Ideally teaching exercises should be text-based and especially in the case of exercises teaching the English Past Progressive and Simple Past to Polish learners. Learners should be forced overtly or covertly to look for the function of verbs within the text rather than rely on a vague feeling for the independent meanings of particular tenses and they should be prevented from making their own contrastive decisions which may prove mis-

leading. In learning a second language, the presence of the native language must play some role. The teacher and materials writer cannot afford to overlook this. If they do not take steps to exploit and to channel the learner's assumptions about the target language that derive from his own language, however subconscious, they are simply allowing him to construct his own private contrastive grammar. In talented learners this may be all right but for quite a number it could be disastrous.

#### REFERENCES

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