

# Authors' Preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.145.01aut>

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**Tense and Aspect in Indo-European Languages: Theory, typology, diachrony**

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[*Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, 145]

1997. xii, 403 pp.

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## AUTHORS' PREFACE

In this work we have attempted to analyse the historical and prehistorical evolution of the verbal systems of all the major branches of the Indo-European phylum of languages, concentrating particularly on the sub-systems of tense and aspect.

Historical Linguistics traditionally tends towards an atomistic approach that deals only with details, rather than with the general patterns found in systems. There have been classic exceptions, of course, to this way of proceeding, such as the statement of generalities encapsulated in Grimm's Law, and the recent attempts to review the PIE consonant system. The concentration on atomism, however, unquestionably stems from the fact that treating all the details together is considered to be a synchronic point of view, and that from a diachronic point of view one can only deal with the evolution of one item at a time.

These assumptions have occasionally been challenged; they are described as "illegitimate reductionism" by Roman Jakobson, for example, who objects to treating synchrony as static, and diachrony as atomistic (1990:167). A similar opinion is expressed by Gustave Guillaume, who comments that "a historical grammar should include numerous chapters on the history of grammatical systems instead of relating little else but the individual histories of the forms composing these systems" (1983:61).

What is new in these chapters, therefore, is first of all an attempt to gain a general picture of the systemic evolution of the verbal systems of IE languages. We have also, as far as possible, sought for a rationale for the systemic changes, rather than treat them as "blind and fortuitous" changes. In this we have also followed Jakobson, who in a most interesting passage relates his concern about taking such a teleological stance, and his consultation with Trubetzkoy (1990:170):

... in October 1926 ... I wrote a long worried letter to Trubetzkoy asking him to react to an idea that had come to fruition in my mind, the idea that linguistic changes were systematic and goal directed and that the evolution of language shares its purposefulness with the development of other sociocultural systems. Although more than fifty years have elapsed since I wrote that letter, I can still vividly remember my anxiety for the reactions of that linguist and associate whom I admired above all others.

On December 22, Trubetzkoy answered me with one of his most significant messages: "I am in perfect agreement with your general considerations. Many elements in the history of language seem fortuitous, but history does not have the right to be satisfied with this explanation. The general outlines of the history of language, when one reflects upon them with a little attention and logic, never prove to be fortuitous. Consequently, the little details cannot be fortuitous either — their sense must simply be discovered. The rational character of the evolution of language stems directly from the fact that a language is a system.

This volume grew out of a PhD seminar in which we took this systemic approach. The results, based on the data of approximately half of the IE language families, turned out to be rather remarkable. The participants brought different viewpoints, different expertise, and different languages to a common goal; there was a continuous current of cross stimulation, which led to the solution of problems, some of which had puzzled the main protagonists for years. In the course of long discussions it was not unusual to have details that were originally proposed as counter-evidence seen in a totally new light and admitted as supporting evidence. There were also instances when individual expertise was able to charter a safe path for all the participants through various potential minefields. When the seminar was over the organizers decided to complete the work by covering all the IE language families from prehistory to the present day.

The chapters, although all individually written, consequently contain much that owes its stimulus to the other participants. By the end of the project there was much that was the common property of the whole group: some of the ideas became part of a mind-set, to which all had contributed, making it impossible to identify the individual contributions. It is our hope that the reader will also be able to find the common thread of ideas that runs through the different chapters, and by the end of the work builds into a total picture.

Some of these ideas can be made quite explicit. One is that a language is not a nomenclature for things in the real world, but a system of representation; different languages represent the same experiences in subtly different ways. It is important for the linguist to discover, for each language, the representational system that is used by speakers; it is equally important for the linguist to understand how this system is used in the creation of discourse. Both the system and its function are equally important; one must not neglect either one or the other.

A second idea, reflected in the comments by Trubetzkoy above, is that languages change because speakers neglect elements that are not satisfactory, so that they fall out of use or become replaced. Speakers also try re-interpretations of old elements, and new ways of doing things, and if the result appears successful it may be copied and adopted by the whole community. As Jakobson