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Foreword

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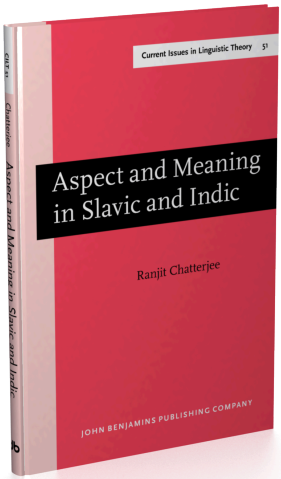

Pages xi–xvi of
Aspect and Meaning in Slavic and Indic
Ranjit Chatterjee
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Foreword
Aspect and language: The Wittgensteinian Turn

Against the cliché that a book 'breaks new ground,' I would suggest that Ranjit Chatterjee has mined the area and given partial instructions on how — if not to blow it up — at least to leave it rent with fissures almost beyond recognition. His argument begins with a fairly comprehensive overview of prior work on aspect, a category that has benefited from an unusual amount of analysis and spadework (compare tense, the genitive case, the ergative). While other overviews of the subject do exist, Chatterjee's is special, in part, because of its range: from traditional to Indo-Europeanist to structuralist to recent logical and syntactic analyses to the Slavist work, which is at once the most copious and perspicuous, and also the most relevant to his empirical focus. All of these approaches, despite their many clear differences, share certain fundamental assumptions — for example, basic or atomic meaning, the primacy of categorical structures over statistical patterning, and the notion that rules or paradigms somehow 'govern' behavior.

Chatterjee, rather than turning to a deductive disproof, plunges directly into a sustained, somewhat conflicted, and extraordinarily wide-ranging and learned discussion of Slavic aspect (which usually refers to the data and the linguists of the Czech language, which the author mastered in Prague, and taught seven years at the University of Chicago). He shows with all the aplomb of a devil's advocate how a large portion of the treasured and time-honored rules, generalizations, and even philosophical underpinnings of many aspectologists do not work when tested against usage, particularly the usage of ordinary language in conversation. To take one of many examples, the 'present perfective,' generally said to be used only with future reference, is shown to have scope over the present in enough contexts to significantly weaken, if not invalidate the rule. Another problem is posed by the keystone in most aspect studies: the allegedly binary nature of the categorial contrast between 'linear' (along some time

line) and 'punctual' (in some metaphorical but still meaningful sense); in Slavic, of course, this more or less universal dichotomy comes out as imperfective versus perfective. Chatterjee shows in various ways how the prestigious binary model has actually distorted our view of language, and how it fails in many cases. The whole paradigm of binariness is challenged and largely rejected in favor of a much looser model of 'language games' (really alternative logics) played within the context of what the author aptly calls 'an implicit, tentative, or "fuzzy" quasi-system' (p. 61). He goes on to sketch an alternative model with a half-dozen categories or subcategories. More generally, we should move on to models with larger numbers of categories interacting with each other (and with pragmatic, contextual variables) in diverse and multivariate ways. Chatterjee's position resonates with recent work by Grenoble, Chvany, and other Slavists engaged in smashing the traditional atom(s) of aspectual binariness, the aspectual cube, and similar figures.

As the foregoing should have suggested by now, Chatterjee's empirical analysis with its scores of examples, tested rules, hard-won exceptions, and semantically sensitive contextualizations, is argued consistently in terms of a sort of dialogue or logical counterpoint with a whole series of general and generally interesting issues in linguistic theory, most of which I can only itemize with familiar labels in the hope that this will give the reader good intimations of what is at stake: 1) 'real' time versus linguistic (e.g., aspectually encoded) time; 2) the lexical versus the grammatical (e.g., syntactic) approach to aspect; 3) the relative importance of lexicon and linguistic context; 4) the theoretical status of the binary model versus its more heuristic status; 5) the issue of the 'objective' versus the 'subjective' in aspect studies (e.g., the positivistic misconception that aspect is more 'subjective' than tense); 6) the differential role of categorical, either/or rules in linguistics as contrasted with probabilistic ones (e.g., Chatterjee begins his discussion with a set of statistical facts about Czech); 7) the problem of language as a set of rules which are realized or produced — as contrasted with the position that rules emerge from action or use and are inseparably interblended with such practice in an on-going process. At the heart of Chatterjee's approach is a large number of propositions, or at least questions, that derive from Wittgenstein (on whom he is one of the leading authorities among professional linguists). These questions and the author's positions on them have a larger scope and relevance, among which I would only single out the following: the problem of unifying theory and practice; the

problem of comprehending the language totality ('the implicit, tentative, fuzzy quasi-system') with its alternative logics, huge sets that are realistically seen as binary, and a larger set that is not); and finally, to what degree are the patterns of usage and the deeper structures a matter of degree, probability, and continuous variables?

Chatterjee contrasts Czech with the very different Bengali, of which he is a native speaker as well as a linguistic specialist. Here, rather than the prefixal complexities of Slavic we find that aspect categories are handled through a system of verbal compounds and what he calls vectors. Carefully reviewing the data and the relatively recent work of Indic aspectologists such as Hook, Chatterjee produces a partly original analysis which, for the sake of convenience, he summarizes with tree diagrams. The empirical differences between the two systems are exceeded by the differences in the scholarship between Slavic aspectology, with its vast classical and Indo-European congeners, and, on the other hand, the relatively new Indic work; aspect here is said to have been 'discovered' as late as the 1950s. Concomitantly, Chatterjee's work on Slavic is primarily a critique of a great tradition, whereas his work on Indic is primarily the construction of a new overall system to be critiqued. The discrepancies between the two situations notwithstanding, Chatterjee arrives at theoretically acute and empirically challenging comparisons in terms, primarily, of 'rules' (most of them negative rules) in *both* Slavic and Indic which seem to have been invalidated or at least seriously qualified by his research findings. Further spadework would surely uncover additional cross-stock generalizations as well as deepening the exact linguistic and indeed ontological status of the common patterns that he has postulated. To take one example, he says, 'This ineffability of nuance (i.e., in Slavic and Indic aspect) is perhaps the major parallel.' That is itself highly suggestive and even provocative, giving intimations of a whole universe of nuance-like and even ineffably nuance-like differences, a universe where aspect, rather than being statable primarily in terms of a linguistic pseudo-calculus predicated on referential features, is actually, mainly a matter of secondary, tertiary and even quaternary levels of style, usage, and associations between verbal roots, adverbs, and so forth. Many traditionalists would dismiss such suggestions as anarchy or chaos, disregarding the fact that chaos in language is a vital area for future research that could be conjoined fruitfully with the recent (1980s) explosion of research on chaos in physics, mathematics, meteorology and other scientific subfields.

Chatterjee's concluding chapter, perhaps the most interesting one, has, I feel, two aspects. At one explicit level he draws together his preceding generalizations in terms of three continuous relations. The first of these engages the fact that aspect is in fact signalled and understood at all levels of linguistic structure, from the shades of intonation in speech situations to powerful semi-axioms in the grammatical code. One necessary implication of this multifariousness of aspect production is that the so-called general or atomic meanings half fade away: 'There is no *Gesamtbedeutung*' for the perfective and the imperfective in Slavic. For this multifariousness Chatterjee uses the term 'multiple articulation.'

The second type of continuous relation involves the vastly different roles of aspect in the languages of the world, particularly with respect to morphology. Some languages are 'endomorphic,' in which case the morphology generates a comprehensive body of aspect forms with considerable predictability (as in some American Indian languages). Or aspect may be far less salient than tense and handled primarily in terms of syntactic rules, as in English. In between these endomorphic and amorphic extremes are the many languages where both morphology and syntax are highly functional and where the notion of morphosyntax is clearly relevant (the exomorphic systems).

The overall lessons to be drawn from Chatterjee's work are of two kinds. The first is to be critical of the pet dichotomies in linguistics such as langue/parole or competence/performance. Consonant with that, one should not observe a categorical dividing line between statistics and rates as contrasted with structure, sets, paradigms and similar qualitative structures. The relation between quantity and quality is always interesting and significant — and not just in questions of language change, where quantitative facts become qualitative ones.

The second and perhaps more intriguing, implied conclusion is the pervasive suggestion that linguistic analysis, when not constrained by the need to produce a demarcated grammar, dictionary, and/or text, should be carried on or practiced simultaneously with a more or less articulated dialogue or contextualization with one or more philosophical positions in all the ramifications of their linguistic relevance. In terms of this new genre of philosophical grammar, Sapir might have written an Amerind grammar in terms of an intermittent counterpoint with the ideas of Croce. And, if we may speculate further, who would emerge as the philosophical alter and/or pater of, for example, Bolinger, Hale, McCawley, Kuipers, Watkins,

Langendoen, Sherzer, Goddard, Labov, Woodbury, and a host of others including, for that matter, the undersigned? It is such philosophical counterpointing or contextualization, in any case, that Chatterjee has carried out by means of a pervasive, in-and-out, alternating discourse that interdigitates the language and linguistics of Czech and Bengali aspect with detailed animadversions on language by the man who was not only a philosophical giant in the earth but a highly competent lexicologist, polyglot, and grammarian: Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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