

How to Do Things with Tense and Aspect

How to Do Things with Tense and Aspect:
Performativity before Austin

By

Igor Ž. Žagar and Matejka Grgič

With an Introduction by Jef Verschueren

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Stanislav Škrabec 1844-1918
Slovenian linguist who formulated the problem of performativity
while researching the use of verbal aspect at the end of the 19th century

FOREWORD

The beginning of this book dates back to 1987 when a colleague of mine, Dr. Bernard Nežmah, published a short squib (2 pages), "P. Stanislav Škrabec – slovenski Austin" [Friar Stanislav Škrabec - Slovenian Austin]. At that time Nežmah worked as a librarian in the National University Library and (quite by accident) came across a rather peculiar religious journal, *Cvetje z vertov sv. Frančiška* [*Flowers from the Garden of Saint Francis*], whose editor was a Franciscan friar Stanislav Škrabec. Why am I saying that the journal was peculiar? Because its editor, Stanislav Škrabec, was using its covers (literally!) for publishing his linguistic writings, while the contents of the journal consisted exclusively of prayers, religious poems and similar material.

This short squib of two pages attracted rather great attention: Nežmah claimed that it was in fact Škrabec who "discovered" performativity in the beginning of the 20th century, and not Austin almost half a century later. He didn't go into great detail (after all, the squib only had two pages), so I decided to pursue the story myself.

What I found in the National University Library was a huge pile of *Flowers from the Garden of Saint Francis* that stretched over almost four decades (1880-1918). But the covers on which Škrabec published his linguistic writings were (literally!) thin as cigarette paper, so I wasn't allowed to photocopy them. Consequently, I've spent weeks and week digging through fragile, yellowish paper, and the first overview of Škrabec's work appeared as a part of my book (in Slovenian), *Zagatnost performativnosti ali kako obljubiti* [*The Problem of Performativity or How to Make a Promise*], published in 1989.

Later on Matejka Grgič, who was a student of mine, became interested in the problem of performativity in Slovenian, and together we have written *Čas in dejanje v jeziku* [*Time and Act in Language*], a Slovenian version of this book, published in 2006.

After considerable revisions and rewriting, as well as extensive research of verbal aspect in other Slavic languages, Robi Kukovec, Adam Rudder and myself translated the manuscript into English. I hope you'll find this quest for performativity as fascinating as we did.

Igor Ž. Žagar
Ljubljana, September 2011

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We would like to express our warm gratitude to Janez Škrabec, the great great nephew of Stanislav Škrabec (the main character of this book), without whose generous help this book wouldn't be possible.

INTRODUCTION

JEF VERSCHUEREN

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Scholarship is a human activity, often highly individual yet strongly interactive, sometimes developing smoothly but more often in leaps and bounds, driven by memory as well as forgetfulness, benefiting from cross-fertilization or suffering from the mutual ignorance that comes with the walls between communities and epochs. That is what makes the historiography of scholarly ideas and discussions an interesting enterprise. In this volume, Igor Ž. Žagar and Matejka Grgič make a fascinating contribution to the historiography of linguistic pragmatics, the science of language use. They provide a detailed sketch of the unmistakable parallels between John Austin's theory of speech acts and the work – unknown to Austin – delivered half a century earlier by a number of Slovenian linguists, in particular Viktor Bežek, Rajko Perušek, Luka Pintar, and Stanislav Škrabec. While their account of these parallels results from the comparison of disconnected bodies of scholarship (Slovenian, Anglo-American, with studies by Benveniste in France brought in as an extra point of orientation), they strongly focus on the interactivity of a developing debate within a Slovenian community of linguists.

There are at least three aspects of the following chapters that make them highly relevant for the field of linguistic pragmatics.

First of all, the focus on the Slovenian debate directs the reader's attention to the pragmatic role of a category of verbs, used to describe (and sometimes to perform) types of linguistic action. Let us call these verbs linguistic action verbs (LAVs), a subcategory of which is the set of speech act verbs (or SAVs). While many prominent speech act theorists deny the existence of an essential relationship between speech acts (by extension, any other meaningful units of verbal interaction) and the verbs which speakers of a given language have at their disposal to describe such acts, the unwitting 'discovery' of speech acts (specifically of the explicit performative kind) by Slovenian linguists was a side effect of discussions of the grammatical behavior (in particular in relation to verbal aspect) of explicit performative verbs such as *to promise*. In speech act theory, LAVs

or SAVs are viewed as arbitrary language-specific lexicalizations of a corresponding universal reality, which deserves description in its own right. This stance ignores the fact that the meaningfulness of speech as a form of social action is determined by the framework of concepts in terms of which the interlocutors interpret their own and each other's behavior. The corresponding lexical fields are indeed language- and culture-specific, but they reflect, albeit imperfectly and incompletely, the conceptual distinctions which members of linguistic or cultural communities habitually make. These distinctions are essential ingredients of the variability, with a universal core that can only be discovered empirically, which pragmatics must be able to handle. Specifically, they are ingredients of what is now commonly called metapragmatic awareness, a crucial element of language use, reflexivity being a *conditio sine qua non* for language as we know it, in particular for the possibility of speaking in spite of the impossibility of full explicitness. Explicit performativity, which represents complete reflexivity, is only one of the manifestations of reflexive functioning. Metapragmatic awareness must be seen as a basic ingredient of the human adaptation, which is one for *living socially with the help of a suitable cognitive apparatus*. This offers communication concepts (and the words capturing them, or LAVs) the center stage of any attempt to understand language as the meaning-generating tool that biological evolution has provided human beings with.

Second, there is an interesting – possibly unintended – way in which Žagar and Grgič's comparison between the Slovenian debate and Austinian speech act theory draws our attention to the normativity associated with language use. The discussion by Škrabec and his compatriots, summarized too briefly, centers around the following issue: explicit performatives (a term which Škrabec did not yet use, of course) can only be viewed as momentaneous acts, without duration; therefore it seems illogical that in most Slavic languages, with few exceptions, imperfective verbs are used. In other words, linguistic usage is observed which is labelled illogical. This is clearly a prescriptive logical-grammatical attitude, which runs through most of the discussions Žagar and Grgič account for. Curiously, while Austin did not show grammatical concerns, his own discovery of the importance of speech as action was at least partly the outcome of a different prescriptive and normative discussion, namely in the field of moral philosophy. Though one can hardly advocate a return to prescriptivism in linguistics, it is important to realize that much of what is describable in verbal behavior is essentially linked to prescriptive, normative, even moral judgment. The following chapters are a powerful reminder, and pragmatics should pay attention.

Third, by reintroducing a focus on verbs, and in particular their functioning in terms of tense and aspect, Žagar and Grgič also reintroduce a much-needed focus on ‘time’ as the raw material of the inevitable dynamics that characterizes language use. Such a focus goes far beyond the discussion of explicit performatives, but in relation to that particular phenomenon there is a clearly time-related problem to be dealt with: complete self-reference in LAVs/SAVs requires the possibility of making an action and its description fully coincide. Austin does not really address this as a problem. Škrabec and his contemporaries cast the problem in logical and grammatical terms. In my own view there is a relatively simple descriptive solution in pragmatic terms if one allows for a cognitive perspective: in order for a verb to be usable in an explicit performative formula, its meaning should be such that its usage does not require a conceptual distance between the action on the one hand and the description on the other. The choice between alternative ‘aspects’ is something that necessarily takes place on the description side of the action-description divide: the describing speaker has to make a choice on the basis of his or her judgment concerning the temporal/aspectual status of the act performed. This inevitable interpretive intervention creates a conceptual dividing line between action and description. But the describing speaker’s role is focused on more explicitly when the perfective is used, since – though I cannot speak with any degree of authority and I must rely for this claim on others – the perfective is the *marked* case in the contrast between perfective and imperfective verbs in Slavic languages. Therefore it is predictable that the perfective would be used less—if at all—in an explicit performative utterance since it draws the attention more strongly to an interpretive distance between action and description.

These are just three angles from which I would advise the reader to look at the intellectual storyline that unfolds in the following chapters. The materials are, of course, much richer, and lend themselves to multiple perspectives.

CHAPTER ONE

“TIME”, “TENSE” AND “ASPECT”: RELATIONS BETWEEN CHRONOLOGICAL TIME AND VERBAL TENSE OR ASPECT

A vast majority of known languages possess means¹ which enable the speaker to express time². Among these languages most of them also express time with a verb, and more specifically, with various verbal tenses.³ The verbal tense, a grammatical category which differs significantly from one language to another, may also be considered a “grammaticalization of time”.⁴ Namely, chronological time is expressed with, and within, the verbal tense. Thus we cannot understand the latter

¹ The list of linguistic means for expressing time and time relations includes verbs, prepositions, adverbs, and in some cases adjectives (former, present, modern...), word formation elements such as prefixes (great-: great-grandmother; neo-: neologism...), particles (already, yet...) etc. There is hardly any part of speech which does not in one way or another express time or time relations. This clearly means that expression of these relations is of utmost importance to humans.

² Bernard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³ Chinese and Hebrew, for example, do not use verbal tenses. In these two languages time relations are expressed exclusively by the use of adverbs next to verbs in a “neutral” tense. Cf.: Carlota S. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

⁴ “Grammaticalization of time has been discussed by numerous authors. By definition, it is a process through which time relations appear at a grammatical level and they influence grammatical structures, for example, syntax, morphology, word formation... There are also processes of “lexicalization of time”. In this case, we are concerned with words which denote time or relations in time on the word formational level, but do not influence syntactic structure (use of the word great-grandmother by no means obligates a speaker to use exclusively past tense, to change the word order in a sentence, nor to avoid certain adjectives where their use might seem internally inconsistent, for example, “a young great-grandmother”). In any case, the boundaries between “lexis” and “grammar” are not always clearly determinable let alone universal.

without focusing our attention to the former, and vice versa. Verbal tense can therefore provide us with a particular kind of insight into our perception of chronological time.

Throughout the centuries people have developed various conceptions and theories about time and there are many similarities between them. In some respects, however, they differ or complement each other. Given the extensiveness and diversity of these conceptions and theories it is difficult to argue or even imagine that humans would have managed to develop a unified “theory of time,” however, language offers evidence that may be just the opposite of this assumption. Although in theory our views of time may be very different and determined by geographical position, era, philosophical schools and even religions, in languages different views come together to a relatively unified structure or image. Though it cannot be argued that the grammaticalization of time and its products are a universal notion, it is true however, that some elements can be found in numerous languages and that they have stayed almost unchanged from antiquity to the present day. A question arises, how does the process of the grammaticalization of a verb work and how do its products (verb tenses) function within the discourse?

Time: chrónos, time and tense

In the Western tradition, basic conceptions of chronological (physical) time and verbal tense have been inherited from the ancient Greeks. With regard to the verb, Aristotle maintained that “above all, a verb means time”:

A verb is a sound, which not only conveys a particular meaning but has a time reference⁵ also. No part by itself has a meaning.⁶

This definition of a verb has not changed significantly up until current times: a verb denotes (or marks) time. The definition, where a verb is above all a word denoting an act(ion)⁷, has not fully replaced time valence

⁵ Cf.: Greek *prosemaíno*: “to foretell, to announce, to proclaim”.

⁶ Cf.: Aristoteles, *The organon. The categories. On interpretation. Prior analytics*, transl. Harold P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: Heineman, 1938¹, 1996^{repr.}), 119. The example is also quoted by Robert I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷ The distinction between *act* and *action* will be gradually introduced in the next chapters.

either. This is probably because time dimension cannot be entirely ignored in any act(ion) (or state). An act(ion) is always in time; time is a basic dimension of every act(ion), as already noted by Aristotle⁸.

A verb is thus a part of speech which is closely linked with time. It is evident from ancient works that in the classical age the verb/time relation was considered a simple relation of a specular type.⁹ In this theory verbal tense fully “overlaps” with chronological time and accurately expresses it by linguistic means. There is a complete equivalence between verbal tense and chronological time. What exists as chronological time in an extra-linguistic reality is a verbal tense in a linguistic reality.

An interesting example of such an understanding of relations between chronological time and verbal tense comes once again from Aristotle who wrote that there are three chronological times and thus three verbal tenses: the present, the past and the future tense. This statement was already refuted by other linguists during antiquity because Greek had six verbal tenses: the present, the future, the imperfect, the aorist, the perfect and the plusquamperfect. The use of these tenses indicated complex relations between an extra-linguistic and a linguistic reality. The theory of a simple transfer of chronological time to the level of language is thus a false one.

The Greeks knew only the word *chrónos* for both verbal tense and chronological time. The Italians today, for example, still speak of time (*tempo*) even when it comes to complex verbal structures where one could hardly claim they denote chronological time per se. In these cases it is more about expressing relations between act(ion)s or states within time relations.¹⁰ The Slovenians also speak of time in general even though they distinguish between, for example, the present tense and the present time. The English are more precise and they use *time* for chronological time and *tense* for verbal tense. We often speak of *tense* even when we mean *aspect*,

⁸ Cf.: Alessandro Giordani, *Tempo e struttura dell'essere. Il concetto di tempo in Aristotele e i suoi fondamenti ontologici* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1995).

⁹ Relations of a specular type are mentioned by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Such is the case with: the gerund which denotes simultaneity, (“Pojoč pesem hodim po ulici.” / “Pojoč pesem sem hodil po ulici.”, “Singing a song, I am walking down the street.” / “Singing a song, I was walking down the street.”); or the participle which denotes anteriority, (“To rekši se je oče odpravil na njivo.” / “To rekši se oče odpravi na njivo”, “Having said that the father set out to the field.” / “Having said that the father sets out to the field.”). These kinds of usages are becoming quite rare in Slovenian but are still in use in other languages (for example, in Italian, where the above mentioned examples are translated from). Cf.: Giorgio Graffi and Sergio Scalise, *Le Lingue e il linguaggio. Introduzione alla linguistica* (Bologna : Il Mulino, 2002).

Aktionsart or *mode*. This is particularly common in languages where one of these categories is not widely used.¹¹

In Italian there are several so called “tenses” denoting the past: *imperfetto*, *passato prossimo*, *passato remoto*, *trapassato prossimo*, *trapassato remoto*. In reality, the difference between *imperfetto* on one side and *passato prossimo* and *passato remoto* on the other, lies only in the fact that the former is imperfective (as the name implies) while the latter two are perfective tenses. The same goes for both conditionals (*congiuntivo* and *condizionale*). Different “tenses” of *congiuntivo* and *condizionale*¹² denote only a sequence of tenses (simultaneity, anteriority and posteriority), or reality, potentiality or unreality of the expressed modality.¹³

Tense, aspect and a type of verbal act(ion)

What are verbal tense and aspect and how are they defined in linguistics? Adding the notion *Aktionsart* (type of verbal act(ion)) to tense and aspect, we find ourselves confronted with a triad which has not yet been adequately defined. Most importantly, however, linguists have failed to clearly define the internal range of each of these three notions.

The term *aspect* is presumed to have appeared on the international scene for the first time in 1830 when a French Slavic philologist translated a Russian grammar and used the word *aspect*. *Aspect* is a translation of the Greek word *eidos* meaning *looking*, *look* (the Slavic word *vid* has a very similar meaning), *form*, *figure*, *image*, *idea*, *notion*, and *conception*. The English word *aspect* is closer in meaning to *quality*, *type*, *attribute*, and *manner*. *Aspect* meant two things in the 19th century linguistics: it signified the distinction between perfective and imperfective verbs and also the meaning of a verb according to the phase of the act(ion) being

¹¹ The friar Stanislav Škrabec was one of the first linguists to claim that Slovenians have a remarkably developed sense of aspect, something that cannot be observed in other (not even Slavic) languages.

¹² Italian *congiuntivo* (subjunctive) has four tenses: *presente*, *passato*, *imperfetto* and *trapassato* (the present tense, the past tense, the imperfect tense, the past perfect tense). *Condizionale* (optative) can be *semplice* (*condizionale presente*, present optative) or *composto* (*condizionale passato*, past optative).

¹³ “Se avessi un gatto, lo nutrirrei.” (“If I had a cat, I would feed it”). The verb *avessi* (*congiuntivo imperfetto*) in this example expresses only the potential possibility for me to have a cat, and not past time or the imperfectiveness of an act or state.

expressed by the verb.¹⁴ Meanwhile, German linguists used the term *Aktionsart* for marking aspect. In contemporary times there seems to be considerable terminological confusion among (especially English speaking) linguists where some authors use only the term *aspect* or *aspectual* while others combine the terms *aspect* and *Aktionsart*. With the term *aspect* or *aspectual* it is the distinction between perfective and imperfective verbs that is denoted. The term *Aktionsart* denotes the type of verbal act(ion).

In the following chapters Kortmann's¹⁵ division expressed in this scheme will be used:

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Aktionsart</i>
grammar	lexicon
completion vs. incompletion	manner of act(ion) (semantic verb/predicate classes)
syntactically or inflectionally signalled	lexically or derivationally signalled

This basic table is far from sufficient to provide us with a detailed analysis of all the differences between *aspect* and *Aktionsart* systems. It is particularly problematic for the analysis contained within this work which considers the phenomena of Slovenian language. Namely, Slovenian verbal aspect is lexically expressed¹⁶ but at the same time definable within categories of morphology.

In general, the division between *aspect* and *tense* is clearer than the division between *aspect* and *Aktionsart*. *Tense* is known in most languages in one form or another. That is why the problem of a correct translation of the term *tense*, which marks a known notion in some languages, and an almost unknown one in others, does not appear as a central issue of discussion among the world's linguists.

Tense and *aspect* systems are complementary. They both express time relations and sometimes overlap. While *tense* denotes the time location of

¹⁴ Cf.: Bernd Kortmann, "The Triad 'Tense–Aspect–Aktionsart'. Problems and Possible Solutions," *Perspectives on Aspect and Aktionsart, Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 6 (1991).

¹⁵ Bernd. Kortmann, "The Triad 'Tense–Aspect–Aktionsart'. Problems and Possible Solutions," *Perspectives on Aspect and Aktionsart, Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 6 (1991).

¹⁶ Further information with regard to *aspect* can be found in any dictionary entry of Slovenian dictionaries, which points to the fact that it is an essential component of the verb in the Slovenian language.

a certain act(ion) or state, *aspect* marks their internal (time) structure, or at least this is true in (classical) theory.¹⁷ When used by speakers, however, the boundary between *tense* and *aspect* is more illusive. In some cases time location can be expressed with aspect, and in others the internal time structure of the act(ion) can be expressed with the tense.¹⁸

In-timing

With this term a Slovenian linguist Tjaša Miklič¹⁹ marks time and time relations put into words. Initially, the author asserts that so called *in-timing* is not merely a matter of verbs or individual parts of speech, but a matter of a text as a whole. The mechanism of expressing time thus should be researched on the level of discourse and not on the level of individual words.

This discourse centred research approach will direct this study despite the fact that in practice it is through the use of verbs and adverbs that language users attempt to create and understand the “meaning”²⁰ of location in time. One possible explanation for this is that users feel it is these two parts of speech which most directly “mean” time.

Certain linguists have written about in-timing and have put forward important theories which may not have always been given appropriate acknowledgement for the contributions they made to furthering understanding in this area. One such linguist was Weinrich, who claimed that a narrative or reportative attitude towards what has been said is expressed with the choice of any verbal tense.²¹ Another was Hopper, whose assertion that verbal tenses represent the content of the object world as *backgrounded* or as *foregrounded* can also help to shed light on this

¹⁷ Cf.: Bernard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁸ An example of this is the “historical” use of the perfective present tense in sentences like “Hodil sem po cesti, pa ti iz grma nenadoma *skoči zajec*” / “I was walking down the road when suddenly a rabbit *jumps* out of the bush.”

¹⁹ Cf.: Tjaša Miklič, “Besedilni mehanizmi učasovljevanja zunajjezikovnih situacij” [“Word Mechanisms of the In-timing of Extra-linguistic Situations.”], *Uporabno jezikoslovje* 94/II (1994): 80-99.

²⁰ The term “meaning” is used here in the widest possible everyday sense. There is no implication of the difference between *Sinn*, *Bedeutung* and *Bezeichnung* used in linguistics.

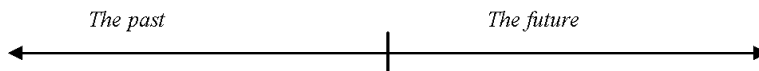
²¹ Cf.: Harald Weinrich, *Tempus. Besprochene und erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964).

issue.²² Further, Vater discovered that modal verbs tend to focus the meaning of verbs within the use of verbal tenses.²³

Since Aristotle, there have been many theories of verbal tense and its relation to chronological time. In his book *Time and Language*, Klein²⁴ organized these theories together into five groups where each group summarizes the basic characteristics of theoretical sets.²⁵ In the following section some of the basic characteristics of each group will be summarized and presented as developmental stages of an imagined unified theory of verbal tense.

The present, future and past

Time is usually imagined (and represented) as a straight line. On an arbitrary spot on the line a point X is placed which marks the present time. To the left of the point, the past time is imagined, and to the right, the future time. Almost all texts which address the *time/tense* problem discuss this straight line used to illustrate a basic conception of time.



Smith²⁶ defines time as being a “single, unbounded dimension.” Such a definition is in accordance with the straight line above. Despite the success that the above illustration has had among numerous researchers and educationalists alike, it has been clear from antiquity that it is not sufficient for a graphical description of the complex *time/tense* problem. One of the principal reasons for this insufficiency is that the illustration lacks a definition of what the present, future and past are.

One thing is, however, evident from this scheme; the present is a point which is arbitrarily placed on any given spot on a straight line. This point is thus a completely arbitrary notion. It follows then that the present is the

²² Cf.: Paul J. Hopper, *Tense–Aspect: Between Semantics and Pragmatics* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1982).

²³ Cf.: Heinz Vater, “Werden als Modalverb”, in: *Aspekte der Modalität*, ed. Joseph P. Calbert and Heinz Vater (Tübingen: Narr, 1975), 71-148.

²⁴ Wolfgang Klein, *Time in Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

²⁵ Klein’s division: I) The simple deictic-relational approach; II) Deictic-relational approach with refined relations; III) Three time parameter approach; IV) Non-deictic non-relational temporal notions; V) Time as secondary meaning of tense.

²⁶ Carlota S. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 136.

first element of separation on the straight line and, up until the present has been defined, there is no past or future. The present is the point which separates, demarcates the past from the future, but on the other hand it also binds and establishes them. In contrast, to the present “point”, the past and the future are two half-lines. The past begins somewhere in infinity and continues to the present, while the future begins with the present and continues to infinity. Naturally, the definition of time arising from the above mentioned arguments raises many questions and dilemmas.

The present

It would appear that the present is the most difficult to define. In spite of the problem posed by the comprehension of the structure of time, and the even more daunting task of illustrating it, the vast majority of researchers have chosen to turn their attention toward an understanding of the present.

Philosophers (for the most part) have not spoken about the linguistic or verbal present, but of extra-linguistic reality. Based on their own philosophical speculations, they have emphasized the present, or the past or the future, as the referential time. The picture offered by language analysis is somewhat different.

A connecting link

When Aristotle put forward the thesis of the “nonexistence” of the moment of the present,²⁷ this idea appeared for the first time in the history of Western thought. The present, as such, does not exist. It does not have, if we resort to philosophical terminology, ontological value. Only through the demarcation of the past and the future is the link created which is referred to as the present. So this demarcation, which is the connecting link, is called the present. The link is given purpose only through the existence of two time entities, the past and the future.

This thesis seems perfectly acceptable from a logical point of view and therefore for Aristotle, it would also mean that this thesis corresponds with the reality. However, the problem of the present cannot be solved solely by considering the ways in which speakers perceive and verbalize it.

The Slovenian verbal system is based on the division into three time entities: the past, future and present. Even though there are systems that

²⁷ Cf.: Robert I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

differ from Slovenian (and systems similar to Slovenian); for example those, which express time in the binary divisions of past/non-past or future/non-future, at the same time do not exclude the present as a notion. Regardless of how time is divided, therefore, human civilization cannot operate without a notion of the present within a system of time.

Aristotle himself, when dealing with verbs, emphasized the fact that the basic verbal form is the present tense while the other two (the past tense and the future tense) derive from it.

'He was healthy' or 'he will be healthy' I likewise should not call a verb. I should call it the tense of a verb. Verbs and tenses in this respect differ: the verb indicates present time but the tenses all times save the present.²⁸

The verbs *to be healthy* in the forms *he was healthy* and *he will be healthy* are thus merely secondary forms of the same part of speech, but the present tense is the basic form (the real verb). The basic form of the verb is then the present tense form, which implies that the past and future tenses are “all-round to it” (*pérìx*).²⁹

The point with dimension

The notion “point with dimension” is an oxymoron, yet it would seem that in Western thought this definition of the present with its internally contradictory form is the one most recognized. Diogenes Laertius claimed that just as the past and the future, the present also has duration (which in a time scale would mean durativity). The difference is that with the present, duration is finite, while with the past and the future, it is infinite.³⁰

The present therefore exists, and not as just a boundary between the past and the future, but also as its own quality. It seems duration is indispensable for a conception of the present. Despite the fact that duration is necessary, it is difficult to rid ourselves of the feeling that the present is a point. This effort is made even more difficult due to the prevalence of this notion of ‘a point’ in the history of Western thought. That is why Jaspers defined the present as an incomprehensible junction point of

²⁸ Aristoteles, *The organon. The categories. On interpretation. Prior analytics*, transl. Harold P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: Heineman, 1938¹, 1996^{repr.}), 119.

²⁹ Cf.: Giordani, Alessandro, *Tempo e struttura dell'essere. Il concetto di tempo in Aristotele e i suoi fondamenti ontologici* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1995).

³⁰ Cf.: Robert I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

immanence and transcendence.³¹ At the moment when duration is assigned to the present a question arises. What dimension should duration have and what should this duration include? Further, who is to define this duration and upon what should this definition be based?

The extent of the present

Robert Binnick states the following example regarding the present:

It is no contradiction to say that it is now the twentieth century, but also that it is now a period of time which includes the nineteenth century (e.g. the second millennium A. D.), or that 1938 is in the twentieth century, which we are now in, though it is not now 1938.³²

According to Binnick, this statement holds true for all of the so-called eternal truths. They are expressed with the present tense (e.g. two and two *is* four) although they are actually always valid, in the past and the future as well. In this case, the present becomes an all-embracing notion, which loses all time dimension and location within a given discourse due to its exaggerated extent. Speakers feel the need to lean on something which is generally called the present. The present is also generally understood as a point and as something that needs to have time limits. At some point we reach the (compromise) thesis found in numerous texts, which states that the present may well be a point on a timeline. Speakers, however, consider the present as a completely arbitrarily definable duration, which also includes (but not exclusively) the point of the present.

The problem was already known during antiquity and since then linguists and philosophers have been trying to solve it in different ways. Agresti alleges at least four different interpretations of the moment of 'the present' that can be summarized as follows:

- Physically-objective present: chronologically measurable time, the time of clocks, calendars, therefore a definable moment; Aristotle's *nyn*;
- Psychological present: Bergson's subjective present;
- Phenomenological present: the present as a horizon, antiquity's *kairós*, Husserl's *Jetzt-Zeit*, Heidegger's *Augenblick*;

³¹ Cf.: Carl Jaspers, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Heidelberg: Springer, 1932).

³² Cf.: Robert I. Binnick, *Time and the Verb. A Guide to Tense and Aspect* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

- Ontological present: Plato's *exaíphnes*, Jasper's incomprehensible present.³³

As can be seen in this brief overview, philosophy still has not satisfactorily defined the “now” moment. Is it a moment, a point, time or its opposite, nothing and infinity? With *nyn*, Greek thinkers emphasized the precise definability of a moment; with the word *kairós*, the moral exactness, correctness, favourableness of the moment; and with *exaíphnes* (*aípsa*) the moment's fleetingness and temporariness. What of all these conceptions of time has been preserved in language?

Conceptions of time

As evidenced from the discussion thus far, our “ideas” of time play a major role in expressing time and time relations. It is certainly true that the ways in which people perceive time are grounded in a physical sensation of chronological time. The way time is expressed is a result of the conceptualization of time relations.³⁴

Let us imagine the following (mental) experiment. We take our car keys into our right hand then raise the arm and drop the keys. What have we done? What has happened? Clearly, we have dropped the keys. But there are several wordings possible to describe this event. For example: we dropped the keys on the floor. The keys were dropped on the floor. The keys fell. The keys fell on the floor. The keys fell from our hand. The keys hit the floor. We threw the keys to the floor. These are just a few examples, which depend upon the structure of language, the context, and (eventual) intentions of the speaker.

Now, imagine that all this happened prior to language, before there was (any) language at all. The event of the falling keys could not be described in such detail and in so many ways. However, if a person's senses were in the right place and functioning, it can be assumed that the observer of this experiment would be able to distinguish, at least perceptually, between the objects which are today called “hand”, “keys” and “floor” in English. It is also quite plausible the observer would notice that the keys changed position (or what would be called “position” in the English language).

³³ Cf.: Enzo Agresti, *Quale tempo? Ontologia, fenomenologia psicopatologia della temporalità* (Pisa: Del Cerro, 2001).

³⁴ The authors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson addressed the issue in their works *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh*. In these books the problem is dealt from the standpoint of cognitive philosophy. Closer to the classical philosophical line is Hans Blumenberg in *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*.

Firstly, the keys were in something that is today called “hand”, then they travelled in the direction today known as “downwards”, and finally the keys were, as one would say in English, on the “floor”. The observer was therefore able to see three different objects (hand, keys and floor) and at least one event (the travelling of the keys to the floor). However, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the observer could, in their own pre-language situation, distinguish between “objects” and “events”.

The former example has been used to draw attention to this point: could a similar experiment be conducted with time? Is it possible to provide a precise definition for time? Not at all! Although time is considered to be one of the four basic quantities, along with length, temperature and mass, it remains completely different from any of them. It is possible to see distance and to feel weight and temperature, but it is not, however, possible to perceive time with any bodily senses. Time cannot be seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted.

The intangibility of time encourages one to draw similarities with other abstract notions, such as schizophrenia, beauty or goodness (to name just a few). However, this also cannot be true as time is (or at least is claimed to be) above all one of four basic physical quantities and not an abstract notion at all. But even after disregarding this assertion and accepting the assumption that time is an abstract notion, no similarities whatsoever can be found with schizophrenia, beauty or goodness. To describe, for example, what schizophrenia is one must resort to language. And in order to be able to describe how schizophrenia appears, expressions like “before” and “after”, “duration”, “intervals”, perhaps even “cycles” and “frequency” must be used. Can those expressions be used to describe time? They cannot, because what we call time *is* duration, intervals, cycles and frequencies, time is about before and after. We say things happen (change, evolve, vanish...) in time. This means they have duration, they appear in intervals, they appear and disappear (are born and die) in cycles. The frequency of how and when they appear and disappear is such and such. We say things were different before and they will (probably) change again.

This being said, let us return to the experiment with the keys. During the first moment, (moment 1) the keys were in our hand. Then (moment 2) they were on their way to the floor. After their fall (moment 3) they lay on the floor. For the sake of this argument, let us then say that we then place the keys on the table. In moment 4 they face toward the left, then (in moment 5) to the right and after that (in moment 6) they face us. We have therefore added three different states. On the table the keys found themselves in three different positions, however, it is a process of the mind which (can) see(s) these three different positions as a single process (the

process in which the keys are turned), or as phases of this single process. Our mind sees this as three different stages of a single process because it is imbued with language, it sees, understands, interprets and represents everything in language categories. “Before”, the keys were here, “then” they left this position and “after that” they found themselves on the floor. Language (can) see(s) this as one and the same process. Language (apparently) “injects” timeness into processes which do not in and of themselves possess it. Time is therefore (merely) the way in which people speak of the world (and the things going on in the world). It is a notion which helps humans to organize their understanding of how things happen in the world and helps us to conceive such happenings.

The process of conceptualization is not the primary subject of linguistics or the philosophy of language. It is, however, primarily a subject of psychology and psycholinguistics; only after that does it enter the domain of other sciences. However, the lingering fragments of this process are also clearly evident with purely linguistic means, which are, in some way, also the last level of the process of conceptualization; hence, the interest of linguistic sciences in linguistic means.

With regard to the relation between chronological time and verbal tense Bertinetto says:

No matter how the question is asked, it is true that verbal tenses in a diachronic perspective are merely crystallization (within a defined morphological pattern) of some basic options out of all possible conceptualizations of the chronological sequence of events. It must not be overlooked though that the options which are concretely present in different languages can be very different.³⁵

Some researchers believe that time is conceptualized in metaphors of space. In this way of thinking, our perception of time is thus similar to our perception of space.³⁶ Research in this field also suggests that there are numerous examples of such conceptualizations. The following are examples of the simplest ones: *in* one hour, the *journey* of his life was *long*, in the *middle* of the day... Spatial dimensions are used in these metaphors to express time dimensions. Expression *in one hour* therefore offers a landscape image of an hour as if it was a place or space. By invoking the metaphor of a *life long journey*, one imagines life as a journey, as

³⁵ Pier Marco Bertinetto, *Tempo, aspetto ed azione nel verbo italiano: il sistema dell'indicativo* (Firenze: Accademia della Crusca, 1986), 25. [cited fragment translated by R. Kukovec and A. Rudder]

³⁶ *Inter al. cf.*: Carlota S. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 136.

something that is evolving in space, however, in actuality this process takes place solely in time.³⁷

In speech, metaphors such as *place FOR time*³⁸ are just one of the types that can be found. In addition, there are also two complementary versions of the metaphor *place AND time*. The first version expresses a conceptualization of “world (space) is still – time runs”. Such a metaphor is called the *moving time metaphor*³⁹. The opposite metaphor, *moving ego*⁴⁰, defines the world (space) as a moving entity which slides towards the future. In English the expressions *in the months ahead* and *in the following months* have the same meaning and they express it with both versions of the *place AND time*⁴¹ metaphor. The previously mentioned timeline is a unique example of how time is expressed with Euclid’s allegory.

The discovery of the *place for time* metaphor certainly explained numerous aspects of the process of conceptualization and expressing of time, however, it in no way sheds any light on verbal tenses and how they work in discourse. Given their lack of explanatory capacity, where shall we find this link between the past, present and future tenses on one hand and the metaphors of place on the other?

Moving and points of reference

The metaphor *place FOR time* does not clarify the relation between the past, present and future. These relations are partly expressed by both *place AND time* metaphors, but the relations between tenses are merely inferred. Above all, the dividing line between the past and the future remains unclear in the complementary *moving time* and *moving ego* system. A system in which the expressions *the months ahead* and *the following*

³⁷ For expressions and representations of time, see: Wolfgang Klein and Ping Li (eds.), *The Expression of Time* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009) and K. M. Jaszczolt, *Representing Time: An Essay on Temporality as Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁸ The definition *place FOR time* originated analogously with other metaphors, which are the subject of stylistics. Those are, for example, *place for power* type of metaphors: “Ljubljana replied to Zagreb that the borders...” = “The Slovenian government replied to Croatian government that...”.

³⁹ Carlota S. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 137.

⁴⁰ It is also called *moving observer metaphor*. Cf.: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 152.

⁴¹ The first phrase reflects the conceptualization of a *moving ego* type, while the other the conceptualization of a *moving time* type.

months can have the same meaning at best allows a distinction between the present and the non-present.

Interpretation of the past and the future remains unexplained or contradictory because all points of reference cease to exist in a system where either space or time can alternatively move. In this type of system, the person/subject is surrounded by time. Time waits in front of the person/subject for the world to move into the future or it comes towards the person/subject from behind. The future can thus be in front or at the back, on the right or on the left side of the finite straight line; similar can be said for the past.

In actuality, everyday speech does not become this confusing. A speaker uses one or the other metaphor and does not usually combine them. A model based exclusively upon these types of metaphors is not useful for an explanation of time relations within the *time/tense* relation.

When studying verbal expressions of time, focus should not be directed exclusively to the finite timeline and *place FOR time* or *place AND time* metaphors. Other elements, which might be connected to this timeline and these metaphors but are not directly dependent upon them, should also be examined.

Yet, behind all of these questions and ponderings, there remains a “philosophical” problem as well. The correlation space - (place)/time is typical for a specific philosophical tradition that reached its peak in the work of Kant. With Bergson begins the search for alternatives to these interpretations, which are clearly no longer adequate to deal with the structural complexity of modern philosophies.⁴²

Paradigms

Numerous linguists within “classical” fields of inquiry inherited much from theories of metaphors to which this research will later return. Such an example, of work done within this “paradigm”, can be found in the *Metaphors We Live By* by Lakoff and Johnson.⁴³

⁴² Cf.: Guido Bruni, *Il tempo della vita. Studio sulla dimensione del presente nella filosofia contemporanea* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2001).

⁴³ Cf.: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). In their work, paradigms are a kind of organized schemata of the human conceptual system where all forms of expression are collected. Despite this definition, paradigms are not to be understood as a rigid or closed system. As the world changes, so too do our reactions to it. These changes result in the combining of different paradigms to create new possibilities of expression.

It is often thought that verbal tenses are paradigms for expressing extra-linguistic time relations.⁴⁴ In this way, the notion of *tense* expands and receives new meanings. This notion therefore suggests the unilateral *time/tense* connection, which was mentioned with reference to Greek *chrónos*, would become obsolete. This paradigm presupposes a discrepancy between the extra-linguistic reality and its perception, conceptualization and expression. A system of paradigms is a system based on the metaphorization of the world; in which the metaphor is not to be understood as a stylistic figure, but as an expression of a phenomenological relation between a subject and the objective world.

The deictic centre

Although we have used theories of metaphors to come closer (at least metaphorically) to an accurate definition of the present, future and past, we have still strayed into new paradoxes. More specifically, we are confronted with the paradox of a subject who is unable to orient themselves in the confusion of time. Such a subject is not even able to express time. In order to express time relations certain points of reference must be established. The present is considered to be the most basic point of reference, however, it is also the most difficult to define. Often (and frequently mistakenly) the notion of the present that was treated above is interwoven with the notion of the deictic centre.⁴⁵

In languages that use the grammaticalization of time, a time *deixis* is always necessarily present in the discourse. It is not a grammatical category by itself, given that, it is itself linked to numerous different other parts of speech. Conversely, it is also true that the time *deixis* is usually treated in grammar as one of the elements that in essence define many grammatical processes. Time and its grammaticalization are certainly not the only areas where the need for *deixis* exists.

Points of division

Time as such does not provide any points of reference, from which the speaker can define the point of division between events. With reference to this, Comrie writes:

⁴⁴ Cf.: Tjaša Miklič, "Besedilni mehanizmi učasovljevanja zunajjezikovnih situacij" ["Word Mechanisms of the In-timing of Extra-linguistic Situations."], *Uporabno jezikoslovje* 94/II (1994): 80-99.

⁴⁵ The term "deictic centre" is used in the sense defined by Bernard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).