

Aspect vs. relative tense: the case reopened

Jürgen Bohnemeyer

Received: 30 October 2012 / Accepted: 4 August 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

Abstract Klein (1994) points out that within the treatment of the temporal semantics of English that he proposes, there is no need to maintain the traditional distinction between perfect aspect and anterior tense. An analysis of the semantics of perfect aspect in terms of placing the topic time in the post-time of the event under description can account for the anterior tense readings of the pluperfect as well. In this article, I argue that “Klein’s Conjecture” appears more problematic once extended to other languages, drawing on evidence from Japanese, Kituba, Kalaallisut, Korean, and Yucatec Maya. Languages such as Japanese have expressions of anterior tense that do not fit Klein’s analysis of perfect aspect (topic time after event time), while others—e.g., Yucatec Maya—have expressions that fit Klein’s analysis, but do not have anterior tense readings. The additions to Klein’s theory necessary so it can accommodate the new evidence comprise a revised viewpoint aspect component that distinguishes not only relations between topic and event time, but also relations between topic time and the runtimes of states preceding and following the event in a causal chain, as well as an updated tense module that distinguishes relations between topic time and perspective times in addition to relations between topic time and utterance time.

Keywords Temporal semantics · Relative tense · Viewpoint aspect · Perfect · Yucatec Maya · Japanese

1 Klein’s Conjecture

The question examined in this article is whether viewpoint aspects and relative tenses are distinct semantic categories. Informally, tense and aspect operators constrain (i.e., restrict) the temporal reference of utterances by expressing temporal relations that

J. Bohnemeyer (✉)
University at Buffalo—SUNY, Buffalo, USA
e-mail: jb77@buffalo.edu