Vlatko Broz

Aspectual Prefixes in Early English

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Scope of the study

This study primarily examines prefixed verbs or preverbs expressing aspectuality in the Old and Middle English periods, but it also takes a look at the post-verbal particles in the subsequent periods of English. Preverbs are also known as verbal prefixes such as *ge-* in the Old English verb *gegladian* 'cheer up' or *ā-* in the Old English verb *āstreccan* 'stretch out', whereas post-verbal particles are preposition-like adverbs that come after a verb and thus comprise a phrasal verb, such as the particle *out* in Modern English *stretch out* or the particle *up* in Modern English *cheer up.* Prefixed verbs in Old English are said to be the functional equivalents (and predecessors) of phrasal verbs in Modern English. The most frequent Old English prefixes such as *a-, ge-* and *for-* are no longer used in English today, so different Modern English particles such as *up, out* and *away* have taken over their function.

Preverbs and post-verbal particles are characterized by a frustrating degree of polysemy. The focus of this study is on those preverbs and post-verbal particles whose meaning is aspectual, which is in itself too broad to discuss exhaustively. The discussions and analysis will inevitably touch upon meanings other than aspectual since they tend to form intricate networks. Verbal properties such as unaccusativity and ergativity have not been treated, as have not been Old English modal verbs as preterit perfects, since this domain of verbal aspect is not expressed by prefixes.

One of the aims of this study is to consider how various Old English prefixes such as *a-* and *ge-,* which are no longer productive, were used in the past to express aspect when attached to verbs and which post-verbal particles perform their function in Present-Day English.

Other aims include revisiting aspect and expand the current analysis of aspectual systems in English, both diachronically and synchronically and with contrastive insights in relation to Croatian, which is a Slavic language with a morphologically marked aspect. Old English is typologically closer to Croatian than to Modern English.

1.2 Research questions and hypothesis

There are several research questions that the present study addresses. The key question could be phrased as follows:

How did English express aspect by means of preverbs that have died out?

This question leads onto a number of secondary questions that are also tackled in this discussion, which are worth mentioning here.

Does English have aspect? How did a system or systems of aspect evolve in English? Why are aspectual studies so complex? Why are attitudes towards aspect so dramatically different among linguists? Why is there such a

proliferation of aspectual categories? Why did aspect originate in the studies of Slavic languages? Should Slavic languages be regarded as "an absolute standard" or merely "an idiosyncratic example" in terms of their structure of aspect? Does a contrastive analysis of aspect between a Slavic and a Germanic language help to account for the characteristics of both languages? Which preverbs were used in early English to mark aspect? Which aspectual categories are there in early English? Why is the basic rule of perfectivization not universally applicable in early English? Why are there so many cases of verbs without a prefix denoting perfective actions as well as prefixed verbs denoting imperfective actions? Do preverbs exhibit properties of grammaticalization, lexicalization or both?

The central hypothesis of this study is that English has several well-developed systems of aspect, one of which is expressed by preverbs and post-verbal particles. The aspect system of preverbs was abandoned during the Middle English period, parallel to which a new aspect system was emerging – that of post-verbal particles. This transition was part of the development of English from a more synthetic type of language to a more analytic one.

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that by and large Old English preverbs expressed aspect in a similar way as they do in Slavic languages even though many scholars tried to prove otherwise. It is proposed that aspectual preverbs are grammaticalized rather than lexicalized. Even though they appear before the verb stem, they act more like inflectional rather than derivational prefixes.

The exceptions to the basic principles of marking aspect are accounted for by other functions of preverbs and other syntactic markers of aspectuality, as well as by examining how aspect really functions in Slavic languages.

1.3 Theoretical framework

The approach taken in this discussion is essentially eclectic. In order to account for the phenomenon of aspect in the diachrony of English, a wide range of theories need to be combined.

There is no single theory, school or movement in the field of aspect. Studies on aspect have their traditions, as for example Slavic or Anglo-American, but even these traditions feature a number of widely differing angles, interpretations or methods in dealing with the linguistic phenomenon of aspect. Therefore, many individual approaches springing from different traditions need to be discussed in order to elicit their theories and ideas. Some of these theories are surprisingly old but they have been evolving and improving for centuries, thus showing a fascinating example of maturation of linguistic thought. All these theories could be called theories of aspect, but it is important to stress that they are not characterized by adherence to any central positions or principles.

There are other theories that can shed light on aspectual phenomena. They have also been taken into consideration in this study. These include Grammaticalization Theory, which has been expounded in several textbooks (e.g. Hopper and Traugott 1993) and Lexicalization Theory (as expounded in Brinton and Traugott 2005). Both Grammaticalization Theory and Lexicalization Theory could be subsumed under a more general theoretical framework, which is that of Cognitive Linguistics. Again, Cognitive Linguistics

is not a theory but an approach to language that places meaning in focus, blurs the boundaries between grammar and lexicon, as well as the boundaries between pragmatics and semantics. It studies cognitive mechanisms and principles of human categorization that in turn account for a wide range of linguistic phenomena.

1.4 Structure of the study

This introduction set the topic of the study, defined its scope and research questions. It also briefly stated the hypothesis and theoretical frameworks used.

Two avenues of research converge in this discussion; one is that on aspect, and the other is on verbal prefixes and particles. Chapter 2 deals with the former, while Chapter 3 with the latter, presenting a brief, selective and critical overview of previous research in both fields. The second chapter addresses the complexity of aspectual studies, comments on several definitions of aspect as a semantic category, shows some examples how aspect can be expressed morphologically and syntactically in a wide range of world languages, outlines the history of studying aspect, discusses aspect in Slavic and Germanic, as well as the aspectual categories used in the analysis.

The third chapter is a survey of previous studies of preverbs and particle verbs, evaluating the works of De la Cruz (1972, 1975), Hiltunen (1983), Brinton (1988), Petré (2005) and Elenbaas (2007). It also presents a short overview of synchronic research of verb-particles.

The fourth chapter discusses theoretical foundations other than aspect-related theories, as well as the methodology of the study.

The fifth chapter analyses the aspectual properties of the preverb *a-,* whereas the sixth and seventh chapters analyse the preverbs *ge-* and *for-* respectively. For each of these three preverbs, there is a discussion of etymology, followed by a corpus-based analysis of semantic and syntactic features with numerous examples. The bulk of analysis focuses on Old English, but for each prefix there is a section that also deals with Middle English.

1.5 Why preverb?

The term 'preverb' is traditionally used in Indo-European linguistics to denote morphemes that appear before a verb and form a close semantic unit with that verb. Fortson defines it as "an adverbial particle that modifies the meaning of a verb and often appears attached to the verb as a prefix" (2004: 475).

This term is not widely accepted in English historical linguistics, but there is a significant number of authors (Bloomfield 1929, Mossé 1938, Pilch 1953 and 1955, Lindemann 1965, Fraser 1975, West 1982, Booij and Van Kemenade 2003) who use it to refer to what the majority call a verbal prefix.

Like many terms in linguistics, the notion of *preverb* has received many interpretations in the literature. In this book it is understood as a verbal prefix, which in English, and in particular in its early stages, is a bound morpheme, i.e. inseparable from the verb. It can have a grammatical function, representing a case of grammaticalization as hypothesized in this study, or it can have a lexical

function with a non-productive word-formation pattern, representing a case of lexicalization or even petrification or fossilization. It needs to be stressed that one and the same preverb can have both grammaticalized and lexicalized meanings (cf. Van der Auwera 1999).

And finally the term neatly allows expressing the idea of a 'verbal prefix' in one word. Quite often in the literature, the adjective 'verbal' is omitted and only 'prefix' is used, which may give rise to confusion as prefixes can also be nominal or adjectival. Indeed, more often than not, the very same prefix can also be attached to nouns and adjectives. Furthermore, the term 'preverb' is used in Indo-European linguistics and points to a developmental continuity that can be traced back to Proto-Indo-European (PIE).

In Vedic Sanskrit, which is considered to be the closest attested language we will ever come to PIE, preverbs were freely detachable from the verb and could take any position in the sentence. The following examples show the Sanskrit preverbs *út* 'up' and *ví* out' in different sentence positions – left-adjacent to the verb as in (1) or at the very end of the sentence as in (2).

(1) *tán no   mahá̃m̐   úd   ayā́n   devó   aktúbhiḥ*
      it we.ACC great.NOM up.PREVERB extend.AOR.3.P.SG. god.NOM twilight ray.INS.PL
      'The mighty god has proffered it to us with twilight rays.'

                                                                Rigveda IV, 53 (352)[1]

(2) *áprathatam   pr̥thivī́m mātáraṃ   ví*
      spread (√*prath*).IMPF.2.P.DU earth.ACC mother.ACC out.PREVERB
      'you two spread out mother earth'

                                                                Rigveda VI, 72, 2

The preverb can also be coalesced and univerbated with the verb, as in the combination of the preverb *ā* with the verb *aprās* in example (3). The function of the preverb *ā* is intensifying and sometimes reversing the meaning. On a formal level, this combination of verb and preverb is the same as the Old English *afyllan* or Gothic *us-fulljan* 'fill up'*,* but Sanskrit and Old English *ā* are not considered to be cognates.

(3) *ā́prā́   rájāṃsi   diviyā́ni   pā́rthivā*
      up.PREVERB+fill (√*prā*).AOR.3.P.SG fairy space.ACC.PL heavenly.ACC.PL earthly.ACC.PL
      'He has filled the dark regions, heavenly and earthly'

                                                                Rigveda IV, 53 (356)[2]

In Classical Sanskrit, as codified by the grammarian Pāṇini, the syntax of preverbs was no longer as free as in Vedic Sanskrit, so the position of preverbs was fixed in the position immediately preceding the verb or compounded with the verb. In other words, postponing the preverb to the end of the sentence as in example (2) was no longer possible. Many aspectual functions of the preverbs in Sanskrit are discussed in Gonda (1962: 225-250).

It should be noted that some authors regard *preverbs* as a cover term for verb particles and prefixes (cf. McIntyre 2003: 119), which points to the common

---

[1] Adapted from Slocum, J. and Thomson, K. (2006). *Ancient Sanskrit Online*
[2] Adapted from Slocum, J. and Thomson, K. (2006). *Ancient Sanskrit Online*

origin of verb particles, verb prefixes and prepositions. It also explains why so many of them have a similar appearance in English today, as well as in many other present-day Indo-European languages. Preverbs are said to follow the grammaticalization path (Booij and Van Kemenade 2003: 4):

independent preverb > left member of verbal compound > prefix > (zero)

One may find it paradoxical to consider particles in English as preverbs since they come post-verbally and not preverbally, but that is a consequence of the syntactic development of the English language. Due to the loss of the OV order in Middle English, the position of particles is "no longer on the left of the verb" (Van Kemenade and Los 2003: 87), i.e. it moved from a preverbal to a post-verbal position.

To summarize, whether one defines preverbs as autonomous constituents which were predecessors to prefixes or as a cover term for any verb particles and prefixes, or verbal prefixes as they are called in this study, they all have one conceptual link in common: preverbs usually appear before the verb, as their name suggests (Lat. *pre-* 'before'), they form complex predicates in combination with verbs and they form a lexical unit with the verb that they modify, typically contributing to the aspectual properties of the derived verb.