PUNCTUAL VERSUS DURATIVE AS COVERT CATEGORIES[1]

Harold V. King
The University of Michigan

The inherent meaning of punctualness or durativeness found in many English verbs, can best be studied in the framework of Whorf's theory of Grammatical Categories. When cooccurrence restrictions attributable to other features such as activity or nonactivity are set aside, it is clear that we must posit at least these two aspectual features, punctual and durative, to account for the way verbs and longer verbal expressions are used with time adverbs such as "already" and with the tense signs and auxiliaries. For example, punctual verbs in the present tense form express a future meaning after "hope" as in "I hope he says something,"whereas durative verbs refer to present time, as in "I hope he knows." Comparable reactances are found after "wish," "like," and "would like." Whether semantic or syntactic, these restrictions can be described in terms of either lexical features or covert categories, but not in a mathematically rigorous way.

1. The question to be considered in this paper is whether the notion of punctual versus durative as a feature of selection will help us to identify any important syntactic-semantic distinctions associated with English verb expressions, particularly distinctions that might explain some of the restrictions on the use of various kinds of time adverbials, temporal conjunctions, and tense signs.

2. The term "verb expression" (abbreviated VBX) will be used here to include the verb along with its complements and objects if any, but excluding optional modifiers and all of the auxiliary apparatus. The term "aspect" will be used only in reference to what might be called inherent aspect rather than to the overt signs of progressive or perfective verb phrases.

3. The treatment of aspect in Poutsma (1926) suggests that a punctual-versus-durative categorization will be useful in accounting not only for the use of time adverbs but also for some of the peculiarities in the use of auxiliaries and many of the restrictions on

embedding and conjoining of verb expressions. Poutsma begins his
Chapter 51 (Aspect) by dividing predications into ''momentaneous''
and ''durative.'' His examples are:

> Momentaneous:
>
>> He will arrive at six.
>> He will leave at nine.
>> He dipped his pen into the ink.
>> He stabbed his assailant.
>> He obtained the shop.
>
> Durative:
>
>> He lives at Oxford.
>> He bore his grief with fortitude.

In addition to the many further details given in the chapter on as-
pect, Poutsma repeatedly refers to the matter of aspect in many
other places throughout the grammar. It is clear that he regarded
aspectual oppositions as indispensable in explaining the syntactic
and semantic peculiarities of English verb expressions.

    4. Here are some further examples to help establish the dif-
ference between the two kinds of time-profile which a VBX can
exhibit:

PUNCTUAL (= perfective, aorist, instantaneous)	DURATIVE (= imperfective, descriptive, stative)
He paints a picture.	He paints like Rivera.
He drinks the glass of water.	He drinks.
He reads the first few lines.	He reads very well.
He hits a home run; appoints a captain	He bats left-handed; manages the team.
She wrote that poem.	She wrote poetry.
She said something in French.	She spoke French fluently.
He put on a hat.	He wore a hat.
You'll miss the first act.	You'll miss your garden (= feel the lack of it).

    5. The most typical punctual expressions are achievement ex-
pressions like ''get'' or ''lift'' which may take time to complete but
do not continue once they are done, as opposed to tasks like ''hold''
or ''support'' which are typically durative. Note in the following ex-
amples that the selectional features that go into the make-up of
many verb expressions will permit them to be used either way.

PUNCTUAL	DURATIVE
He is anxious to *drive a Bentley*.	He is known to *drive a Bentley*.
He forgot to *beat his wife*.	He was said to *beat his wife*.

It is not clear exactly what factors in the internal structure of a VBX go to determine its aspectual potential; but obviously it is not the choice of verb alone that determines how the whole expression can be used; for example the kind of nominals chosen for objects, complements, etc., has a lot to do with it. Generic noun phrases, whether singular or plural, seem to be characteristic of durative VBX's, whereas definite or indefinite-particular noun phrases often give a punctual meaning, as in "She wrote that poem" or "He painted a (single, specific) picture."

6. In this connection it is appropriate to consider the example in Sweet, "receive a letter from him" versus "receive letters from him" (sec. 2246). Sweet notes that the first does not admit of the idea of duration while the second necessarily implies repetition. Elsewhere (sec. 283) Sweet distinguishes what he calls long tenses (durative) from short or "point" tenses (punctual). The long tenses can be either continuous ("he lives in the country") or recurrent ("he goes there often"). He explains his use of the term "aspect" as referring to "distinctions of time independent of any reference to past, present, or future." Or as Hockett puts it, "Aspects have to do, not with the location of an event in time, but with its temporal distribution or contour". (1958:237) Sweet made it clear that he was talking about aspect in terms of semantics or universal grammar rather than the surface structure of English: "The distinction of duration between 'fell' and 'lay' in 'he fell down' and 'he lay there'. . . has of course nothing to do with grammar, because it is not shown by any grammatical forms but by the meaning of the words themselves." (sec. 283)

7. Among the verbs typically used in durative expressions are those which by other criteria are nonactivities, such as "know," "like," "resemble," and "want." But it would be misleading to equate durative and nonactivity merely because of a similarity in some of their reactance frames. It should be noted that "He is known to VBX," "said to VBX," and similar slots, where nonactivity VBX's typically appear, will also accommodate durative activity expressions. And conversely there are many nonactivity VBX's (such as "become," "receive," "happen," etc.) which are persistently used in punctual time frames. Thus it appears that the dimension of activity versus nonactivity must be dealt with

separately from the dimension of punctual versus durative with
which we are concerned here.

8. A useful theoretical framework for dealing with this prob-
lem is provided in Whorf (1945). Our problem is typical of the
kind he discussed. There are some VBX's that are used only with
a durative meaning and some that are used only with a punctual
meaning, and there are also many that can be used either way—a
typical case of overlapping distribution, exactly the situation in
which it proves convenient to postulate what Whorf calls "covert
grammatical categories." It is the same kind of situation that
motivates the positing of the countable and uncountable categories
for nominal expressions. It is worth noting also that in both situ-
ations it is not the noun or verb itself which is to be categorized
but rather the whole construction of which the noun or verb is a
part.

9. Incidentally, there is a very close semantic parallel between
mass (uncountable) nominal expressions and durative VBX's, the
latter being like a blob of activity spreading out over an ill-defined
period of time, whereas the singular count nominal is like the single
momentaneous event which constitutes the general meaning of punc-
tual VBX's. When a punctual VBX like "He stole a loaf of bread"
is put into a context where it cannot mean a single event, then its
meaning will be iterative: "Whenever he got hungry, he would
steal a loaf of bread." This is parallel in meaning to the plural
of a count nominal. Sweet called attention to this when he men-
tioned the similarity between continuous versus discrete time-
adverbs and mass versus count substantives. (sec. 345)

10. The punctual-durative contrast is, in Whorf's terminology,
a selective feature, a term that is also in keeping with Chomsky's
"selectional restrictions" as opposed to "strict subcategorization."
(1965, esp. 95) This is simply to say that having chosen certain for-
matives—a verb with its complements, objects, etc.—to put together
in a verb expression, there are then consequences to which you have
committed yourself as to the environments in which the resulting
VBX can be used. For example there are restrictions as to the ad-
can be used. For example there are restrictions as to the ad-
verbial expressions with which the VBX is compatible; there are
certain meanings of auxiliaries, particularly modals, which may be
ruled out; and there are constraints as to the other verbs onto
which this VBX may be attached as a complement. As an example,
the time adverbs "still" (negative "no longer") and "already" go
with the simple tenses of durative verb expressions, not with punc-
tuals. But punctuals, not duratives, appear in places like this: "As
soon as you have received it, please tell me," where "receive it"

can be replaced only with a punctual expression.

11. As for those VBX's that can be used either way, we usually make a decision when we hear such an expression whether it should be taken as a single event or as a description of a state of affairs. If somebody says of Governor Smith "He beats his wife," you may say "Well, now, I didn't know he was that kind of a guy." (Your decision is that the statement was a durative-aspect present tense.) But if you see somebody reading a newspaper and hear him utter the sentence "Governor Smith beats his wife," you may ask "When? Where?" or something of the sort, to reveal that you apprehend this as a report of a single momentaneous event. It is obvious that here as in many cases the whole situational context determines how the VBX will be understood. There are also many verbs or verb expressions that are compatible with only one kind of context as to the feature of temporal contour.

12. In the simple past, a punctual VBX will have the meaning either of one single event (which, as Joos says, "advances the plot") or else it will have an iterative meaning—an activity that has to finish and then start all over again in order to come under the "customary" use of the past tense, as for example "he escaped." But durative expressions in the past tense do not advance the plot; they rather describe the background, so that "Alice's father drank," for example, tells you something about what the old gentleman was like, but it doesn't say what happened at a particular moment.

13. In the simple present tense, a punctual expression often has an iterative meaning:

"What do they do for amusement?

—They get the car out and drive over to the drag strip."

Or it may be a statement of what is going to happen; i.e., part of a plan or a fixed program:

" The race starts at noon tomorrow."

In a sense this is a durative *use* of a punctual expression; that is to say, the expression "start at noon tomorrow" is punctual, but the whole sentence is a statement of a present state of affairs. In any case, this is not a use to which durative expressions can be put; we cannot say for example "He drives a hard bargain tomorrow" with the generic meaning of "a."

14. Punctual expressions are typically used with the simple present formative in narratives in the so-called historical present: "Then he whips out his quill and dips it in the inkwell." Here

again each VBX advances the plot. Closely related to this use are those examples found in chapter titles or "summary of story plot." (Twaddel 1960)   Here also is to be included the peculiar use of the present tense in introducing arithmetic problems and the like: "A man finds five dollars and spends half of it."   Again, all of these seem to be durative uses of punctual expressions.

15. As to modals, there are many points where the rules require some reference to the aspectual nature of the main verb. For example, most grammar books for foreign students mention that "could" is not used for single events in the past: we do not say "Last week we could finally get our money back." You have to say "we were able."   And accordingly, if you say "In July you could begin to study Chinese," It will be understood not as a past but as a conditional referring to *next* July; and this can be explained by the categorization of "begin to study Chinese" as a punctual VBX.   On the other hand, if you say "In July you could read very nicely," the auxiliary "could" will be understood as a past referring to *last* July.   And the explanation of this requires the categorization of "read very nicely" as a durative.   Somewhere here also lies the possibility of explaining the oddity of sentences like "John has read very nicely"—an oddity noticed by Jespersen among others.

16. Among the other modals, "may" meaning possibility or "perhaps" or "admissibility of supposition" (OED) when combined with a punctual VBX means "perhaps will"—i.e., has a future meaning: "He may say something in French."   But MAY-perhaps plus a durative VBX means "perhaps does" (present time) as in such a sentence as "He may speak French" or "He may know something."   Punctuals of course can be similarly used with iterative meaning: "He may open the door the wrong way" in the sense of "It may be that he customarily opens it."   (The other meaning of "may," MAY-permission, is not typically compatible with durative VBX's. It would be odd to use the sentence "He may speak sixteen languages" with the intention of giving permission for some one to be a polyglot.)   There are a number of other constructions, by the way, where punctuals without any auxiliary word are future in meaning while duratives in the same environment are present in meaning.   Consider the following examples:

"I hope he says something."   "I hope he knows."   (Dura-
   (Punctual.)   tive.)

"If he says anything." (Punc-   "If he knows. . ." (Durative.)
   tual.)

The use of a punctual expression in the present tense to express future time will seem entirely natural to students whose native language is of the Slavic family.

17. The meaning of "admissibility of supposition" is also expressed (with a negative or interrogative) by the surface form CAN as in "You can't mean it." Durative VBX's (including many non-activity expressions like "mean") are especially compatible with this use of CAN:

> "He can't drive a truck for a living, that's for sure, because
> if he did..." and so on.

But punctuals do not go in this construction; the form CAN is persistently interpreted, in combination with punctuals, as either ability or permission ("You can't eat this sandwich") rather than admissibility of supposition.

18. In sentences like "I hope he reads nicely," a punctual will mean future single event, while durative will mean present state of affairs; and similarly we use duratives after "wish" as in "I wish you spoke French" (with the past tense sign expressing the underlying idea of "unreal"). A punctual VBX in this slot can only mean iterative: "I wish you took a vacation." A single-event punctual requires that the underlying idea of "unreal" be expressed with the form "would" as in "I wish you would say something."

19. The distinction between "Do you like. ." (in general) and "Would you like..." (right now) comes into the verb-aspect picture just as it does into the question of particular and generic indefinite nominals. We say "Do you like to write poetry?" but not "Do you like to write a poem for me?" (Unless of course the VBX is intended in the iterative sense.) On the other hand, we say "Would you like to play a set of tennis?" (punctual) but not "Would you like to speak French fluently?" (durative). Of course we can say "Would you like *to be able* to VBX-durative?" but then this is not an invitation. With further study of this part of the whole problem, it seems likely that an explanation will be found for the great frequency of durative verb expressions after "can" and "be able" and for the fact that there is practically no difference in meaning between "Can you speak French?" and "Do you speak French?," whereas with punctuals there is a great deal of difference, as for example between "Can you escape from this predicament?" and "Do you escape from this predicament?"

20. To sum up, though many vexing problems remain to be solved, it seems that the most useful covert categories to be postulated for English verb expressions are of two separate kinds. First, the categories of punctual and durative, meaning approximately

events versus states; and second, the categories of activity and nonactivity, which will be dealt with later in another paper. The term aspect as it has traditionally been used seems appropriate only for the first of these dimensions. In Whorf's terminology, the aspectual categories for English verb expressions are not only covert but are also what he calls selective categories (rather than modulus) which means they are determined by the choices made in putting together the verb expression—partly the purely lexical choice of the verb itself, but also involving the matter of adverbial complements and the selection of determiners before the object noun and so forth.

21. Alternatively, instead of talking about covert selective categories, we could simply say, as Sweet did, that there is something in the meaning of the verb expression that determines whether or not it is compatible with certain adverbials or certain uses of modals and whether it may be used as a complement after certain other verbs. As a final recommendation, it is suggested that we use the terminology of features and categories in order to talk about aspectual meanings, but that we should take care not to let these terms dazzle us into believing that we are on the way to achieving anything like mathematical rigor in the description of the English verb system.

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