Comparing aspectual systems

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Spanish and Russian temporal-aspectual systems so that they can easily be compared to the Dutch system described in Verkuyl (2001).[1] Aspectual systems comprise certain properties of temporal and aspectual structure represented in natural languages. Languages have developed their own strategies to encode this information. The three languages we are going to look at are Dutch, Spanish and Russian, and the temporal domain we are focusing on is past.

Talking about tense-aspect systems, we assume the existence of a number of basic oppositions. The first one is the terminative/durative opposition, familiar from Verkuyl's work, e.g. Verkuyl (1993). It concerns the relationship of the verb and its arguments, and its value is determined at the predicational level, which in syntactic terms roughly corresponds to the level of the VP. The second and third oppositions are the perfect/imperfect (Dutch and Spanish) and perfective/imperfective (Russian) ones. Both of them are sentential notions. Their meaning can only be determined at the sentential or discourse level, where contextual information needs to be taken into account. In this paper we investigate the relation between these oppositions and see how much similarity there is behind these almost identical terms.

1. Dutch

The part of the Dutch temporal/aspectual system presented in Table 1 will be taken here as our point of reference whilst working towards constructing comparable tables for the Spanish and Russian aspectual systems.

The durative vs. terminative distinction relies on Verkuyl's Plus Principle (Verkuyl, 1993): the dynamicity of a verb plus certain quantificational restrictions

Table 1. Dutch pasts

	Imperfect	Perfect
Durative	1 *Zij zong* she sang	2 *Zij heeft gezongen* she has sung
Terminative	3 *Zij zong een lied* she sang a song	4 *Zij heeft een lied gezongen* she has a song sung

on the denotation of its arguments yields a compositionally formed terminative aspect; all other cases are durative. The terminativity in 3 and 4 in Table 1 is due to the fact that the verb expresses progress in time and that the arguments of the verb denote restricted quantities. These restrictions are absent in 1 and 2 because there is no internal argument. Other types of sentences expressing durativity are those where the internal argument is a bare plural (*Ze zong liederen* (She sang songs)). The argument fails to specify a restricted quantity and those sentences where the verb has a stative nature (*Ze haatte liederen* (She hated songs)).

The columns in Table 1 represent a tense distinction. We use the terms perfect and imperfect to comprise two features:

1. "Onvoltooid" (uncompleted) + "verleden" (past) = imperfect
2. "Voltooid" (completed) + "tegenwoordige" (present) = perfect

An important characteristic shown in Table 1 is the fact that in the Dutch "voltooid" (perfect) forms, the auxiliary verb is actually in the present form. This is why the form is called "voltooid tegenwoordige tijd" (VTT) (perfect present tense). Nevertheless, the temporal interpretation of these sentences is unambiguous: the action referred to takes place in the past. This fact, however, does not seem to be directly reflected in the inflected verbal morphology: formally, VTT is still a present tense. This is one reason to introduce the notion of temporal domain where the eventuality is interpreted.

In order to maintain the idea that [± completed] is a tense notion, one should not simply create a point in time or even an interval and relate it to the eventuality expressed by the predication, as happens standardly in Reichenbachian tense systems. Rather the idea is that the Germanic opposition [± completed] should be taken as an opposition between a completed domain, which in sentences 2 and 4 of Table 1 is presented from a present perspective and an uncompleted domain in which the point of perspective is located in the past introducing a domain in which all sorts of eventualities such as sentences 1 or 3 are located. A terminative sentence such as 3 pertains to a completed eventuality in an uncompleted domain, the completion of the latter possibly being given much later in the discourse. A durative sentence such as 2 pertains to an uncompleted eventuality in a completed domain.

At this point we are not able to give a more formal definition of the notion of a temporal domain, that is why we only describe it informally. There are, however, two important characteristics of this notion that we will maintain. First, we assume that the temporal domain can be specified by temporal adverbs like *yesterday*, *in summer* or *in 1998* (cf. Reference time (Reichenbach 1947)). Second, we would like to emphasize that this is a purely temporal notion, i.e. it has nothing to do with the aspectual characteristics of a predicate or VP, which are determined independently from the relation of an eventuality to the hosting temporal domain.[2]

The Dutch table shows that there is a quadrant where the two oppositions cross, creating, therefore, 4 possibilities for rendering distinct aspectual meanings. Table 1 is then sufficient to bring out all that is necessary to deal with systems with a poor tense system interacting with a relatively rich aspectual system, such as Russian, and with systems with a rich tense system and a rich aspectual system, such as Spanish. The Dutch system occupies an intermediate position.

What we would like to do in the following sections is to explore which strategies Spanish and Russian employ in dealing with the terminativity at the predicational level and the fact that one can speak about an uncompleted domain in the past; and conversely, with the durativity at the predicational level and the fact that one can speak about a completed domain in the past.

2. Spanish

A list of problems and their postulated solutions will lead us to a parallel table where the Spanish temporal/aspectual system can be represented.

The first problem we encounter when trying to build a table for Spanish, which would look similar and be comparable to the one for Dutch, is the fact that there is only space for two Spanish verb forms: a simple past and a compound form. This is not sufficient. The first step, then, is to add a column for the Spanish table.

Table 2. Spanish pasts

	Imperfecto (Imperfect)	Perfecto simple (Simple perfect)	Perfecto Compuesto (Compound Perfect)
Durativo	1 *Ella cantaba* she sang.IMP	2 *Ella cantó* she sang.PF	3 *Ella ha cantado* she has sung
Terminativo	4 *Ella cantaba una canción* she sang.IMP one song	5 *Ella cantó una canción* she sang.PF one song	6 *Ella ha cantado una canción* she has sung a song

The second problem we encounter concerns the two simple forms. As the verbal names indicate, the sentences in cells 1 and 4 are imperfect and the ones in

2 and 5 are perfect. Put very simply , like in Dutch, the imperfect forms imply that the eventuality described by the predication is placed at a time domain that is not completed, while the perfect forms imply that the eventuality described by the predication is placed at a time domain that is completed. We will see the nuances of the imperfect later on. But for now, we have made an aspectual distinction between the two simple forms the Spanish language has to offer when speaking about events in the past.

Our third problem concerns the perfect forms.[3] If both of them imply that the domain hosting a described eventuality is completed, why do we need two forms? And here is where the inflected verbal form gives us clues. The verbal inflection of the simple perfect is past; the verbal inflection of the compound perfect is present (again, like the VTT in Dutch). Both actions are placed in the past. The difference is that the temporal domain of the simple perfect does not include the present,[4] while the temporal domain of the compound perfect does, as indicated by the form of the auxiliary verb.

(1) a. *La semana pasada fuimos   dos veces al   cine*
            the week   last   we.went.PF two times to.the cinema
            'Last week we went twice to the cinema'

      b. *Esta semana hemos ido dos veces al   cine*
            this week   we.have gone two times to.the cinema
            'This week we have been twice to the cinema'

The distinction between the simple and compound forms of the perfect in Spanish can be described as follows. The difference cannot be stated in terms of the temporal location of the eventuality itself; what matters here is whether the temporal domain includes the present or not.

We leave now behind the perfect forms and their meanings in Spanish. The imperfect form itself postulates many problems that we will now touch upon.

The imperfect has three different readings: (1) Episodic/background reading; (2) Habitual/repetitive reading; (3) Progressive/ongoing reading. Sentences in the first column of the Spanish table do not specify which one of the three readings the sentence has. We need to have extra information, which can be supplied by adverbial elements in the sentence or which has to be obtained from the context.

We understand an imperfect form as having an episodic reading when the eventuality described by predication is used as background, as part of a description, for example, at the beginning of a story:

(2) *Ayer   María cantaba una canción porque estaba   contenta*
        yesterday María sang.IMP   one.song because was.IMP happy
        'Yesterday María sang a song because she was happy'

An imperfect form has a habitual or repetitive meaning when the eventuality described by the predication occurs more than once in the past:

(3) *Ella cantaba   cancion escada Domingo*
    she sang.IMP songs   every Sunday
    'She sang songs every Sunday'

The imperfect form expressing progressivity[5] has the unusual property of always having to be supported by another tensed clause for the sentence where it occurs to fully function:

(4) *María cantaba   cuando me la   encontré*
    María sang.IMP when   me her I.found.PF
    'María was singing when I found her'

Interestingly enough, the Spanish language has also the means to express progressivity with a verbal periphrasis, like in English or in Dutch:

(5) *María estaba   cantando cuando me la   encontré*
    María was.IMP singing   when   me her I.found.PF
    'María was singing when I found her'

This leaves us with the following question: what is the difference between the imperfect form expressing progressivity and the progressive verbal periphrasis in Spanish?

   Let us first see what the progressive periphrasis has to offer that the imperfect form does not have. Both sentences make use of the imperfect inflection, either on the auxiliary form, as in (5), or on the main verb, as in (4). Thus, it seems that the difference between these two sentences is not due to a different aspectual form, because both sentences accept the imperfect inflection. The difference seems to be in the placement of this inflection. If it is on the main verb, such as in (4), then the sentence acquires a straightforward imperfect meaning, where the temporal domain chosen by the speaker is not completed. On the other hand, if the speaker chooses to place the inflection on the auxiliary verb, as in (5), then the main verb needs to take the gerundive inflection, which adds to the sentence an "action in progress" meaning. Both of these sentences imply that the time domain where the eventuality is taking place is not completed; the difference is that when the speaker chooses the periphrasis s/he emphasizes the progress of the eventuality. This reasoning also helps us understand sentences such as (6):

(6) *María estuvo   cantando canciones*
    María was.PF singing   songs
    'María was singing songs'

Here we also find a progressive periphrasis (be + -ing) but interestingly enough, the aspectual inflection on the auxiliary verb is perfect. This sentence shows that a progressive meaning does not necessarily require imperfect morphology. What this sentence tells us is that there was an eventuality, taking place in a past temporal domain, described as progressive, but the temporal domain where the eventuality is placed is completed because of the perfect inflection which the verb takes.

Going back to our Spanish table, our sentence in cell 1, that is, imperfect and durative sentence, does not present any problem. A sentence that includes an imperfect form, implying that the eventuality described by the predication is placed at a temporal domain that is not completed, does not conflict with the fact that the eventuality is durative.

However, sentences with imperfect form but compositionally formed terminative aspect do create a problem. For convenience, we will repeat here the sentences given above ((2), (3), and (4)) as examples for the three imperfect meanings:

(7)   a.   Ayer María cantaba una canción porque estaba contenta. = Episodic
      b.   María cantaba una canción cada Domingo. = Habitual
      c.   María cantaba una canción cuando me la encontré. = Progressive

Only *María cantaba una canción* in sentence (b) can be understood as terminative, since the action occurs several times but each time it reaches an endpoint. (7a) and (7c) cannot accept the terminative reading and hence the sentence becomes durative. The imperfect form of the verb overrules and modifies the terminative meaning given by the internal structure of the verb and its arguments by preventing the whole predication from being actualized in real time.

3.   Russian

To give just a brief idea about what is meant by the opposition between perfective and imperfective verbal forms in Russian, consider the following examples:

(8)   a.   *Saša pel   pesnju*
           Saša sang.IMP song.ACC
           'Saša sang/was singing a song'
      b.   *Saša s-pel   pesnju*
           Saša PF-sang song.ACC
           'Saša sang a song'

The Russian sentences in (8a) and (8b) are identical, except for one thing — the difference in the *aspectual* form of the verb. The term *aspect* here traditionally refers to the opposition between *perfective* and *imperfective* in Russian. In (8a), the verb

pet' 'to sing' is in the imperfective, in (8b) it is in the perfective aspect. Perfectivity is usually morphologically marked on a verb. One of the most common morphological means to derive perfective forms is prefixation.[6] From the point of view of verbal morphology, the aspectual morphology in Russian is not a part of the tense morphology at the same time: the verb forms in (8) both have the same inflectional past tense morpheme -l-.

But here we have to mention that the number of morphological tenses in Russian is significantly smaller than in Dutch or Spanish. In particular, Russian does not have complex perfect tenses. The only tense form which features an auxiliary verb is the future forms of imperfective verbs. Since we constrain ourselves to the past domain only, this fact is not going to be of any importance for us here. Russian inflectional tense morphology does not really distinguish between present and future, i.e. verbs bear the same inflection in all non-past forms. This suggests that, strictly speaking, there may be only two tense forms in Russian, past and non-past, and that this is the only difference reflected in the domain of verbal tense morphology (Table 3).

Table 3. Russian tense forms

	Imperfective	Perfective
Past	pe-l-a sing-PST-SG.FEM	s-pe-l-a PF-sing-PST-SG.FEM
Present	po-jot[7] sing-3.SG	∅
Future	bud-et pet' be-3.SG sing-INF	s-po-jot PF-sing-3.SG

When we try to compare the tables for Dutch and Spanish on the one hand and Russian on the other, there are two ways to make a comparison: (1) one can treat the aspectual opposition in Russian as pertaining to the same semantic information conveyed by the terminative-durative distinction, or (2) one can tend to assign (im)perfectivity temporal functions, bringing the difference in aspect nearer to the difference between the perfect and the imperfect tenses in Dutch and Spanish. There is a third logically possible option, which is to say that in Russian, we are dealing with an opposition that is not reducible to either the perfect/imperfect or the durative/terminative distinctions, it is a completely different phenomenon. It may indeed turn out to be so, but, in our opinion, this is something that has to be proven, not just assumed. And to prove that this is so, one has to show that the first two options are not empirically correct, since, in our view, there is nothing concep-

tually wrong with them. This is the logic we will follow.

Now let us turn back to the question of constructing a table that would reflect the temporal-aspectual system of Russian. The only tense form that we take into account is the past form; i.e. we will look at the first row in the table above. Moreover, we assumed that the terminative/durative opposition is present in all three languages under consideration, including Russian. Thus, this distinction needs to be preserved in the table we are going to build for Russian.

Let us first assume that the imperfective/perfective distinction is equivalent to the terminative/durative one. The result we would get in this case is Table 4.

Table 4.   Russian past

	Past
Durative/ Imperfective	*Ona pela* she sang.IMP
Terminative/ Perfective	*Ona s-pela pesnju* she PF-sang song

There are several reasons why this table should be revised. First of all, it does not seem to host all the relevant Russian examples. We have at least two more sentences left to be accounted for:

(9)   *Ona po-pela*
        she PF-sang
        She has sung

(10) *Ona pela   ondu pesnju*
        she sang.IMP one   song.ACC
        She sang a song

Let us address the examples in turn.

The example in (9) is tricky. The Russian morphological system allows for the derivation of different perfective verb forms from one and the same stem. The first question that comes to mind is what is the difference between the two perfective forms, the one in Table 4 and the one in example (9)? We argue that the difference is stated in terms of durativity/terminativity and the *po*-forms are durative on the basis of two arguments. First of all that the *po*-forms (example (9)) are only compatible with the duration adverbials, as shown in (11). Second, they do not accept [+SQA][8] direct objects, which is a necessary condition to obtain a termina-tive interpretation of a predicate (cf. (12)). The different behavior of the other

perfective form is exemplified in (13).

(11) *Ona po-pela polčasa*
      she PF-sang half.hour
      'She sang for half an hour'

(12) *Ona po-pela pesni/   ?odnu   pesnju/   *3 pesni*
      she PF-sang song.pl.ACC/ ?a(*one) song.ACC/ *3 song.pl.ACC
      'She has sung songs/a song/3 songs'

(13) *Ona s-pela   pesni/   odnu   pesnju/   3 pesni   za polčasa*
      she PF-sang song.pl.ACC/ a(one) song.ACC/ 3 song.pl.ACC in half.hour
      'She sang songs/a song/3 songs in half an hour'

In (10), the verb form itself is imperfective. But is this sentence durative? Verkuyl (1993) showed that for verbs like *eat* it is not enough to have a [+SQA] direct objects even in English or Dutch. These verbs would not require the 'exhaustion' of the object, which would lead to a terminative interpretation of a predicate. For Russian it would mean that an imperfective verb form, in principle, would never warrant a terminative interpretation, no matter what the properties of the arguments are. This is a strong statement, but it seems to hold in the great majority of cases. For the sake of argument, however, we will continue to consider (10) formally terminative according to the Plus Principle: the computational system should be able to produce the [Terminative] value for a predicate at the level of the VP because the verb is dynamic and the internal argument bears a [+SQA] feature. We will come back to the imperfective examples later.

Taking (9) and (10) into account, we build another table for Russian, which hosts all the relevant examples (Table 5).

Table 5. Russian past

	Past tense Imperfective	Past tense Perfective
Durative	1 *Ona pela* she sang.IMP	2 *Ona po-pela* she PF-sang
Terminative	3 *Ona pela odnu pesnju* she sang.IMP one song	4 *Ona s-pela odnu pesnju* she PF-sang one song

Now we will turn to the imperfective examples. What we intend to show is that there are striking parallels between Russian, Spanish and Dutch, the three languages that we consider here, with respect to the interpretation of sentences in imperfect

(tense) or imperfective (aspect).

If we look at the Russian sentences with imperfective verb forms, whether durative or terminative, we observe that they can have exactly the 3 readings that we have established for the Spanish sentences earlier. The sentences in (14) exemplify the episodic/background reading, those in (15) — the habitual reading, and, finally, in (16) we obtain the progressive meaning:

(14) a. *Včera   utrom   ona pela*   durative
     yesterday morning she sang.IMP
     She sang yesterday morning

  b. *Včera   utrom   ona pela   (odnu) pesn'ju*   terminative
     yesterday morning she sang.IMP (one/a) song.ACC
     She sang a song yesterday morning

(15) a. *Ona pela   každoe voskresen'je*   durative
     she sang.IMP every   Sunday
     She used to sing every Sunday

  b. *Ona pela   (odnu) pesn'ju   každoe voskresen'je*   terminative
     she sang.IMP (one/a) song.ACC every   Sunday
     She used to sing a song every Sunday

(16) a. *Ona pela   kogda ja ee videla*   durative
     she sang.IMP when I her saw
     She was singing when I saw her

  b. *Ona pela   (odnu) pesn'ju kogda ja ee videla*   terminative
     she sang.IMP (one/a) song.ACC when I her saw
     She was singing a song when I saw her

As in Spanish, just by looking at the imperfective sentences in the Russian table, we cannot assign them one of the three meanings. What disambiguates imperfectivity in general is contextual information or information provided by temporal adverbials or subordinate clauses. As far as we know, Dutch imperfect sentences (i.e. sentences in the simple past form) exhibit exactly the same pattern. These facts lead us to the following conclusion: imperfect(ivity), whether it is traditionally a property of a tense system (as in Dutch) or an aspect system (as in Russian and Spanish) can be given a uniform analysis. Moreover, the range of available interpretations is exactly the same in the case of terminative and durative sentences in the imperfective, which points to the fact that imperfectivity is 'stronger' in the sense that it is able to override the terminative/durative distinction. Our prime witness is, of course, the example of terminative imperfective sentences with progressive interpretation, where it is clear that the eventuality cannot have been terminated. The Spanish examples that we have seen earlier are identical to the Russian ones in this respect. But also, any other sentence with an imperfective verb form does not

logically entail that the eventuality described is finished or terminated. Such an interpretation, however, often arises due to the plausible pragmatic inferences. Thus, if some kind of a relevant past temporal domain is strictly determined, usually by means of adverbial modification, then the possibility of an eventuality holding beyond this domain is usually cancelled, although never completely blocked. The right context disambiguates any conflict between terminative and imperfective.

We have also noticed that the relation between imperfectivity and progressivity is more complex than it is generally assumed. It is not only the case that imperfectivity comprises more meanings and cannot be associated with progressivity only, but also progressivity does not necessarily entail imperfectivity, as has been elegantly shown in example (6) from Spanish. We therefore conclude, that progressive and imperfective should be treated separately, and analyzed by means of different mechanisms and tools. Our views on how a possible analysis of imperfectivity can be formulated and about the necessary tools to do it are presented in the concluding section.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to analyze the temporal-aspectual systems of three languages, focusing in particular on the following problems. First, we have made a comparison between languages of different groups: Germanic, Romance and Slavic. Our representatives were Dutch, Spanish and Russian respectively. Second, we have discussed the meanings of the imperfective sentences in these languages. And third, we have tried to tackle a very serious question of whether the (im)perfect and (im)perfective can be essentially dealt with as the same phenomenon.

We have investigated the properties exhibited by the sentences with one common feature: the imperfective aspectual value of a verb. It has been shown, that whether imperfectivity is taken to be a part of the temporal or purely the aspectual system of a language, the same readings are associated with sentences featuring imperfective forms. We have also pointed out that imperfectivity should not be associated with either durativity in the sense of Verkuyl (1993) or progressive interpretation. The main conclusion, therefore, is that the perfect(ive)/imperfect(ive) opposition should be explained separately, and not conflated with the other temporal-aspectual phenomena that the languages we have been dealing with show.

In the introductory section, we mentioned that the question of our primary interest is whether the terms (im)perfect in Spanish and Dutch on the one hand, and (im)perfective in Russian on the other, refer to the same phenomenon. At this

point, we do not have sufficient evidence to justify a positive answer to this question. However, in our views the results that have been achieved and presented here, indicate that we are on the right track. Our data from Spanish and Russian show that this hypothesis is based on solid empirical observations and should not be discarded without further investigation. Of course, our main goal is to provide a full comparative analysis of (im)perfect(ivity), but in order to achieve this goal, we have to compare the meanings of perfect(ive) in the same way as we have done with imperfect(ive) here. This is what we leave for future research. Here we just give a rough graphic representation of all the three meanings of the imperfect(ive) forms as we see it now.
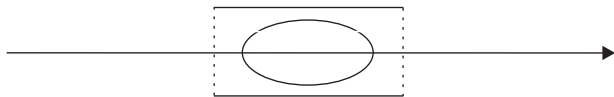
(17) a. episodic reading

yesterday morning[9]

b. habitual reading

Sunday 1   Sunday 2   Sunday 3......
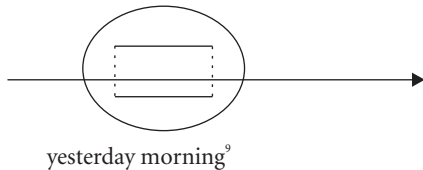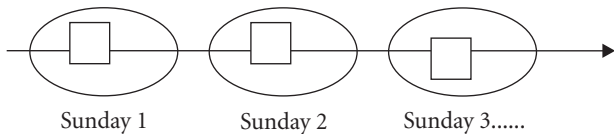
c. progressive reading

Here, the representations of all the imperfective meanings are given. In the episodic reading the temporal domain (the oval) is specified by 'yesterday' in our examples, in the habitual reading it is indicated by 'on Sunday 1…n', and, finally, in the progressive scheme, the temporal domain cuts open the eventuality and selects, as it were, a part of it. In the last case the domain is specified by a subordinate clause.

Finally, as we have said throughout the paper, an adequate analysis of imperfectivity cannot be given in terms of the description of eventuality, whether it concerns the part/whole relation (as in progressive) or its durative vs. terminative character. We opt for an analysis in terms of temporal domain, which hosts an eventuality. The main characteristic of the imperfectivity can be given in terms of perspective. This is the notion that we have scarcely mentioned before, the reason being that we cannot provide a formal account yet. In simple words, what we

believe matters for imperfectivity is the perspective taken by a speaker. In particular, the relation between a point of perspective and the temporal domain appears to be crucial for deriving the imperfective value.

This description is certainly very informal and should be set up in formal linguistic terms. But we are hoping that this will be a subject of a different paper.

Notes

1. This line of thought has also been pursued in Verkuyl (2001), González (2001) and Borik and Mlynarczyk (2001).

2. Hereby, we maintain the idea developed in Verkuyl (1993 and elsewhere) about the atemporal nature of the durative/terminative aspectual distinction.

3. As pointed out by a reviewer, different terms have been used to refer to these two tenses; in 1931, the R.A.E. (Real Academia Española) observed that the sintagmatic aspect divides the verbal forms into non-delimited (the simple forms) and delimited (the compound forms). But the inflectional aspect has not always been taken into account. This has created the confusing situation where all the simple forms are called "imperfect" and all the compound forms "perfect". Gili 1979 pointed out that simple/compound is not the same as imperfect/perfect (e.g. the simple form "canté" is perfect). The terms *perfecto simple* and *perfecto compuesto*, already used by Bosque, 1990, seem to describe more accurately the differences and similarities between both tenses at stake here.

4. Present as an utterance/speech time.

5. As pointed out by a reviewer, the imperfect past expressing progressivity may be regarded, in some particular contexts, as less natural than the progressive periphrasis.

6. But, of course, this is not the only one. For space considerations, we cannot afford to discuss the complex aspectual morphology in Russian in detail.

7. -jo- and -e- are just the phonological variants of the agreement inflection in all non-past tenses.

8. {+SQA} stands for [+Specified Quantity of A], where 'A' is the denotation of an argument. For the detailed description of Verkuyl's model of aspectual construal, the reader is referred to Verkuyl (1993). We do not have enough space to explain all the intricacies of this system here.

9. The dotted line means that the temporal boundaries of a given object are not strictly defined. It was pointed out to us by an anonymous reviewer that in *Ayer estaba aquí* ('Yesterday was-IMP here) the relation between the domain denoted by *ayer* and the eventuality denoted by *estaba aquí* is ambiguous: either the eventuality is included in the domain or vise versa. Either way, we cannot assert that the eventuality has well-determined temporal boundaries. Cf. also (17c).

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