

# Interview with dr. Robert Binnick: tense, aspect and mood

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Doctor Robert Binnick is Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto. His main research areas are Mongolian and Altaic languages in general, and the semantics of tense and verbal aspect. He is also a Vice-President of the Mongolia Society and he has published extensively on both Mongolian and tense/aspect.

Professor Binnick is responsible for the publications of **Modern Mongolian: A Transformational Syntax** (1979); **Time and the Verb: a Guide to Tense and Aspect** (1991); **The Past Tenses of the Mongolian Verb: Meaning and Use** (2011); **The Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect** (2012) and many other relevant papers on the field of linguistics. For more information about this dedicated and respected language researcher, please visit <https://www.uts.utoronto.ca/cfl/robert-binnick>.

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- 1. We would like to start by asking you a question with regard to the 1990s, when you first published the work *Time and the verb: a guide to tense and aspect*, which still is a reference to studies in aspect since nowadays for researchers all over the world. Why did that topic call your attention at that time? (What influenced you the most to study tense and aspect at that time?)**

My interest in tense and aspect actually goes all the way back to high school, when I read Benjamin Lee Whorf. In graduate school (in 1966) reading Martin Joos' **The English Verb** prompted me to write a (jeune and naïve) working paper on English tense. My interest was expanded in 1969 by reading Otto Jespersen's **Philosophy of Grammar** and further in 1971 by W. W. Goodwin's **Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb**. In 1975, I read a lot of philosophy of time and tense logic. Reviewing J. Scheffer's **The Progressive in English** in 1976 merely cemented my interest.

- 2. In *Time and the verb: a guide to tense and aspect*, published in 1991, the reader can find a guide to complex theories about tense and aspect. Why presenting different perspectives for such complex category as the verb and its meaning?**

Already in the 1980s there was a large literature by linguists and others – grammarians, logicians, philosophers, narratologists, psychologists, and computer scientists – on tense, aspect, and mood/modality. Observational adequacy where TAM was concerned was poor, there was no consensus on the description

of almost any phenomenon, and serious explanatory theories were lacking. Ignorance of the literature was rife and scholars were publishing hypotheses already explored and rejected long ago. I thought that a historical approach, starting with the oldest work and the simplest themes and building towards more modern approaches and more complex phenomena, made sense as a way of gradually clarifying for the reader both the issues and the research results.

**3. Considering tense and aspect as a general linguistic theory, which of your findings do you consider most relevant within the framework of the Generative Theory? How does Generative Grammar help you to understand the human language?**

The answers depend on what you mean by Generative Grammar. In about 1955-1975, Noam Chomsky completely revolutionized the study of language, and the concept of Generative Grammar was amongst his most significant and fruitful contributions, without which linguistics as we understand it simply would not exist. Since then the term has however come to be understood in disparate ways, some so vague as to be almost meaningless (e.g., as the hypothesis of an innate language capacity), others so narrow (as a formal theory of language structure) as to be largely irrelevant to anything but a study of syntax, which is only a small part of tense and aspect in natural languages.

The more I got into tense and aspect, the more I was attracted to semantics and pragmatics, especially within European frameworks owing much to the work of logicians like

Arthur Prior and philosophers like Richard Montague, and little to Chomsky and his successors. I certainly don't regard my own research as particularly relevant to Generative Theory.

- 4. In early 1990s you said: “Tense and aspect have been peculiarly resistant to linguistic classification and explanation. There continue to be many competing theories, many different terminologies, and considerable controversy and confusion surrounding these evidently universal linguistic phenomena”. Now, 30 years later, would you say the problem persists? Do you believe that nowadays the difference between tense and aspect remains controversial? Would you say the explanatory concepts from other linguistic theories still remain fuzzy?**

A 2019 article notes that “Aspect in the English language has been described through different categories and terminologies, which might lead teachers and students into some misunderstandings.”. Another says “The nature of future temporal reference has long posed a challenge to linguistic theories of temporal interpretation.”. The perfect tenses here might be purely existential, but maybe not. Another says (in the present tense) “[...] scholars disagree about what the most frequent or preferred aspect and tense of performatives is, and how to explain the variety in tense, aspect and modality (TAM).”. I could go on and on, but the point is we are far from the Millennium where TAM is concerned, despite an increasing amount of valuable literature coming from first-rate scholars whom I greatly admire.

**5. Do you still believe both diachronically and synchronically perspectives must be considered when we deal with data from different languages? These days you are involved on studies about Altaic languages (Turkic, Mongolian and Machu-Tungus). Why the interest in those languages? What do you expect to find?**

Since Ferdinand de Saussure, diachrony and synchrony have been sundered and the former downplayed, as if languages exist as sets of static, temporally disjoint states and not as unitary, dynamic systems. A purely synchronic view of natural language, divorced from the diachronic, is ultimately un insightful. Just as our DNA records our ancestry and forms the basis for our descendants, linguistic systems encapsulate the past and delimit the future. A series of snapshots is less realistic, and less informative, than a video. Neither the speech of an individual nor a language as a whole is usefully studied purely from the perspective of a single point in time.

Nor is language in general to be projected from the perspective of a single language or any tiny and possibly unrepresentative group of languages. What non-Indo-European languages like the Altaic offer to the general linguist is a non-parochial perspective. Some of the most important work on tense and aspect has come from studies of Korean and Japanese, for example, languages similar to Altaic in structure. Too many theories purporting to model language in general have ignored features of unfamiliar languages. The value of typological and universalist work, like that of Östen Dahl or Joan Bybee, is to remind us of this.

**6. Concerning the different ways in which time is understood through different cultures around the world (if it is circular or linear, for instance), how those different conceptualizations of time can be reflected in the expression of tense in different languages?**

I'm not very Whorfian when it comes to the relation of conceptualizations of time to the representations of time in different languages. A lot of linguistic features are no more teleological than are biological characteristics, some of which are purely the result of chance. I don't think the case has been made that languages have the tense-aspect systems they do because of their speakers' temporal conceptualizations any more than grammatical gender systems reflect their speakers' conceptualizations of natural gender.

**7. Do you believe that there is still much to be investigated with regards to the categories of tense, aspect and mood? What would you recommend to linguists trying to carry out investigation on these matters?**

Linguistics today has some really first-rate scholars producing extraordinarily valuable work. And theoretical paradigms have considerably matured in the last generation. But I see a continuing disconnection between high-level theories that are empirically inconsequential and low-level, detailed research that doesn't contribute much to our understanding of language. Rather than rehash the same old topics, I would like to see people broaden and deepen the scope of TAM studies.

In the 1970s and 1980s I discovered that there was a great

deal of confusion about, and ignorance of, tense and aspect and it was very hard for someone who felt perplexed by the literature to get a good picture, despite the great work of Bernard Comrie and others. So **Time and the Verb** was intended to provide an overview of the issues, theories, and arguments in the field. Unfortunately, the book was rightly critiqued for not concluding with a coherent, overall account. I did not have one in 1991, nor did anyone else, nor do I think a satisfactory and comprehensive theory has emerged as of yet. We are still blind men feeling an elephant, though we do have a much better zoology of elephant parts than we did thirty years ago.

A lot of things have been intensely studied since **Time and the Verb**, as the **Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect** attests. I'm glad that it was able to include chapters on hitherto largely neglected exotica, such as supercomposé past tenses and remoteness systems. But to this day many phenomena remain poorly investigated and only a small minority of languages have received serious investigation. No scholar should be at a loss for an engaging topic where tense and aspect are concerned!

For young scholars at a loss for interesting topics to pursue, I would recommend two approaches. First, I myself have often delved into *terra* that was largely *incognita*. Surprisingly many aspects of even such well-plowed fields such as English remain relatively poorly explored; take **any** sentence at random from a book or the Web and try to formulate an account of its form, meaning, and use, and I'm certain you will discover things no one has even thought about before. Science progresses not by questions answered but questions as yet unanswered.

Second, challenge theories. It is easy to build theories into unfalsifiable bubbles like Freudian psychoanalysis or Marxist historiography by constructing ever more elaborate arguments in their favour. Better theories arise when we prick such bubbles

with challenging observations and hypotheses they cannot accommodate. Above all, bear in mind two questions: what issues does my research bear on, and how will it further our understanding of language?

Human languages are extraordinarily complex products of those simple (not!) things, the human mind and human society, and there are thousands of them in the world, each with manifold dialects and a broad range of idiolects. And tense and aspect crucially interact with every other aspect of language (except maybe phonology). Yes, I definitely do think there still remains **much** to be investigated.

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