Interview with Dr. Bernard Comrie: tense, aspect and mood

Rodrigo Altair Morato*
Adriana Leitão Martins**
Gisely Gonçalves de Castro***

Dr. Bernard Comrie is a specialist in linguistic typology and linguistic universals as well as in Caucasian languages. He is currently at the University of California, Santa Barbara where he is a Distinguished Professor of Linguistics. His long and respected career includes teaching at the University of Cambridge and the University of Southern California. He also worked as Director of the Department of Linguistics at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, in Leipzig. Dr. Comrie's biggest interests are language universals and typology, historical linguistics and languages of the Caucasus. His work on typology explores cross-linguistic examination of tense-aspect systems, causative constructions, relative clauses, nominalizations, reference-tracking devices, ditransitive constructions, valency classes, and numeral systems.

Among many important publications, Professor Comrie is well-known for the books he wrote or helped to edit: **Aspect** (1976), **Language Universals and Linguistic Typology** (1981), **Tense** (1985), **Studies in Ditransitive Constructions:** A Comparative Handbook (2010), **The World Atlas of Language Structures** (2013), **Valency Classes in the World's Languages**

* Professor na Rede Jesuíta de Educação. Doutor em Linguística (PUC Minas); ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8667-0923.
** Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Doutora em Linguística (UFRJ); ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0510-2586.
*** Instituto Federal de Educação do Pará (IFPA). Doutora em Linguística (PUC Minas); ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4011-1472.

(2015), **Noun-Modifying Clause Constructions in Languages of Eurasia:** Rethinking Theoretical and Geographic Boundaries (2017). For more information about this tireless linguist, please visit www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/people/bernard-comrie.

1. We would like to start by asking you a question with regard to the 1970s, when you first published works on the aspect systems of language, which are reference studies in aspect 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?

It is probably more a case of aspect looking for me than me looking for aspect! I had studied Russian and Slavic linguistics at the University of Cambridge, so I was very familiar with aspect, although my main work at the time was in syntax. Cambridge University Press was interested in expanding its textbook series to include volumes on particular linguistic phenomena as well as on subfields like syntax, semantics, etc. For some reason, they decided on aspect as the first such topic, and approached me as someone familiar with the topic. I suppose I could simply say that the rest is history. But I should add that it took me some time to consider the proposal and accept it, as it was not even a project I had dreamed of. But certainly, with hindsight, it was a wonderful opportunity, especially as they were willing to invest in someone who in those days was a very junior scholar. The textbook on tense was a natural follow-up, and in that case I initiated the proposal to the Press. I have to confess that I enjoyed working on tense more than on aspect, although the relevant reading public seems to prefer reading my work on aspect, at least judging by number of citations.

2. In Aspect **(1976), you state that this work neither deals with any specific language nor does it compare several particular languages, but presents this category as part of general linguistic theory. In** Tense **(1985), you point out**

that the objective of the book is to provide an explanation for Tense from the point of view of the universals of language and linguistic typology. From 1976 to 1985, what determined the adoption of the typological approach?

I suppose that I have always been a typologist, but I just did not know it. From the early 1970s I considered myself to be working in language universals, but it was really only with the rapid expansion of typology as a recognized approach to language that it became clear to me that this is where I fit in. (For the record, I think my first typological project was when I was still in grammar school, when the teacher wondered out aloud whether any other languages were like Ancient Greek in requiring singular verbs with neuter plural subjects. I got all the (not very many) grammars out of the local library and wrote up a brief summary, alas, no longer extant.) Even **Aspect** is in a sense typological, in that it draws in material from a range of languages in order to try and establish general properties of Language. Of course, my books **Aspect** and **Tense** also differ in crucial respects from current typological expectations, in particular in that the sample of languages considered is not balanced, whether for language family or for geographical area. But one thing that has remained constant is my belief that to understand Language you need to look at a wide range of languages.

3. How did those typological studies on tense and aspect developed in the 1970s and 80s influence your career regarding typological works since then?

I think my typological work has seen a gradual expansion since those early years, in part in response to the recognition that

one needs even wider samples of languages in order to make typologically valid claims about Language, though also in part in response to the fact that there is now a much wider range of reliable, extensive material on the languages of the world – in the 1970s you were very restricted by what was available, whereas nowadays the problem is more the difficulty of encompassing all that is available, whence the strategy of working with balanced samples of languages.

4. **Considering** Aspect **as a general linguistic theory, which of your findings do you consider most relevant within the framework of the linguistic typology?**

In terms of direct relevance to typology, my sense is that the main contribution of my early work, including that on aspect and tense, was to show that such an approach is possible and that it leads to insights that are not derivable from just studying one language or even a small range of languages. So maybe the easier question to answer would be what benefits the typological approach brought to the understanding of tense and aspect. I will mention two. First, looking across different languages made it very clear to me how different from one another are the concepts "perfect" and "perfective", despite the similarity of the standard international terms, and I consider one of my minor triumphs to have been the widespread acceptance of this distinction, conceptually and terminologically, in later work. Second, the typological work suggested some important weaknesses in what had become (and for some still remains) the classic approach to tense in language, namely that developed by Reichenbach (1947), for instance in the impossibility of accounting for phenomena found even in English like a time reference that is

anterior to a reference point that is posterior to another reference point that lies in the past ("past in the future in the past", temporal interpretations of the English "would have" construction), as well as the complete neglect of cross-linguistically widespread phenomena like degrees of remoteness in past and future time reference (e.g. recent versus remote past).

5. In Aspect **(1976), you register that not all habitual activity is iterative. A brazilian researcher (TRAVAGLIA, 1985) argued that, for Portuguese, all habitual activity is iterative. In languages you have investigated, is habituality without iterativity rare or common? Did you notice any different finding since then?**

I think that here it is important to distinguish between general linguistic concepts – what Haspelmath calls "comparative concepts" – and specific categories in individual languages. If we define the concept "habitual" as something like "a situation that is characteristic of an extended period of time", then we can examine particular categories in individual languages and ask whether they are necessarily iterative, but the answer may well be different for different languages. The English "used to" construction, which expresses habituality in the past, does not need to be iterative, as can be seen in examples like "I used to know the algorithm for extracting square roots, but I have forgotten it", where reference is to a continuous state of knowledge, not to intermittent bouts of knowledge alternating with ignorance. Even in Romance languages, where habituality is one of the criteria (though not the only one) that can lead to the choice of the imperfect to express past time reference, the

imperfect does not in this usage have to be iterative. But note that if I replace the English "used to" construction with the less grammaticalized "be in the habit of", then the interpretation is necessarily iterative, since "I was in the habit of knowing" can only refer to different instances of knowing on different occasions.

A problem in evaluating statistical claims about habituality is that many languages have categories whose use is sensitive to habituality, but that are not used for all and only habitual situations; as already noted, the English "used to" construction has an added requirement of past time reference, while the semantics of the Romance imperfect extends beyond habituality. Added to this is the fact that expressions encoding habituality are grammaticalized to different degrees, which makes it hard to draw the line between aspect as a grammatical category and aspectuality more generally as a semantic domain. So, I would not venture an answer to your question whether habituality without iterativity is rare, common, or in between. Others should weigh in here!

6. **Regarding the similarities in the use of metaphors to express the concept of time by the use of expressions related to space observed in different languages in the world, how do you think the study of TAM categories can contribute to the study of human cognition in general?**

What seems to me clear is that space provides a convenient starting point for a wide range of metaphors, not only relating to time, and this surely points to its cognitive salience. Of course, we now know, thanks to such work as Levinson (2003),

that conceptualization of space varies quite considerably crosslinguistically. Certain spatial parameters that are important in a particular language often do not find their way into temporal expressions, like left-right or north-south. Others get different interpretations in different languages or even within the same language, e.g. whether the past is in front or behind – native speakers of English are often at odds about whether moving a meeting forward means timing it earlier or later. I think a lot of work still needs to be done on crosslinguistic variation here and possible links to culturally conditioned cognitive salience, but this is work that others will need to do – it exceeds my competence.

7. More specifically, in your opinion, how can studies about the TAM categories in different languages contribute to the study of the universals of language?

I think we are now at the stage where we can use the more detailed and more wide-ranging material that is coming in with regard to TAM across languages to test universal claims about TAM, thus contributing to our understanding of crosslinguistic variation in this area but also to general methodological considerations regarding the formulation and testing of universal claims. For instance, in **Tense** I formulated the hypothesis that a given tense will never denote a discontinuous segment of time, thus excluding a "non-present" (with past or future, but not present time reference), despite the widespread occurrence of, for instance, non-past. I noted some instances that might border on counterexamples. We now know of more and clearer cases, but they still seem to be extremely rare, so the question remains

as to why such tenses, even if not absolutely excluded, are so uncommon, an instance of a universal tendency.

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

My sense remains as it was in 1985 when I published **Tense**, that such cultural differences in the conceptualization of time as linear versus circular have not been shown to have a clear effect on tense systems, and it seems to me that claims to the contrary such as Whorf's for Hopi have been shown on the basis of better material – in this case by Malotki (1983) – to be faulty. I think that there may be cultural differences that find a reflection in time expressions, e.g. cultures that are less oriented to exact time keeping with the same word translating both "now" and "today", but I am not aware of cases where this would impinge on grammaticalized expressions. It is certainly something to be on the lookout for, as with any potential counterexample to a claimed universal (whether linguistic, cultural, or linguistic-cultural), but I am not holding my breath. On a more general level, I await cognitive anthropological studies of time that would compare to Levinson's work on space.

9. Linguistic findings have promoted important advances in the field over time. For example, today we have information about structures of languages that we didn't even know to exist, as in the case of some indigenous languages. In your

opinion, what are the biggest challenges today's linguistics studies still face?

I think the biggest single challenge is the extent to which languages are endangered. When the current debate on endangered languages took off in the 1970s, those who maintained that up to 90% of languages spoken today would have died out by 2100 were considered pessimists; now, they would be considered overoptimistic. The social implications of this are catastrophic, but for the purposes of answering this question I will stick to the scientific implications. Much of linguistics has been driven by new information coming from endangered (in some cases, already extinct) languages, e.g. the re-evaluation of ergativity in the light of Dixon's (1972) work on Dyirbal, or the recognition of verb root deletion as a rare phenomenon nonetheless well substantiated in a number of languages in work by Zamponi and myself (2020). Who knows what riches may be lost, both culturally and scientifically, as the lights go out on the world's linguistic diversity?

In other respects, though, I am optimistic about the future of linguistics. In particular, current developments in corpus linguistics, quantitative methods, instrumental phonetics provide us with means of empirically testing hypotheses at a rate that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago.

10. You have a long and solid career highlighted by several works that were important for the development of linguistic studies. Among all your works, which ones do you consider to have had the most significant impact in the field of linguistics?

If you mean literally "impact", then I suppose I have to peek at my Google Citations list, but in fact the results there do not differ significantly from what I would probably have said intuitively myself. My work on aspect and tense is probably the most widely cited, even though for some years those topics have not been at the forefront of my research. The work on language universals and typology generally was influential in moving syntactic studies away from almost exclusive reliance on English occasionally supplemented by a few other languages to a situation where grammarians of many different persuasions recognize the importance of crosslinguistic data. My work with Keenan on Noun Phrase Accessibility (KEENAN; COMRIE, 1977) was not only my first big typological project but also left me with a life-long attachment to relative clauses as a source of insight into grammar, including several revisions of my ideas on relative clauses as I became aware of new data and analyses (see *e.g.* MATSUMOTO *et al.,* 2017). Closely linked to this is my interest in the areas of valence, alignment, and voice, which have dominated much of my work especially across the last couple of decades, in part because these phenomena not only constitute the basic syntactic framework of the clause but also interact with so many other phenomena that they remain a constant source of new insights (see *e.g.* MALCHUKOV; COMRIE, 2015).

11. These days you are involved on studies about Grammar of Akabea (Andaman Islands), Grammar of Bezhta (North Caucasus), Grammar of Haruai (Papua New Guinea), Grammar of Tsez (North Caucasus). Why the interest in such languages? What do you expect to find?

Any language may turn out to be interesting in one respect or another to the investigator, and of course before the investigation it is hard to make predictions. When I chose to work on Haruai in the New Guinea highlands, I expected from its location and what was already known about neighboring languages that it would have a switch-reference system, and this turned out to be the case, fortunately so, since I definitely wanted to investigate this phenomenon and the US National Science Foundation had invested a lot of money in getting me there! But I had not predicted that Haruai would also turn out to have an interesting word taboo system that leads both to rapid lexical replacement (causing problems for basing hypotheses of genealogical relations among languages solely on lexicon) and to the coexistence of true synonyms for a number of concepts where one lexical item is likely to be tabooed (see further COMRIE, 2000). In choosing to work on Tsez and Bezhta, there were already grammatical sketches and fuller studies of some related languages, but I was still not prepared for the rich variation in detail between these closely related languages that presents a veritable cornucopia for micro-typological studies. With Akabea, I had absolutely no idea of what to expect, indeed given the pre-professional documentation of this language extinct for almost 100 years I did not even know to what extent it would be possible to extract any useful material, but as it turned out Zamponi and I were able not only to write a reasonably comprehensive grammar of the language but also to uncover typologically rare phenomena like Verb Root Deletion (COMRIE; ZAMPONI, 2019). Choice of a language to work on is sometimes guided by largely non-linguistic factors – for instance, I had simply always wanted to work on a language of New Guinea, regarding this as something

of a last frontier – but will inevitably lead to the discovery of interesting phenomena.

12. Is there any direct relation between your first published works and your research on Rare Linguistic Phenomena, Typology of Numeral Systems, Typology of Writing Systems, Languages and Genes?

There are certain guiding principles that have remained constant from my earliest work up to the present day, perhaps the most important being the importance of taking seriously the fact of crosslinguistic diversity. Claims have to be based upon and tested against a wide range of languages, and we must always be open to the possibility of having to change a cherished belief on the basis of new data. Another principle that I would mention is that strong crosslinguistic tendencies are just as important as language universals. This means on the one hand that a small percentage of counterexamples does not necessarily invalidate the significance of a generalization, on the other that whatever account we give must be able to encompass the exceptions. This makes universals research more tricky, but perhaps, precisely for this reason, more interesting.

13. How does crosslinguistic examination of tense-aspect systems, causative constructions, relative clauses, nominalizations, reference-tracking devices, ditransitive constructions, valency classes and numeral system help you to understand problems related to prehistoric human migrations and contact?

It is maybe easiest to answer this one by starting from the question of how one might uncover prehistoric human migrations and contact. Basically, the answer is that you look for evidence of things spreading from one group to another, as groups move into geographical proximity. We can look at this in terms of biology, as genes from one group move into another, a signal of intermarriage. Equally, we could look at the spread of cultural phenomena like burial customs, sometimes directly retrievable from the archeological record, sometimes inferable from the present-day distribution of variants, e.g. if two neighboring groups share cultural features but are different genetically, then one can reasonably deduce that there has been strong cultural diffusion as a result of contact but little intermarriage. One can do exactly the same with features subject to crosslinguistic variation, here with the added advantage that we may know from comparative-historical linguistic studies that language A is a close relative of language B, but note that it is now a neighbor of language C and shares feature values with language C that it does not share with language B. These features could in principle be any of those listed in the question, though in practice the best studied ones are likely to be those included in the **World Atlas of Language Structures** (WALS) (HASPELMATH; DRYER, 2013). One of the striking results derivable from WALS is that in some respects languages are more like their neighbors than like their relatives, *i.e.* the linguistic record retains traces both of original geographic distribution (with relatives also being neighbors) and of migrations leading to new contacts as linguistic features diffuse into unrelated languages that come into contact with one another.

14. You have been known to say: "If it's a language, I'll work on it." Why is that? Which aspects of language are most intriguing to you nowadays?

I think I have largely answered this question in my responses to earlier questions, so maybe at this point I can just summarize by saying that any language will turn up some point of general interest, and much of our progress in linguistics has come from integrating such new phenomena into our existing models, modifying those models, sometimes radically, to incorporate the new material. So if it's a language, please work on it! As noted above in more detail, major topics that I am currently working on include relative clauses and the whole area of valence/alignment/voice.

15. 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?

As I have already mentioned, I am not working specifically on tense-aspect-mood to any great extent at present, but that is mainly because I feel that I have made the contribution that I can in opening up the field and that I should now let others develop it further.

One area where there have been major advances almost continuously since my work in the 1970s and 1980s is the interaction between (grammatical) aspect and "lexical aspect", also known as "aktionsart" and "actionality". Although this interaction was touched on in Comrie (1976), it has been developed further by a number of linguists, including for

instance: Dahl (1985) for the Slavic perfective; Smith (1991) in general linguistic theory; Bertinetto (1994), especially for Italian; Breu (1994) in general linguistics with particular reference to Slavic; and Johanson (2000) again in general linguistics but with particular reference to Turkish. Linguists interested in tense would do well to pay particular attention to this interaction.

Developments in corpus linguistics mean that it is now much more feasible to examine aspect in discourse across long stretches of discourse from different genres, and methodologically I consider this an essential new tool to be used by those investigating tense-aspect-mood.

At a more basic level, I would encourage those investigating tense-aspect-mood to consider carefully the meaning and discourse function of the categories they encounter, without trying to rush into classifying them according to current terminology. Of course, the latter can provide a useful entry point into the system, but there are sufficient complications in many languages – including even well studied languages like English! – to merit a meticulous approach.

Finally, anyone seeking a recent detailed state-of-the-art overview of the field of tense and aspect should consult Binnick (2012).

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