

A translation questionnaire on tense-aspect constructions

This questionnaire is supposed to investigate how the semantic categories of time reference, viewpoint and actionality are expressed through the use of grammatical/tense-aspect constructions in a given language. Participants are given the task to translate a set of sentences from the meta-language into the subject language. There are 71 items in total; each item consists of one target sentence to be translated and 2 – 3 additional sentences providing the context for the translation.

1. Semantic distinctions targeted

Overview

This questionnaire targets the semantic categories of actionality, time reference and viewpoint, and the different values they can take on. For each category, a different number of values is considered. An overview is given below:

Category	Distinctions
Actionality (lexical aspect)	• inceptive copular states • change-focus inceptive verbal states • result-focus inceptive verbal states • non-inceptive states • homogeneous activities • heterogeneous activities • quantified-object accomplishments • unquantified-object accomplishments • achievements
Time reference	• remote past • recent past • present • near future • remote future
Viewpoint (grammatical aspect)	• partial view • total view • [change focus vs. result focus for inceptive verbal states]

Each item in the questionnaire represents a specific combination of these values. In practice, however, some value combinations were excluded due to being conceptually awkward. More information on which combinations exactly were excluded, and why, can be found in Koss 2025 (Appendix IV).

In addition, a small set of related verbal meanings was included for which distinctions of time reference and viewpoint seemed less relevant or in some way divergent, and which were therefore excluded from the regular alternation of the three main categories. These include habitual (i.e., regularly reoccurring) situations, generic statements (referring to situations that hold true at any point in time), and performatives (i.e., utterances through which a speech act is performed).

It has to be noted that the categories at hand relate to meaning rather than linguistic form, which is why formal notions such as “tense” or “aspect” were avoided when labelling them.

In the following, each category and its possible values will be characterized.

Actionality

Roughly speaking, actionality refers to different types of situations (as expressed through verbs or verb phrases) regarding their internal temporal structure. While a great number of situation types (or *actional classes*) have been discussed in the literature, this questionnaire is mostly based on the four basic ones which have traditionally been distinguished since Vendler (1967): states (which have temporal extension, but do not involve a change over time; e.g., English *know*), activities (which have temporal extension and involve a change over time; e.g., English *run*), accomplishments (which have temporal extension, involve a change over time, and additionally, have an inherent endpoint; e.g., English *write a book*), and achievements (which have no temporal extension, but involve a change and have an inherent endpoint; e.g., English *explode*). For some types, additional subdistinctions have been made, which will be described in the following. It is obvious that operationalizing all possible subdistinctions would have made the questionnaire far too long. Thus, a certain selection based on a specific criterion had to be made: the subdistinctions that are now included have all been shown in prior literature to interact in different ways with the other two semantic categories under investigation, time reference and viewpoint.

- States

A subdistinction was made between inceptive and non-inceptive states, i.e., between stative situations that imply a prior qualitative change that brought the respective situation into being (e.g., *be angry*), and those stative situations where no prior change is implied (e.g., *be nice*). Moreover, a further distinction was made within the class of inceptive states: “change focus” and “result focus”. “Change focus” items are supposed

to make the prior change salient by using a *get STATE* construction in the English version (e.g., *I **got** angry*). “Result focus” items, by contrast, put more emphasis on the inceptive state itself, using a copular construction in the English version (e.g., *I **am** angry*).

It turned out that in the two meta-languages in which the questionnaire is available so far, English and Spanish, most stative situations are not expressed through proper verbs, but through *copula + adjective* constructions (e.g., *be angry*, *estar enfadado*, resp.). To control for this, a small number of items were included involving inceptive states which are expressed through verbal (non-copular) constructions in the two languages (*know* and *saber*, resp.).

- Activities

A subdistinction was made between homogeneous and heterogeneous activities (as characterized in, e.g., Michaelis 2004 and 2011). While heterogeneous activities (such as *work* or *dance*) can be considered prototypical activities in that they are bounded in and involve a change over time, homogenous activities (such as *stand* or *sleep*) are bounded in time, but do not involve the notion of change. Homogenous activities thus semantically lie between states and activities.

- Accomplishments

A subdistinction was made between verb phrases featuring an accomplishment verb and a quantified object (*clean **the window***), and verb phrases featuring an accomplishment verb and an unquantified object (*clean **windows***).

- Achievements

For the class of achievements, no further sub-distinctions were made.

Time reference

Time reference distinctions correspond to the three basic timeline areas of past, present and future; within past and future, an additional two-way distinction in terms of temporal remoteness was made (i.e., recent past/near future vs. remote past and future). For achievements, the present as a temporal domain was not targeted, due to the fact that present-time achievements seem hard to conceptualize.

Viewpoint

A simple two-way distinction was made between a partial view and a total view on a given situation, i.e. whether the focus lies on a subpart of a situation or on a situation as a whole.

2. Setup of items

Actionality and time reference - lexical items

Two of the three semantic categories outlined above are represented through the use of specific lexical items: actionality distinctions are represented through specific verbs or verb phrases; time reference is represented through the use of specific adverbs or adverbial phrases. Consequently, each item in the main part of the questionnaire consists of a specific combination of these lexical items.

An overview of the lexical items used for distinctions relating to actionality and time reference is given below:

Actional class	Verbs/verb phrases
inceptive copular states	• <i>be/get angry</i> • <i>be/get tired</i>
inceptive verbal states	• <i>know</i>
non-inceptive states	• <i>be nice</i> • <i>be American</i>
homogeneous activities	• <i>stand</i> • <i>sleep</i>
heterogeneous activities	• <i>work</i> • <i>dance</i>
quantified-object accomplishments	• <i>plant the flower</i> • <i>clean the window</i>
unquantified-object accomplishments	• <i>plant flowers</i> • <i>clean windows</i>
achievements	• <i>fall</i> • <i>arrive</i>

Lexical items used for actional classes

Temporal domain	Adverbial
remote past	<i>when I was a child/as a child</i>
recent past	<i>just now</i>
present	<i>(right) now</i>
near future	<i>in a minute</i>
remote future	<i>someday</i>

Lexical items used for time reference distinctions

Viewpoint - syntactic structures

As a proxy for viewpoint distinctions, different syntactic structures were used: partial-view items involve two subclauses referring to simultaneous situations, while total-view items either involve simple clauses or two subclauses referring to sequential situations.

Alternations of verbs and verb phrases – two versions of the questionnaire

Out of the three categories in question, actionality is probably the most complex and fuzzy one, considering all the different possible distinctions along which verb meanings can be characterized. This entails the risk that the lexical items chosen to represent specific actional classes in this questionnaire come with idiosyncratic semantic properties which are not representative of the actional class they are supposed to represent. To reduce the influence of such potential idiosyncrasies on the results of the questionnaire, it was decided to use two alternating verbs/verb phrases per actional class. Furthermore, two versions of the questionnaire were developed, the appearance of lexical items in specific questionnaire items in the second version being the mirror image of the first version: in the first version, questionnaire item 1 uses lexical item A, questionnaire item 2 uses lexical item B, questionnaire item 3 uses lexical item A, and so on. In the second version, questionnaire item 1 uses lexical item B, questionnaire item 2 uses lexical item A, questionnaire item 3 uses lexical item B, and so on.

Other parameters

Apart from the semantic distinctions outlined above, there are two further parameters which are distributed in a systematic way across all items: person and number of subject, and features of human referents.

Person and number of subject

In order to facilitate the differentiation between agreement morphology and tense-aspect marking within verb phrases when analysing the results, person and number of the subject were kept stable across the questionnaire: all fragments to be translated feature a first person singular subject. The only exceptions are items 68 and 69 (“generic event” and “generic state”) which feature a third person plural subject, due to the apparent incompatibility between genericity and first person singular subjects.

Features of human referents

Some items involve human referents with differing features regarding gender and domestic role (“grandmother”, “husband” etc.). Across the questionnaire as a whole, the frequency of these features was balanced out. This means that female and male referents as well as (grand)parents, siblings and partners appear equally often across the entire questionnaire.

3. Presentation

It is advisable to use a survey program such as Qualtrics for administering the questionnaire, especially if participants are supposed to provide a translation for every single item. In this way, items can be presented in a randomized order, avoiding any kind of priming or fatigue

effects that might arise when participants are forced to repeatedly translate nearly identical constructions. Another advantage of using a survey program is that participants do not have to fill out the questionnaire in one go; instead, they can save their responses and then get back to the questionnaire at a later point.

In order to facilitate the analysis of the results, participants are asked to put the verb (phrase) in each of their translations in bold.

4. Citation

The questionnaire should be cited as follows:

Koss, Tom. 2025. A translation questionnaire on tense-aspect constructions.