VERB TENSE AND ASPECT:
Translating English Perfect Tenses to Portuguese

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ABSTRACT: This article displays a comprehensive reading of aspectual theory, followed by an attempt to correlate different verb systems. Based on Yule (1998) in English and on Bechara (2004) in Portuguese, the way from theoretical to contextualized analysis was discovered. Finally, a comparative reading of Orwell's *Animal Farm* translations has shown how a translator can make inadequate choices if he/she is not aware of semantics.

KEYWORDS: translation; verb tense; verb aspect; semantic features**.**

INTRODUCTION

From my own academic experience in translation from English to Portuguese, I can perceive that verb tense equivalence has been a problem, especially with regard to perfect tenses. Grammar given definitions and usages of different verb tenses in both languages are not sufficient to establish an equivalence in spite of context. However, semantic equivalence could be achieved if the translator were aware of verb tense usages in context as well as their meaning.

Verb forms in English are more commonly explained from the perspective of aspectual theory, besides the notion of tense. This theory works with the meaning of the verb itself and of verbal grammar structures. By combining grammar and lexicon, the meaning of verb phrases can dramatically change.

This aspectual theory is applicable to all languages. Nevertheless, Brazilian Portuguese grammarians do not seem very familiar with it. Understanding usage and meaning of perfect tenses has been troublesome for Brazilian learners of English, because it can refer to either present or past, depending on the context. This blurring occurs because of semantic features that some verb phrases have in English, but do not have in Portuguese, and vice versa.

Even though the Brazilian Portuguese verb system does not have exactly the same semantic features of English perfect tenses, this article is going to investigate (1) how9aspectual theory and which semantic features are applied to verbs in English, (2) how this theory and related semantic features are applied to the Brazilian Portuguese verb system, (3) which similarities can explain possible equivalence between both languages, and (4) how translators have put it into practice in different versions of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Hence, the main point is to avoid discrediting fluency with inadequate choices.

1. TENSE AND ASPECT IN ENGLISH

According to Yule (1998, p.54-58), the different forms of a verb in English are determined in terms of tense and aspect. The latter reveals the way in which the situation is perceived or experienced, while the former is related to the location of the situation in time. The simple time-line view, which stands past as *yesterday*, present as *today*, and future as *tomorrow*, seems to induce learners to misunderstand English verb forms.

Verb tense distinction in English is made by the opposition between the past tense and the present tense (box 1.1). When the situation described is close to the situation of utterance, which means that it is non-remote from the speaker's situation, the present tense is required. However, if the situation described is more remote from the situation of utterance, which is, remote from the speaker's situation, the past tense is more commonly used. In other words, it is the perspective of the speaker or writer of the very moment of the utterance which determines the remoteness of the situation being described, and consequently the verb tense usage. Although presenting *then* as the adverbial expression of remoteness in time, and *now* as the non-remote expression, Yule (1998, p.60) points out that the relative remoteness of an event is not determined by the adverbial expression, but by the speaker choice of verb tense in the moment of utterance.

verb form	lived	live
tense	past	present
concept	**remote**	**non-remote**
expression	then, there, that	now, here, this

Box 1.1. Remoteness in time (adapted from YULE, 1998, p.59-60)

Concerning verb meaning only, Yule (1998, p.62-64) presents lexical aspect by distinguishing stative from dynamic situations, and by subdividing the latter into punctual (non-durative) and durative aspects (box 1.2). The stative meaning of a verb implies no action by no agent, nor any end to the state described, which is cognitive, such as knowledge *(know, understand),* emotion *(hate, like)* or relations *(be, have).* In the other hand, dynamic situations imply the concept of change. When this change is an isolated act, with almost no duration *(kick, hit, smash),* the aspect is punctual. If this punctual situation is presented with the progressive form, the meaning is that the act happens repeatedly, so the adverbial expression to reinforce this iterative aspect is going to be *again and again* or *over and over*. However, if the change extends through time, as an activity *(run, eat)* or a process *(become, grow),* the aspect of the verb is durative.

stative		dynamic		
		punctual	durative	
cognition	relations	acts	activities	processes
believe	be	hit	eat	become
hate	belong	jump	run	change
know	contain	kick	swim	flow
like	have	stab	walk	grow
understand	own	strike	work	harden
want	resemble	throw	write	learn

Box 1.2. Lexical aspect (YULE, 1998, p.64)

In opposition to lexical aspect, there are two basic grammatical aspects: the progressive and the perfect (box 1.3). While the progressive aspect describes an ongoing situation viewed from the inside (a situation in progress), the perfect aspect describes a situation viewed from the outside, in retrospect.

progressive	viewed from inside	in progress
perfect	viewed from the outside	in retrospect

Box 1.3. Grammatical aspect (YULE, 1998, p.65)

The author emphasizes the interaction between lexical and grammatical aspect in terms of interpretation and implicated meaning (box 1.4). Verbs denoting acts, activities and processes (dynamic lexical aspect) have different meanings when used with progressive or with perfect aspect (grammatical aspect). In utterances like *He is eating lunch* or *She is learning karate*, the progressive aspect in association with the dynamic lexical aspect of the verb implies the idea of an ongoing or incomplete process or activity. However, if the perfect

aspect is used, as in *He has eaten lunch* or *She has learned karate*, the implicated meaning is that some goal has been achieved after a completed event, because the situation is retrospectively viewed. When the perfect aspect is used with the stative aspect, there is no implicated meaning of completion. Instead, there is a pre-existing situation that will continue, as in *I have been ill* or *He has believed in Allah all his life*. Despite not being usual, stative verbs can be used with the progressive. The implicated meaning is that of a non-permanent or temporary situation, as showed in *You're being foolish* or *I'm having a terrible day*.

grammatical aspect	lexical aspect	implicated meaning
perfect	dynamic	completed activity retrospectively viewed
perfect	stative	pre-existing state retrospectively viewed
progressive	dynamic	ongoing activity internally viewed
progressive	stative	temporary state internally viewed

Box 1. 4. Implicated meaning (YULE, 1998, p.67)

Thinking about the present perfect as 'a past event with current relevance' is a consequence of the combination of non-remoteness from the situation of utterance with the retrospectively view of an event. Thus, it is the combination of each aspectual feature that produces the whole meaning of an utterance.

2. TENSE AND ASPECT IN PORTUGUESE

Tense and aspect are generally correlated in Portuguese and other Romanic languages. In order to achieve a better interpretation of this correlation, Coseriu (1978, apud BECHARA, 2004, p.213-219) presents a three-layered system of analyzing aspect in Portuguese verb forms.

The main layer concerns time period configuration, represented by *nível de tempo* (tense level) and *perspectiva primária* (primary perspective). The former (box 2.1) is a double tense structure subdivided in (a) *nível atual* (current level), which coincides with the speaker's timeline of the moment of utterance by using tenses of *presente*, and (b) *nível*

inatual (non-current level), where actions happen detached from the present timeline, in parallel, by using tenses of *imperfeito.*

tense level	verb tense
current	*presente*
non-current	*imperfeito*

Box 2.1. Tense level (BECHARA, 2004, p.214)

The latter (box 2.2) establishes the speaker's point of view relatively to the action being described by the verb. The speaker can see the action (a) in parallel, which means that the action happens in parallel to him/herself, (b) in retrospective, meaning that the action had happened before this point of parallelism, or (c) in prospective, as happening after this point. The primary perspective also establishes other aspects of a verb: while from parallel perspective the action is in progress *(ação cursiva),* from both retrospective and prospective ones, the action is regarded as a whole *(ação complexiva).*

	past	present	future
	retrospective	**parallel**	**prospective**
current	*fiz*	*faço*	*farei*
non-current	*fizera*	*fazia*	*faria*
	complexiva	*cursiva*	*complexiva*

Box 2.2. Primary perspective (BECHARA, 2004, p.214)

The second layer of analysis determines the time period position. It can be perceived from *perspectiva secundária* (secondary perspective; box 2.3), that is each previously established period of time (by the primary perspective) being relocated in the same way it was done before (retrospectively or prospectively).
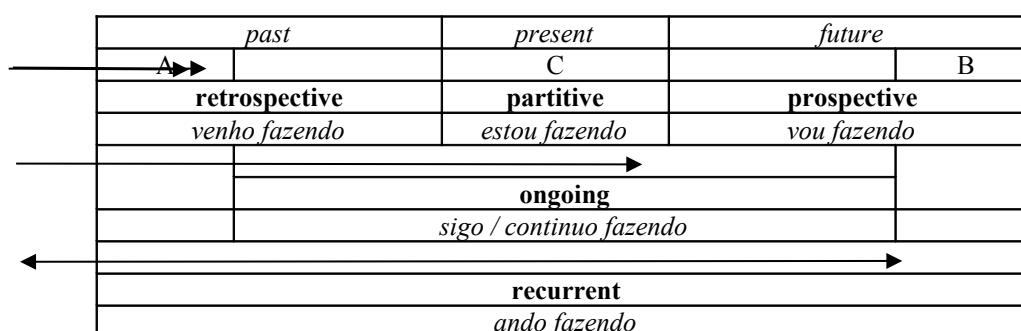
	retrospective relocation	location	**prospective relocation**
present	*tenho feito*	*faço*	*vou fazer*
	tinha feito	*fazia*	*ia fazer*
past	*tive feito*	*fiz*	*fui fazer*
	tivera feito	*fizera*	*fora fazer*
future	*terei feito*	*farei*	*irei fazer*
	teria feito	*faria*	*iria fazer*

Box 2.3. Secondary perspective (BECHARA, 2004, p.215)

The final layer is the analysis of aspectual features, such as *visão* (view) and *fase* (phase or stage), for each point in time.

According to Bechara (2004, p.216), view (box 2.4) allows the speaker to partly or wholly consider the action described by the verb. It is the action as an interval between two

points in time (A and B), which can coincide in one (C). That coincident situation is called *parcializante* (partitive view), and it is expressed by *estar* + gerund *(estar fazendo)*. Additionally, the view is called: (a) *comitativa* (recurrent view), when the action is continuously perceived in different moments between A and B, being expressed by *andar* + gerund *(andar fazendo), andar* + adjective *(andar enfermo)*, or *andar* + participle *(andar desesperado)*; (b) *prospectiva* (prospective view), when the action is viewed from point C towards an indefinite, distant point after C, being expressed by *ir* + gerund *(ir fazendo);* (c) *retrospectiva* (retrospective view), when the action is viewed from an indefinite, distant point before C towards point C, coinciding with the moment of observation – the action is, thus, progressive, and it is expressed by *vir* + gerund *(vir fazendo);* (d) *continuativa* (ongoing view) is a combination of both prospective and retrospective views, which is expressed by *seguir* + gerund *(seguir fazendo)* or *continuar* + gerund *(continuar fazendo).*

past		*present*	*future*	
A ▶▶		C		B
retrospective		**partitive**	**prospective**	
venho fazendo		*estou fazendo*	*vou fazendo*	
	ongoing			
	sigo / continuo fazendo			
recurrent				
ando fazendo				

Box 2.4. View (adapted from BECHARA, 2004, p. 216-219)

Another aspectual feature of the third layer, phase (box 2.5) is the relation between the moment of observation and the action development stage. The phases are six: (a) *iminente* (imminent phase), when the action is likely to begin, which is expressed by *estar para* + infinitive *(estou para escrever);* (b) *inceptiva* (initial phase), which is the action initial point, expressed by *começar a* + infinitive *(começo a escrever), pôr-se a* + infinitive *(ponho-me a escrever)* or *sair* + gerund *(saio dizendo);* (c) *progressiva* (progressive phase), which is the development of the action, expressed by *ir* + gerund (*vou dizendo);* (d) *continuativa* (ongoing phase), which considers the action middle point of development, expressed by *seguir* + gerund *(sigo escrevendo), continuo a* + infinitive *(continuo a escrever)* or *estou* + gerund *(estou dizendo);* (e) *regressiva* (regressive phase) and *conclusiva* (finitive phase) consist of the action final stages, expressed by *terminar de* + infinitive *(termino de escrever)*; and (f)

egressiva (definitive phase), when the action cannot be changed, it is the action after being completed or finished, expressed by *acabar de* + infinitive *(acabo de escrever)*.

before the action	during the action					after the action
	→					
imminent	**initial**	**progressive**	**ongoing**	**regressive conclusive**	**definite**	
estou para escrever	*começo a escrever*	*vou dizendo*	*sigo escrevendo*	*termino de escrever*	*acabo de escrever*	
	ponho-me a escrever		*continuo a escrever*			
	saio dizendo		*estou dizendo*			

Box 2.5. Phase (adapted from BECHARA, 2004, p. 217-218)

Although Coriseu's analysis is based on those three layers, he reinforces other important verb aspects, as *duração* (duration), *repetição* (repetition) and *conclusão* (completion). Firstly, duration (box 2.6) reveals how the action happens through time, being it durative, punctual or iterative.

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durative	**punctual**	**iterative**
olhar	*chegar*	*saltitar*

Box 2.6. Duration (BECHARA, 2004, p. 215)

On the other hand, repetition (box 2.7) characterizes the action as *semelfáctiva* (isolated action)*,* meaning that there is no repetition at all, or as *freqüentativa* (repetitive action), which can be singular or indeterminate repetition. Singular repetition is lexically expressed in Portuguese as in *volto a dizer* or *redizer*.

isolated action	**repetitive action**	
	singular repetition	**indeterminate repetition**
fazer	*refazer*	*viver fazendo*
	voltar a fazer	*costumar fazer*

Box 2.7. Repetition (adapted from BECHARA, 2004, p. 215)

The last aspect is completion (box 2.8). The action can be *conclusa* (completed action), *inconclusa* (incompleted action) or *sem traço de conclusão* (verbs which do not imply completion). Romanic languages have no such distinction in terms of structure. For

completion is to be regarded as *terminativa* (subjective) or *completiva* (objective). It depends on whether the subject had reached a final objective or not. In Portuguese, subject completion is grammatically expressed, whereas objective completion is contextually perceived.

subjective	*escrevi muito.*	*(agora não escrevo)*
objective	*escrevi o livro.*	*(fiz o que devia fazer)*

Box 2.8. Completion (BECHARA, 2004, p. 215)

After all, only tense level and primary perspective must be grammatically or lexically expressed in every single Portuguese verb-phrase. Hence, the other categories can be contextually or semantically perceived. The comparison in box 2.9 shows that the verb-phrases *estive fazendo* and *tenho estado fazendo* both express view, tense level and primary perspective, though only the latter expresses secondary perspective.

aspect	*estive fazendo*	*tenho estado fazendo*
tense level	*presente*	*presente*
primary perspective	retrospective	parallel
secondary perspective	-	+
view	retrospective	ongoing

Box 2.9. Comparative analysis

3. EQUIVALENCE FROM THEORY

As English and Portuguese have different verb systems, understanding aspectual features is fundamental for translators. Consider the following utterances in English, and their literal translation to Portuguese:

I **have been working** very hard.	*Eu **tenho estado trabalhando** demais.*
You **had been learning** a lot.	*Você **tinha estado aprendendo** muito.*

Box 3.1. Literal translation

A good translator would immediately disregard those structures of box 3.1 as possible translations, because they are not usual in Brazilian Portuguese, that is, they would sound awkward. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the meaning being described is required. Both examples have the perfect and the progressive aspects, expressing an external view of an

action in retrospect, as well as an internal view of the same action in progress. It is important to point out that one view does not necessarily exclude another (box 3.2).

I	PRESENT	HAVE + -EN/ED	BE + -ING	**work** very hard.
subject	at the time of utterance	external view in retrospect	internal view in progress	dynamic activity
(=at this time I look back at myself in an activity viewed internally as in progress)				
You	PAST	HAVE + -EN/ED	BE + -ING	**learn** a lot.
subject	remote from time of utterance	external view in retrospect	internal view in progress	dynamic process
(=at that time I looked back at you in a process viewed internally as in progress)				

Box 3.2. Semantic analysis in English (YULE, 1998, p.67)

In the former *I have been working very hard*, the action being described is *to work very hard*. This activity has happened before (retrospective view) a couple of times (recurrent), but it is still happening now (internally viewed as in progress; non-remoteness in time). Furthermore, it will probably happen again if the subject does not do anything to change this situation (ongoing activity). Conversely, in the latter *you had been learning a lot*, the action being described is *to learn a lot*. This was a continuous process (in progress, internally viewed), which had started before the time of utterance (remoteness in time). However, as the process does not happen anymore (completed action), it can be retrospectively observed (external view).

After this analysis, a correlation between aspects of English and those of Portuguese can be established, so that the translator can find the possibilities of translation. As demonstrated in boxes 3.2 and 3.3, the semantic process begins with the understanding of each English aspectual feature, followed by a semantic correlation with Portuguese aspectual features, in order to unveil the linguistic possibilities of translation.

I **have been working** very hard.				
aspect in English		aspect in Portuguese		
at this time	at the time of utterance	current level	*trabalho*	Tense level
		on the same timeline	~~*trabalhei*~~	

viewed internally as in progress	internal view	in progress	*trabalho* ~~*trabalhava*~~	Primary perspective
	in progress			
I look back at myself	external view	retrospective relocation	***tenho trabalhado***	Secondary perspective
	in retrospect			
in a dynamic activity	durative	recurrent	***ando trabalhando***	View
		ongoing	***sigo trabalhando***	
		ongoing	***estou trabalhando***	Phase
*Eu **tenho trabalhado** demais.*				
*Eu **ando trabalhando** demais.*				
*Eu **sigo trabalhando** demais.*				
*Eu **estou trabalhando** demais.*				

Box 3.2. Translation process to Portuguese

You **had been learning** a lot.				
aspect in English		aspect in Portuguese		
at that time	remote from time of utterance	non-current level	*aprendia* ~~*aprendera*~~	Tense level
		on a different timeline		
viewed internally as in progress	internal view	in progress	~~*aprendo*~~ *aprendia*	Primary perspective
	in progress			
I looked back at you	external view	retrospective relocation	***tinha aprendido***	Secondary perspective
	in retrospect			
a dynamic process	durative	retrospective	***vinha aprendendo***	View
		progressive	***vinha aprendendo***	Phase
*Eu **tinha aprendido** muito.*				
*Eu **vinha aprendendo** muito.*				

Box 3.3. Translation process to Portuguese

Remoteness in time (box 1.1) is related to tense level (box 2.1), which can be current level, expressed by Portuguese tenses of *presente,* or non-current level, expressed by Portuguese tenses of *imperfeito.* Each of them will give us two possibilities to be considered. When the progressive and the perfect (box 1.3) are both expressed, the former is related to primary perspective (box 2.2), which produces two other possibilities. By comparing the four possible verb-forms, we can keep only the similar ones. The perfect aspect is now under the secondary perspective (box 2.3), retrospectively relocating the action in time. From now on, the previous possibility is left behind, because a more adequate one has been found. The next step is to consider the lexical aspect (box 1.2). In the examples, the actions described are dynamic, thus durative, which means that view and phase are applicable. Depending on how

the speaker perceives the action in time, view can be recurrent, retrospective and/or ongoing (box 2.4), whereas phase can be progressive, ongoing or even definite (if the process is already finished) (box 2.5). More possibilities will be brought after analyzing view and phase. Nevertheless, the translator's choice will always depend on the context.

4. EQUIVALENCE IN CONTEXT

After this explanation on aspects and the correlation between English and Portuguese, we are able to analyze whether translators are considering such theory or not. Our first intention was to make a comparative reading of two different published translations of the first chapter of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). However, as the analysis went deeper as it apparently would, we restricted the discussion to the first paragraph only – even though being aware of other passages which had produced disagreement between the translators.

Animal Farm begins with "Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the pop-holes" (ORWELL, 1945, p.1). The following box (4.1) reproduces the entirely paragraph, and its translations:

Animal Farm By George Orwell (1945, p.1)	*A Revolução dos Bichos* Translation by Heitor Ferreira (1945, p.5)	*A Revolução dos Bichos* Translation by Luiz Carlos Carneiro de Paula (2006, p.15)
Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the pop-holes. With the ring of light from his lantern dancing from side to side, he lurched across the yard, kicked off his boots at the back door, drew himself a last glass of beer from the barrel in the scullery, and made his way up to bed, where Mrs. Jones was already snoring.	*O Sr. Jones, proprietário da Granja do Solar, fechou o galinheiro à noite, mas estava bêbado demais para lembrar-se de fechar também as vigias. Com o facho de luz da sua lanterna balançando de um lado para o outro, atravessou cambaleante o pátio, tirou as botas na porta dos fundos, tomou um último copo de cerveja do barril que havia na copa, e foi para a cama, onde sua mulher já ressonava.*	*Mr. Jones, da Fazenda do Sobrado, havia fechado o galinheiro à noite, mas estava bêbado demais para se lembrar de fechar também as portinholas. Com o facho de sua lanterna ziquezagueando, atravessou cambaleante o pátio, tirou as botas na porta dos fundos, tomou um último copo de cerveja do barril que havia na copa e foi para a cama, onde sua mulher já ressonava.*

Box 4.1. Comparative reading

A semantic reading of the passage would be as in box 4.2:

Mr. Jones **had locked** the hen-houses for the night.			
Mr. Jones	PAST	HAVE + -EN/ED	**lock** the hen-houses for the night.
subject	remote from time of utterance	external view in retrospect	dynamic act
(=at that time I looked back at Mr. Jones in a dynamic process)			

Box 4.2. Semantic analysis in English

In other words, if the action is described in the past, it is remote from the time of utterance, and the tense level is non-current, producing *fechava* and *fechara* as possible translations for the process described. This process is retrospectively viewed from the outside, as a whole. Thus, two more possibilities are brought – *fechou* and *fechara*. By opposition, we have only *fechara* left. The secondary perspective is disregarded here, because there is no progressive aspect in English, which gives room to the perfect aspect under the primary perspective. As *lock* and *fechar* are both dynamic processes, the implicated meaning (box 1.4) resulting from the combination between the lexical (dynamic) and the grammatical (perfect) aspects is that of a completed action or a definite phase. So the last possibility is *acabara de fechar*, as it is shown in box 4.3.

Mr. Jones **had locked** the hen-houses for the night.				
aspect in English		aspect in Portuguese		
at that time	remote from time of utterance	non-current level	*fechava* **fechara**	Tense level
		on a different timeline		
I looked back at Mr. Jones	in retrospect	retrospectively	*fechou* **fechara**	Primary perspective
	outside view	viewed as a whole		
		retrospective relocation	*tivera fechado*	Secondary perspective
		---		View
in a dynamic process	completed action	definite	**acabara de fechar**	Phase
Mr. Jones **fechara** o galinheiro à noite.				
Mr. Jones **acabara de fechar** o galinheiro à noite.				

Box 4.3. Translation process to Portuguese

The narration which comes next to "Mr. Jones had locked the hen-houses for the night…" is written in English past tenses (and narratives usually are), so the action of *locking the hen-houses* is expressed in past perfect to emphasize that it has happened before these

actions: *to lurch*, *to kick off*, *to draw*, *to make his way up* and *to be snoring* – but while *been drunk*. In Portuguese, an equivalent verb-form would be among the tenses of *imperfeito,* and this aspect combined with the retrospective one gives us the only alternative of *fechara*. Furthermore, *acabara de fechar* is not adequate because the focus is not on the stages of the process, but on the process as a whole. The issue is not when the action was completed (recently or long ago), but whether it happened or not.

Finally, we can assume that both translations are inadequate based on aspectual theory and its linguistic correlations being purposed. Ferreira has misunderstood tense level, considering *had locked* as current *(fecha / fechou),* instead of non-current *(fechava / fechara).* In other hand, Carneiro de Paula has misinterpreted primary perspective, regarding it as in parallel *(fecha / fechava),* and not retrospectively *(fechou / fechara).* Consequently, he brought the retrospective view under the secondary perspective, which had produced *tinha fechado* and *havia fechado*.

5. CONCLUSION

By understanding theory, it was possible to demonstrate which meanings and perspectives are behind linguistic choices in translating perfect tense verb-phrases from English to Portuguese. Even though translation studies have long asserted that equivalence is relative and depends on the context, translation works seem to misunderstand the semantics behind the verb-form. Therefore, aspectual theory is to be widely and further discussed, in an attempt to reveal similarities between languages, instead of remarking only differences.

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