

A COMPARATIVE - CONTRASTIVE APPROACH TO AUXILIARY VERBS IN ENGLISH, ROMANIAN AND ITALIAN

Auxiliary verbs represent a very useful tool in any language, their main function being that of helping speakers provide relevant information about the time and the nature of the action they make reference to in communication.

Depending on the languages taken into consideration, the typology and number of auxiliary verbs used in communication in order to individualize the action expressed by speakers differs significantly. If we consider the three languages approached in the present paper, i.e. English, Romanian and Italian, the list of auxiliary verbs proper includes five verbs in English, three in Romanian and two in Italian:

English	<i>to do, to be, to have, will, would</i>
Romanian	<i>a fi, a avea, a vrea</i>
Italian	<i>essere, avere</i>

For the sake of relevance, focus will be laid only on the formal and semantic characteristics of the two auxiliaries shared by these languages.

The auxiliary verbs *to be* and *to have* are used in English as marks of an important verb category, namely *aspect*, which is both formally and semantically traceable in the verb form. The auxiliary verb *to be* is a mark of the *continuous* or *progressive* aspect in English, which means that it is an obligatory element to be used with all the finite and non-finite forms of the verb in this aspect (e.g. Present Tense Continuous, Past Tense Continuous, Future Tense Continuous, Future in the Past Continuous, Present Conditional Continuous and Present Infinitive Continuous). A formal aspect worth mentioning at this point is that the auxiliary verb *to be* always requires the present participle of the main verb. On the other hand, the auxiliary verb *to have* is a mark of the *perfect* or *perfective* aspect in English, which means that it is part and parcel of all the perfect tenses in this language (e.g. Present Perfect Simple, Past Perfect Simple, Future Perfect Simple, Future Perfect in the Past Simple, Perfect Conditional Continuous, Perfect Infinitive and Perfect Gerund). Similarly to the auxiliary verb *to be*,

to have conditions the form of the immediately following verb which has to be in the past participle. The *continuous* and the *perfective* aspects coexist a series of verb forms in English which, as their names suggest, bring together the auxiliary verbs *to be* and *to have*: Present Perfect Continuous, Past Perfect Continuous, Future Perfect Continuous, Future Perfect in the Past Continuous, Perfect Conditional Continuous, and Perfect Infinitive Continuous.

The formal value of auxiliary verbs is obvious in Romanian and Italian, as well, this aspect being highlighted in the definitions provided by the specialists in the field. Referring to **auxiliary** verbs, Dumitru Irimia (1997) states that such verbs lack any semantic content and have a strict use with specific tenses. Their forms, when used as auxiliaries, differ from their forms when used as main verbs:

„Auxiliarele morfologice în limba română sunt verbe golite de conținut semantic și fixate în anumite forme flexionare. Flexiunea lor – redusă, de obicei, la o singură paradigmă temporală - este de cele mai multe ori diferită de flexiunea acelorasi verbe în conditia de verbe libere.” (Irimia 1997: 184)

Moreover, he underlines that auxiliaries are included in the category of free morphemes used in Romanian to express specific grammatical meaning together with other auxiliaries: *“Verbele auxiliare fac parte din categoria morfemelor libere de care se serveste limba română pentru exprimarea unor sensuri gramaticale fine alături de alte auxiliare ale flexiunii.”* (Irimia 1997: 184)

As regards the definition of auxiliary verbs in Italian, their formal value is most often the aspect pointed out by different specialists in the field because these verbs are linguistic tools which ‘help’ in forming compound tenses. Marinucci (1996: 195) emphasizes this idea when he states that *“i verbi ausiliari intervengono in “aiuto” nella formazione dei tempi composti di tutti i verbi”*. Using the formal value of auxiliary verbs as a starting point in his approach, Serriani (1989) considers that such verbs can provide relevant information, about such verb categories as voice and tense (auxiliaries proper), about a specific semantic value (verbi *servili*) or an aspectual element (verbi *fraseologici*) :

„Ausiliari sono tutti quelli verbi che, accanto a un loro uso e significato autonomi, svolgono funzione vicaria nei confronti di qualsiasi altro verbo individuando: a) una determinazione morfologica (diatesi o tempo: ausiliari propriamente detti); b) un particolare valore semantico (servili); un dato elemento aspettuale (fraseologici Moretti-Orvieto 1983: 12-13)” (Serriani 1989: 391)

An interesting aspect mentioned by the Italian grammarians is the fact that the two auxiliaries combine only with specific classes of main verbs, i.e. *avere* is used with transitive verbs and *essere* combines with intransitive and pronominal verbs, and with transitive verbs, if they are in the passive voice:

„I verbi ausiliari intervengono in “aiuto” nella formazione dei tempi composti di tutti i verbi. L’ausiliare avere viene usato per formare i tempi composti di tutti i verbi transitivi, con l’ausiliare essere si coniugano tutti i verbi transitivi alla forma passiva e i verbi pronominali. Per i verbi intransitivi non è possibile codificare una regola precisa riguardo alla scelta dell’ ausiliare.” (Marinucci 1996: 195)

Similarly to the auxiliary verbs *to be* in English and *a fi* in Romanian, *essere* is used in Italian as a mark of the passive voice.

„Essere e avere consentono la formazione dei tempi composti con valore di passato rispettivamente a) per la maggioranza dei verbi intransitivi, per quasi tutti i verbi impersonali, per tutti quelli riflessivi e intransitivi pronominali b) per tutti i verbi transitivi e per un certo numero di intransitivi. Il verbo essere forma inoltre il passivo.” (Serriani 1989: 391)

Moving from the formal to the semantic characteristics of the verbs *to be* / *a fi* / *essere* and *to have* / *a avea* / *avere*, reference should be made that their use as **auxiliaries**, when they are devoid of any meaning, is in full opposition with the instances when they function as **main** verbs. The verbs *to be* and *to have* are the two most common ‘state verbs’ in English used to express ‘states of affairs’ or situations valid at a given moment in time. When used with this semantic value, both verbs take only the simple/indefinite aspect of the tense required by the context:

e.g. Jane **is not** at home **now**. You can try to call her later.
Their parents **have** too many financial problems **at present**.

The same grammatical behaviour may be observed when the verb *to be* is a semi-auxiliary (copulative/link verb, part of a nominal predicate) used to express a permanent characteristic of the subject and when the verb *to have* (main verb) expresses **possession**:

e.g. Your sister **is** intelligent and everybody likes her.
Jack **has** a lovely Ferrari Testarossa. It must have cost him a fortune.

Comparing English and Romanian, the verbs *a fi* and *a avea* are used as main verbs to express *existence* and *possession*, respectively:

e.g. Ziarul **este** pe masă. (a se afla)
Nu **este** nici o altă soluție (a exista)
Ioana **are** o casă și două mașini. (a poseda)

In much the same way, the verb *essere* is used as a main verb in Italian with the meaning 'to exist' ('essistere', 'trovarsi') and *avere* with meanings such as : 'to possess', 'to feel', 'to obtain', 'to receive': "*Avere è usato con valore predicativo con vari significati: possedere, sentire, provare ('avere compassione per qualcuno'), ottenere (avere dei risultati), ricevere (avere notizie)*" (Marinucci 1996: 196). The examples below are relevant in this respect:

e.g. *Il telefono è nella tua stanza.* (trovarsi)
Non c'è niente da fare in questa situazione (esistere)
Gianni ha tutto quello che vuole (possedere)
Ha tanta compassione per i bambini malati (provare)
Tu hai dei risultati migliori questo semestre. (ottenere)
Non ho notizie da Maurizio da quasi due settimane. (ricevere)

Although the verbs *to be* and *to have* are obviously devoid of any meaning when used as auxiliaries, their being marks of the **continuous** and **perfective** aspect, respectively, in English allow for a correlation between the presence of these auxiliaries in the verb form and the type of action expressed. Thus, the **continuous** aspect is formally marked by the auxiliary verb *to be* and the present participle of the main verb and it is commonly used in English to express actions in **full progress**, **durative** actions or **temporary** actions/situations. It is also associated with **changing** situations or with **modality** (the speakers' attitude towards the message conveyed). As regards the **perfect/ perfective** aspect, it formally implies the presence of the auxiliary verb *to have* and of the past participle for the immediately following verb. This aspect it is used by speakers when reference has to be made to a past (completed) action, situation or event. Some of the various meanings conveyed by the **continuous** aspect in English are exemplified by a series of relevant examples included in the table below:

THE CONTINUOUS ASPECT → aux. <i>to be</i> + the present participle of the main verb	
actions in full progress	<p><i>The baby is sleeping so we should turn off the TV.</i> (action in full progress at the moment of speaking)</p> <p><i>Jane was attending a conference this time last week.</i> (action which was in full progress at a given moment in the past)</p> <p><i>The new employees will be working when you get to work tomorrow morning.</i> (action which will be in progress at a given moment in the future when another action happens)</p>

	<i>Don't call him now. He may be sleeping.</i>
durative actions	<i>My father was working all day long yesterday. They have been jogging for almost two hours. We will be discussing the terms of the contract between 9 and 11 tomorrow morning.</i>
temporary actions	<i>Our manager is working longer hours this week. (only this week) Jackie hasn't been studying too hard lately. (she normally studies hard) The children were going to bed later those days. (only those days)</i>

Regarding Romanian and Italian, the auxiliary verbs analyzed have strictly a formal value in these languages. They are used to form various compound tenses, but they do not express any of the semantic values associated with *to be* and *to have* as marks of the **continuous** and **perfective** aspects in English. This idea is pointed out by Dumitru Irimia (1997) who states that the grammatical category of **tense** includes relevant information about the categories of **aspect** and **mood**, as well as about **person** and **number**:

*„În limba română categoria gramaticală a timpului înglobează în desfășurarea opozițiilor sale interne și categoriile gramaticale **aspect** și **mod** într-un proces de solidarizare în parte asemănător cu cel propriu complementarității categoriilor de persoană și număr.” (Irimia 1997: 211)*

Enlarging on the category of **aspect**, Irimia explains that this category is illustrated in Romanian by the opposition **perfective/imperfective**, the former being associated with complete actions and the latter with incomplete ones: *Categoria gramaticală a aspectului se dezvoltă în limba română prin opoziția dintre 2 termeni corelativi: perfectiv/imperfectiv. Opoziția perfectiv - imperfectiv se corelează cu opoziția împlinit - neîmplinit.” (id. ibid.)*

Another interesting aspect pointed out is that the grammatical category of **aspect** is expressed in various ways in Romanian depending on the tense, mood and voice envisaged and in close interdependence with the semantic content of the main verbs. The past tenses of the indicative mood are the best to illustrate the **perfective - imperfective** opposition. The tenses *perfectul compus*, *perfectul simplu* and *mai mult ca perfectul* are used for **completed** actions and *imperfectul* is selected when reference has to be made to **incomplete** actions:

Categoria gramaticală a aspectului se realizează în mod diferit în funcție de timp, mod și datează precum și în strânsă legătură cu conținutul semantic al verbelor. Opoziția cea mai bine reprezentată caracterizează timpul trecut indicativ. (Irimia 1997: 212)

The perfective- imperfective dichotomy is integrated by Dumitru Irimia (1997) in the **subjective aspect** (*aspectul subiectiv*) which represents a means of modalizing the temporal characteristics of the verbal action. Moreover, reference is also made to the **objective aspect** which is selected by speakers in order to provide relevant information about the development of the action or about its specific stages traceable in verb form. From this perspective, mention may be made of the **singular, plural, imminent inchoative, continuing** or **ending** character of an action:

*„Se disting două variante ale categoriei gramaticale aspect: 1. **aspectul subiectiv** – expresia modului specific de înscriere de către vorbitor a temporalității acțiunii verbale în durata enunțării și 2. **aspectul obiectiv** – expresia modului specific de desfășurare obiectivă a acțiunii verbale în durata enunțului. Prin **aspectul subiectiv** subiectul vorbitor modalizează temporalitatea acțiunii verbale pe care o poate prezenta ca perfectivă (Am traversat repede strada sau imperfectivă Când traversam strada m-a strigat cineva). Prin **aspectul obiectiv**, subiectul vorbitor descrie modul de desfășurare sau momente, etape în desfășurarea acțiunii verbale în planul enunțului: **singularitate** (a citi), **pluralitate** (a reciti), **iminent** (stă să adoarmă), **inchoativ** (a adormi), **continuuativ** (a dormi) sau **terminativ** (a termina de dormi)” (Irimia 1997: 212)*

Combining the elements included in the classification of **aspect** suggested by Dumitru Irimia, Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (2010) states that this category expresses the change of state visible in the verb form from the point of view of its development:

„Aspectul prezintă schimbarea de stare desemnată de verb din punctul de vedere al desfășurării sale care poate fi văzută:

- ca un eveniment unic , de obicei de scurtă durată (aspect **punctual** sau **momentan** – ea deschide) sau ca aflat în desfășurare, într-un interval mai îndelungat (aspect **durativ** sau **continuu** – a se plimba)*
- ca încheiată (aspectul **perfectiv** – a căzut) sau neîncheiată (aspect **imperfectiv** – cădea)*
- ca petrecându-se o singură dată (a închis) sau ca repetându-se (închidea mereu) (aspect **iterativ**)*
- ca fiind în pregătire (aspect **prospectiv** – stă să plouă), în curs de a începe (aspect **inchoativ** – începe să mănânce), în desfășurare (aspect **continuuativ** – continua să cânte) sau în curs de **terminare** (aspect **terminativ** - termină de cântat).” (Dindelegan 2010: 243-244)*

As far as the Italian approach to the category of **aspect** is concerned, Serriani (1989) underlines that this verb category provides information

regarding the **duration, momentary character, repeatedness, beginning or completion** of an action: *L'aspetto contrassegna l'atto verbale secondo la prospettiva della durata, della momentaneità, della ripetitività, dell'inizio o della conclusione di un processo, della compiutezza o dell'incompiutezza dell'azione.* (Serriani 1989: 390)

A similar view is expressed by Marinucci (1996) who states that 'aspectual auxiliaries' are used in Italian to denote the **beginning** of an action, actions **on the point of starting**, actions in **progress** and **durative** or **completed** actions:

„Gli ausiliari aspettuali esprimono i seguenti significati:

- *azione che inizia (aspetto **ingressivo puntuale**) cominciare, mettersi, iniziare*
- *azione che sta per iniziare (aspetto **ingressivo imminente**) stare per, accingersi*
- *azione che si svolge e dura nel tempo (aspetto **durativo**) stare + gerundio, continuare a, insistere nel*
- *azione che termina (aspetto **conclusivo puntuale**) smettere, cessare, finire di “*
(Marinucci 1996: 199)

Taking into discussion the same class of verbs, Serriani (1989) makes explicit reference to the formal and semantic characteristics of 'aspectual auxiliaries': *“Gli ausiliari di tempo o aspettuali segnalano, in unione con un altro verbo di modo indefinito (infinito o gerundio, un particolare aspetto dell'azione: imminenza, inizio, continuità o conclusione di un'azione”.* (Serriani 1989: 397) This opinion is shared by Trifone and Palermo (2000) who state that the category of aspect may be expressed in different ways in Italian, either formally, or semantically:

L'italiano, a differenza di altre lingue, [...] non dispone di desinenze verbali che consentano di determinare il valore aspettuale del verbo. Tuttavia, ciascun verbo può esplicitare il suo valore aspettuale in più modi:

- ***attraverso il significato intrinseco:** esistono verbi come cadere, morire, colpire, che esprimono un'azione **momentanea**; altri come dormire, abitare, studiare che esprimono un'azione **durativa**; altri ancora come maturare, impallidire, arrosire, che esprimono un'azione che si compie **progressivamente**, ecc.*
- ***attraverso il tempo:** alcuni tempi verbali hanno uno specifico valore aspettuale. Se l'azione viene presentata come conclusa nel passato, si ha aspetto **perfettivo**; se l'azione viene presentata nel corso del suo svolgimentosi ha aspetto **imperfettivo**. Inoltre, le frasi Scrivo una lettera e Sto scrivendo una lettera esprimono, rispettivamente, un'azione **durativa** o **progressiva**.*
- ***attraverso perifrasi verbali:** essere sul punto di, essere in procinto di, stare per+ infinito del verbo esprimono l'aspetto **ingressivo** o **incoativo**;*
- ***attraverso strumenti derivativi:** alcuni suffissi come **-icchiare, -acchiare, -ettare, -ottare, -erellare** conferiscono al verbo di base un particolare significato aspettuale:*

cantare → *canticchiare*, *rubare* → *rubacchiare*, *fischiare* → *fischiettare*, *parlare* → *parlottare*, *giocare* → *giocherellare*. (Trifone, Palermo 2000: 117)

To **conclude**, the idea should be pointed out that **auxiliary** verbs have the same grammatical function in the three languages taken into account in the present paper. They are used to form compound tenses and are the elements in the predicate which provide relevant information about verb categories such as voice, mood, tense, person and number. As far as the category of **aspect** is concerned, it is obvious that this category is represented differently in English, Romanian and Italian. If the **continuous** and **perfective** aspects are formally and semantically marked in English, a matrix being easy to suggest in this respect, they are expressed mostly by lexical means in Romanian and Italian, the repetitive, durative, momentary, (in)complete nature of the action being traceable mostly in the meaning of the main verb and in the specific grammatical constructions used to express some of these aspectual values (Dindelegan 2010, Dardano e Trifone 1995):

Aspectualitatea se indică în mare măsură prin mijloace lexicale: prin construcții cu verbe având sens aspectual care alcătuiesc împreună cu verbul principal un predicat complex, prin circumstanțiale și prin particule adverbiale. Gramaticile românești mai vechi nu includeau aspectul între categoriile verbului deoarece în română acesta nu este marcat cu mijloace gramaticale specifice. Timpurile verbale marchează în limba română doar anumite valori aspectuale aspectul perfectiv/imperfectiv, aspectul momentan/durativ și aspectul iterativ. Mijloacele de marcare a aspectului interferează cu trăsăturile aspectuale inerente ale sensului lexical al verbului. Verbele pot fi preponderant durative (a rătăci, a crește, a aștepta) sau punctuale (a apărea, a adormi). Apariția lor la timpuri durative sau punctuale întărește sau contrazice semnificația primară, creând efecte de sens contextuale. (Dindelegan 2010: 243-244)

In italiano l'aspetto non è grammaticalizzato, ciò nonostante, le principali nozioni aspettuali sono riconoscibili nel Sistema della flessione verbale. Aspetto perfetto, aspetto imperfetto, aspetto compiuto, aspetto progressivo. (Dardano e Trifone 1995: 315 -316)

Nevertheless the formal specificity of auxiliary verbs shared by the three languages under discussion and the fact that their semantic values in English find an equivalent semantic representation in Romanian and Italian are elements which may prove extremely useful in teaching and learning auxiliary verbs to philology students, irrespective of the students' native language.

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Abstract: Starting from the fact that auxiliary verbs have the same grammatical function, irrespective of the language taken into consideration, the present paper aims at identifying relevant formal and semantic similarities and dissimilarities between the most common auxiliary verbs in English, Romanian and Italian and at proving that certain semantic features shared by the auxiliary verbs analyzed (*to be* and *to have*) may represent a useful tool for teaching English auxiliary verbs to Romanian and/or Italian students.

Key words: auxiliaries, duration, perfectivity, progress.