Can different languages be analyzed using the same model?

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Spanish and Russian are relatively different languages, even if they historically share a common basis in the Indo-European family. The differences extend to the verbal system. Spanish has inherited a system that is relatively rich in forms from Latin. Russian, however, has a structure that is more similar to Classic Greek with a division based on the concept of aspect. David Westerholm, at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, compares the way past time is expressed in Spanish and in Russian and arrives at a new analysis model that can also be applied to other languages.

Spanish expresses aspectual differences in the verbal system through the simple past tenses imperfecto and pretérito. In a superficial analysis, however, it is noticeable that the concept of aspect does not work in the same way in the two languages. So, is it a question of the same linguistic phenomenon, and can the languages be analysed using the same model?

In his dissertation, David Westerholm presents a model called the ABC model, which can be used as a graphic definition of the concept of verbal aspect. Spanish and Russian verbs are analysed using this model, which can be said to form a linguistically neutral cognitive basis for the concept of aspect. The author of the dissertation tries to describe the tangible differences expressed by each verbal form by defining a number of underlying values. In the two languages, the simple verbal forms thus represent interpretations of the values into which the category of aspect can be divided. In real terms, this means that in Russian, imperfectivity is associated with a process while in Spanish it is

interpreted rather as an expression of simultaneousness.

The dissertation also discusses the perfect tense, a function that is found in Spanish but is formally missing in Russian. David Westerholm claims that the perfect tense - in spite of its name - functionally does not express perfectivity, but that the perfect function is if anything an independent verbal parameter that expresses retrospectivity.

The whole dissertation has a systemic perspective with the focus on the relationship between different verbal functions with a past time reference and a striving to differentiate between different categories expressed by the verbs. As verbal aspect is a common category in world languages and there is no clear definition of it, there is an ambition to lay the foundations for a universal classification through the ABC model that can also be applied to languages other than Spanish and Russian.

Source: University of Gothenburg