A Reply to Oswald Szemerényi: "The Origin of Aspect in the Indo-European Languages"

By Albert L. Lloyd, Philadelphia, Pa.

In his article in *Glotta* 65 (1987), 1–18, Oswald Szemerényi comes to the conclusion that aspect did not exist in Proto-Indo-European. He argues that of all the Indo-European languages only Greek and Slavic have been proved to have aspect, their aspectual systems are quite different, and Slavic at least must have developed its system much later. One of these arguments is, however, not entirely accurate. Szemerényi cavalierly dismisses the existence of Gothic aspect, stating quite incorrectly that "this view has long been shown to be erroneous and untenable" (p. 4), but presenting no real evidence for this claim other than some references to authors who agree with him (none very recent) and blithe dismissal of those who do not.[1]

The single very brief 'discussion' of Gothic aspect (one paragraph on p. 4) contains several incorrect statements. In support of his assertion that the prefix *ga-* "alters *not the aspect but the meaning* of the basic verb", Szemerényi cites three examples, two involving weak processives (*sitan* and *standan*), a class of verbs in which aspect distinctions are sometimes difficult to recognize, but are by no means lacking.[2] To be sure, *sitan* normally means 'sitzen' and *gasitan* 'sich setzen', but this statement tells us only that a distinction that can be expressed aspectually in Gothic must be expressed otherwise in German, a language lacking formal aspect.

The same applies to the pair *standan* 'stand' ('stehen') – *gastandan* 'stop' ('stehen bleiben'); however, Szemerényi overlooks (or fails to

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[1] For example, he bases his rejection of my own detailed treatment of Gothic aspect (Lloyd 1979) on a single verb pair: *wrikan* 'persecute' (mistranslated by Szemerényi as 'pursue') – *gawrikan* 'avenge' (mistranslated as 'punish'), which I myself categorized as a somewhat doubtful case (pp. 260 f.), while ignoring the hundreds of indisputable aspectual pairs. Similarly, A. R. Wedel's statement that "Streitberg's aspectual theory is basically correct, at least when applied to the OHG Isidor" may not be entirely accurate (much of Streitberg's theory has been shown to be wrong, though his basic premise of Germanic – or at least Gothic – aspect based on prefixation stands), but it hardly "verges on the comical," as Szemerényi says (p. 4, fn. 10, 11).

[2] For a discussion of weak processives and aspect see Lloyd 1978, 195–204; Lloyd 1979, 127–34, 275–287.

mention) that *gastandan* may also mean 'stand', showing even in non-aspectual languages such as German no semantic difference from *standan,* but entering into a strictly aspectual contrast with it in Gothic (for example, Rom. 11,20, and especially Mark 3, 24–26, where both verbs appear together).[3]) In the third verb *bairan,* Szemerényi has chosen a particularly bad example to bolster his case. The simplex can indeed mean 'carry,' but he ignores the fact that it also means 'to bear fruit or children' and in at least one occurrence (Luke 2,6–7) forms a truly model aspectual pair with *gabairan:* ... *usfullnodedun dagos du bairan izai. jah gabar sunu seinana pana frumabaur* ... ('... the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son ....' King James Version).[4])

In point of fact, the evidence for Gothic aspect is overwhelming[5]) and, on the basis of (to be sure far less conclusive) remnants of what appears to be a similar system in Old High German and Old English, at least worth considering for Germanic as a whole. Up to now, no one has presented credible evidence to counter the conclusions in my 1979 study;[6]) unless and until someone develops a better theory to explain the Gothic facts, Gothic aspect cannot simply be wished away. Szemerényi's statement on p. 4 should therefore be reversed to read: „Aspect was certainly a morphological category in Gothic."

Although this removes one plank from Szemerényi's argument, it does not necessarily disprove his claim that aspect did not exist in Proto-Indo-European. I have made it clear that I also consider the type of aspect found in Slavic and Germanic to have developed secondarily; whether an aspect distinction similar to (but not identical with) that found in Greek can be assigned to Proto-Indo-European remains highly conjectural. Szemerényi's article has shifted the balance to the negative side, but the last word still remains to be said.

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[3]) For details see Lloyd 1979, 286 f.

[4]) See Lloyd 1979, 227.

[5]) This evidence is presented in great detail in Lloyd 1979 and need not be repeated here.

[6]) On the contrary, reviewers of Lloyd 1979 have generally expressed agreement with these conclusions; see especially Hopper 1981 and Lawson 1981.

Bibliographical References

Hopper, Paul J.: Review of Lloyd 1979. *Language* 57 (1981), 926–28.

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