

SOME PECULIARITIES OF VERBAL ASPECT IN SLOVENE*

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The peculiarities I have in mind are, of course, only such from the standpoint of the other Slavic languages, whose usage in the matter concerned is somewhat different. Nor do they in the least involve a different essence or a different definition of verbal aspect, for which I reject both the "completed action" view and its more sophisticated version, the criterion of complexity as the mark of the perfective (pv.) aspect, allegedly contrasted, in a privative binary opposition, with an unmarked imperfective (ipv.) aspect. Indeed, the essence of the aspectual opposition is exactly the same in all Slavic languages. They differ only on points of detail in application or manifestation, due probably to different stages of aspectual development, as well as to the interference of other grammatical categories within the system of tenses. In my view, the structure of verbal aspect rests on the bases of our concept of time: this concerns the essence of time and the structure of the time axis itself, and not the relative location of events on it, which is handled by the grammatical tenses. (The English language is fortunate in that it can lexically distinguish time from tense, which is really not time but location on the time axis as expressed grammatically.) It will be readily conceded, I hope, that there is bound to be some interaction between the constituent features of time as such and the occurrence of events within it, reflected in the tenses. In any case, what is ultimately given is really only the occurrence of events in their mutual relationship, which may in principle be either one of succession or simultaneity (in a rather broad sense). From this relationship, which the aspectual opposition mirrors, the concept of time is abstracted and eventually acquires independent status in our minds.

The present represents essentially nothing other than the ever fleeting dividing line between the past and the future, but is as a rule extended for communicative purposes.

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Precisely because of its fleeting nature, the present must in fact be extended, lest it elude our grasp altogether. To render the actual present, which is more or less simultaneous with our speaking about it, the *ipv.* aspect has to be used. This produces the impression of some relatively lasting and unchanging state, regardless of the actual duration as measured by watch or clock, for we are dealing here with matters that reach more deeply than any measurement of time. Therefore, the *pv.* cannot be used in any Slavic language for the present tense in its most basic application, the so-called actual present, which is wholly or in part simultaneous with the moment of utterance. Simultaneity is of the domain of the *ipv.* aspect, while the *pv.* reflects succession in time; in the actual present, we mean exactly to stop this succession, if only for a moment (in fact for as long as no change is registered). Thus, in answer to the question: what is happening just now while you and I are talking about it?, Slovene, like any other Slavic idiom, can resort only to an *ipv.* verb. This is the kind of grammatical coercion to which we are subjected by the molds of the language we speak and where we have no freedom of choice at all. Nor do we have to be corrected by a schoolmaster, but fall quite naturally into the proper category if we are Slavs.

Very properly, then, does the Slovenska slovnica of Bajec, Kolarič and Rupel¹ begin its section on the imperfective present with an example like: Stojim in gledam: velikanski ogenj gori. Mrači se in zmeraj svetleje odseva plamen. Po travi sede dekleta, njim nasproti fantje... At this point it could be objected that the whole scene here described may constitute a recollection from the past rendered in the so-called historical present. This is, of course, true, but strictly speaking the objection concerns only the introduction stojim in gledam, whereas what follows is meant to be seen simultaneously with my standing and looking and talking about it. In any case, if I were now standing thus and describing what I see, I would have to use exactly the same forms.

If, however, the same grammar says on the next page: "The imperfective present denotes an action which occurs or is repeated in the actual-present,"² I cannot quite agree, because in the "actual present" an event cannot be repeated. If it is, then we have a slightly different use of the present tense, which I call the iterative present. For there is no limit imposed by nature to what may constitute the present

tense; we limit it according to our needs of communication. The present begins and ends where its "contents" change, and in order for an event to be repeated (and not constitute one continuous state), it must perceptibly change, that is to say, be superseded by something else, and then be resumed. But in a repetition, the actual present is no longer the same. The iterative present requires, of course, no overlap with the actual present. Thus I can continue the above example: Mati pripravlja veliki lonec mesa za večerjo, even when mother is known to be in the office, in order to refer to her regular evening activities; or Oblaki plujó on a day when there is not a single cloud on the horizon. It is true, though, that the iterative present merges imperceptibly into the so-called extended present. This is so because it is sometimes difficult or unnecessary to distinguish a properly repeated event from a single continuing state reaching well back into the past and, as the case may be, also into the future. In: V isti smeri tečeta Sava in Drava, we have a proper extended present that does also comprise the actual present. It should be noted that for all the physical changes that occur in the rivers' movement, there is no change as far as it is reflected with linguistic means; tečeta comprises them all.

However, in all this, Slovene behaves no differently from the other Slavic languages. But there is an important class of cases where usage in Slovene differs perceptibly from that of its sister idioms. I have said that in order to refer to an event that is at least partly simultaneous with my speaking about it (it may last longer, but must not change so as to require a different linguistic designation), I can resort only to the *ipv.* aspect. Yet it seems that especially Slovene deviates from this universally valid principle of Slavic aspectual usage in that it uses also *pv.* verbs for activities apparently coincident with the actual present. For this I use the "present of coincidence." The feature itself is, of course, well-known and was described early in the century by Stanislav Škrabec³ under the name praesens effectivum, subsequently also by J. Mencej.⁴ As a matter of fact, Miklosich had already noticed the phenomenon in the Freising texts, where he thought it was due to uralte Verderbnis ("age-old corruption").⁵ Among the instances adduced by Škrabec, who does not share Miklosich's value judgment, are expressions like: To ti pošljem (herewith I send you); to ti dam (herewith I give you); to jim objubim (I promise); jih pustim s Bogom (a greeting), etc. Mencej reckons with a certain German influence, while Škrabec

believes that the employment of the pv. aspect with the meaning of an act largely co-extensive with its linguistic formulation represents a genuine popular usage that can lay claim to a respectable age and at which some grammarians chafed per nefas. We have here linguistic renderings of events that practically (but not quite!) coincide with the reference to them, and it is this fact which seemed and seems so strange to other Slavs, although there are related instances in their languages, too (c.f., e.g., not only Serbo-Croatian Ne dam ja to, razumeš li, ne dam [Nušić], but also Polish przysięgnę [I could swear]; Jesteś głupi. Tyle ci powiem [You are silly. So much I'll tell you.] [Koschmieder's examples]. But the feature is most widespread in Slovene and has led to interventions by grammarians, at least in former times, and under the impact of aspectual definitions in other Slavic languages, which made them attribute this Slovene popular usage to the "corrupting" influence of (Austrian) German. The peculiarity of Slovene lies in the fact that, whereas it shares with the other Slavic languages what I call the potential function of the pv. present, like utegnem (I can manage), on a par with Pol. potrafię, Russ. v toľk ne voz'mu, etc., it avails itself specifically of pv. verbs to designate events which seem to be co-extensive with the actual reference to them, as in odrešim, as against Serbo-Croatian, ja te odrešujem od tvojih grijeha (herewith I absolve thee of thy sins). There is no potential nuance here, based on an implied succession of events, as in the last Polish example, "I am SUCH THAT I can do this," Russian, "I am not ABLE TO understand," etc., but there seems to be a clear formulation of what I am doing in the actual present.

Or so it seems, because the "herewith" which we can always put into the English translation (ponudim [herewith I make you an offer], kupim [herewith I buy], obljubim [herewith I promise]) shows that we are not really dealing with a mere description of what is passing between the speaker and the addressee. The actual present, however, does involve such a mere static description. In this respect, Škrabec has hit upon the essence of the matter in stressing the fact that the act concerned is really meant to be effected by the utterance, which is why he speaks of a praesens effectivum. He also claims, to my mind on good grounds, that logically Slovene is right and not the other Slavic languages (but see my above examples from them). I will interpret his definition as meaning that in Slovene the embedding of the activity between resolve and effect comes to the fore, which

very properly activates the pv. aspect, whereas the other idioms have rather more equated the linguistic expression with that of a mere process taking place in the actual present, which only has to be described. It is interesting to note that if the confessing person is disturbed in his activity with the question as to what he is doing, his reply will very properly be spovedujem se, as pointed out by Škrabec, which shows to my mind that the feeling for the grammatical expression of a true actual present is as vigorous in the Slovenes as it is in all other Slavs. In this last formulation the speaker stops, as it were, the flow of succession and concentrates on the relatively unchanging state that perseveres through it. The objective length of the duration makes no difference because, as I have said, the verbal aspect embodying the contrast of a succession of changing events versus the absence of change represents a deeper structure than the measurement of time as well as the relative location of events on the time axis.

In his article published three years later, Mencej shows a much greater willingness than Škrabec to admit a certain blunting of the feeling for aspect under German influence, leading to the employment of the pv. present to render an ostensibly actual present situation. But I think it is entirely unnecessary to assume this. First of all, the matter is not at all unknown in the other Slavic languages, for the few examples adduced above can easily be multiplied. Cases like Slovak: To ti nepoviem [I cannot tell you], or especially Priznan se [I will admit], appear not too remote from the above-mentioned Slovene confessional formula and other examples. In Slovene, however, we are dealing with a very consistent and widespread usage. Since instances occur in the Freising confessional text (dated at ca. 1000), like ispovêdê (rendering Latin confiteor and not confitebor, as Škrabec very properly points out) and others, while at more or less the same time (the eleventh century) the Old Church Slavonic texts are already using the ipv. present ispovâdajo (Euchol. Sin. 67 b, etc.), the question arises why there should be such an old difference in approach between Slovene on the one hand and all other Slavic languages on the other. This question I can attempt to answer here only in part.

What seems to disturb the other Slavs and disturbed Slovene grammarians (Schriftgelehrte, as Škrabec, who was a clergyman, called them), who did their best to eliminate the pv. present tense forms at issue at least in educated speech, replacing them by ipv. forms, was, of course, the future

connotation of the pv. present. I speak advisedly of a future connotation, for I cannot accept the view that future reference is the basic meaning of the pv. present whose essence is supposed to be the prostoe buduščee.⁶ The form is above all indeed a pv. present, morphologically as well as functionally, which came to be used, even predominantly at least in the main clause, in a future meaning, in a way I have tried to describe in my book on verbal aspect.⁷ This was the position in O.C.S. and represents surely the statistically dominant function now in the North Slavic languages, whereas the other functions--which many grammarians try by hook or by crook to derive from the future one, instead of the other way around--have been on the decline in the attested history of Russian and Polish. As rightly pointed out by Meillet,⁸ however, the future meaning of the pv. present is by no means logically required, but is what he calls accessory. I would say it must be seen against the background of what surely constitutes a not very rich system of tenses, especially in Great Russian. In any case, it would be a mistake to believe that the aspect can always successfully discharge all the niceties of temporal meaning which a richer system of verbal tenses can handle.

About the effect of the future meaning of the pv. present--one of the functions of that form in my scheme--Škrabec says: "As this meaning of the present tense of pv. verbs has not become so all-pervasive in modern Slovene, its use as an 'effective present' has remained possible, and in fact has been demanded by the linguistic sense of the Slovene people with growing insistence." This is no doubt correct, and the question can only remain as to why this should have been so. Needless to say, in our answer we can go only so far and may have to limit ourselves to allocating to the feature in question a place within a wider context to derive its "meaning," without as yet being able to touch upon the actual causation.

I have mentioned before that the range of employment of the pv. present has not remained the same throughout the history of some Slavic languages. Thus in modern Russian and Polish it cannot as a rule be used to refer to single events in the past (for greater vividness); in the so-called "historical" function, at least not as a rule without an introduction by kak and jak respectively; and not at all in so-called stage remarks, unlike the situation a mere couple of centuries ago. In Slovene, however, the pv. present does occur in these functions, as also in Czech and Slovak, and

Serbo-Croatian, between which it is geographically situated. In Bulgarian (and Macedonian) we find the same inability, but there it is due to the fact that the pv. present can never be used in the main clause by itself (without the particle of the future). Slovene forms, as it were, the linguistic transition between the northern and the southern Slavic world in this respect. The pv. present can be freely used metaphorically in its historical function, that is, not only for an exemplary occurrence as part of a series of identical events, but also for single ones: Nemci vderó v vas, jo zažgó in postrelé talce (from the Slovenska slovnica).⁹ It (the Grammar) enters a caveat against a confusion of temporal levels, as in: Ko sem ga po tolikih letih spet videl, me navdá veliko veselje, where the authors suggest that je navdalo should be said. But the example shows that the switching of temporal levels comes quite naturally to a Slovene, while they remain within the same aspect; and the pv. present as such is quite acceptable to render an event whose emergence in the past is clarified by the context. This is not, of course, an "unmarked form doing service for the marked one," but a stylistically motivated transfer felt to be such.

Slovene is furthermore free to resort to the pv. present in scenic observations, as in Ivan Cankar's "Lepa Vida": Poljanec (si natočí v kozarec) ... Dioniz (pride k mizi in pije). The stylistic function here comprises specifically a rendering of a quick succession of events which obviously do not take place in the actual present, but which are every time enacted afresh whenever the play is performed or, for that matter, read.

I cannot here enter into all the uses of the pv. present in Slovene, among which the future meaning is but one. In Serbo-Croatian the future tense is always expressed by a form of the original present tense of the volitional verb now reduced to an auxiliary, but in Slovene the future function is preserved, without an auxiliary; in addition to this, however, we also find a morphological expression of the future by means of the auxiliary bo, boš, bo ... which--unlike the position in the North Slavic languages--also combines with the pv., not only the ipv. aspect (in the l-form). This continues the inherited Slavic future perfect that as such has been lost as part of the simplification of the tense system. Thus we find in Cankar's Podobe iz sanj: Toda ne boš umrl, temveč umiral boš vsak trenotek in brez konca, with a stylistically motivated inversion. Unlike the state

of affairs in the North Slavic languages, with their combination bqdq + ipv. infinitive not attested in their oldest stages and no doubt arisen following a German model, it is not even necessary to assume an analogous German influence in Slovene, although I think we cannot be sure on this point. In any case, the future function of the pv. present, which is inherited from Common Slavic, has remained alive in Slovenia, but has to compete with the reflex of the future perfect without any very noticeable difference in meaning, as I hope to have demonstrated in my book (cf. also from Jurčič's "Deseti brat": To boš izvedel, preden bo dva, tri dni). This fact may explain, I believe, why the pv. present has remained free to denote not a true present of coincidence, but, near enough, an event which the speaker is resolved to carry out immediately in pursuance of his present state of mind, and often does through its mere enunciation. In this way Slovene has probably remained faithful to one of the original functions of the Common Slavic pv. present.

I therefore venture to suggest that the feature under discussion is not in any way due to (Austrian) German influence, corrupting or otherwise, since that language has no verbal aspect, but that it represents an archaism that has best been preserved in Slovene with its central, yet at the same time somewhat sequestered position in the Slavic world. What is unique in its tense system, with the aforementioned effect in aspectual distribution, is the functional load of the pv. present, which in its future meaning is shared by the reflex of bqdq plus l-participle.

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Footnotes

¹A. Bajec, R. Kolarič, M. Rupel, Slovenska slovnica (Ljubljana: 1971), 236.

²Ibid., 237.

³Stanislav Škrabec, "Zum Gebrauche der Verba perfectiva und imperfectiva im Slovenischen," Archiv für slavische Philologie 25 (1903), 554-64.

⁴J. Mencej, "Zur Präsensfrage perfectiver Verba im Slovenischen," Archiv für slavische Philologie 28 (1906), 40-51.

⁵Franz Miklosich, Vergleichende Grammatik der slavischen Sprachen IV: Syntax (Heidelberg: 1926), 777.

⁶Which one finds in so many Russian grammars as well as many works by Russian grammarians, with exceptions, of course. But, for example, the editor of the posthumous edition of Šaxmatov's Sintaksis russkogo jazyka thought it necessary to warn readers in her footnote that when he speaks of pv. present, Šaxmatov means "of course" the simple future: A. A. Šaxmatov, Sintaksis russkogo jazyka (ed. E. S. Istrina) (Leningrad: 1941), 580.

⁷Herbert Galton, The Main Functions of the Slavic Verbal Aspect (Skopje: 1976), passim.

⁸Antoine Meillet, Études sur l'étymologie et le vocabulaire du vieux slave (Paris: 1902-1905), 99.

⁹Slovenska slovnica, op. cit., 241.