

IMPERFECTIVE AND PERFECTIVE PAST TENSE IN SLOVENE: A DEFINITELY NON-BINARY APPROACH

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I have used this sub-title so as to make my stand explicit from the very beginning, because it has happened to me that people are so little used to a non-binary approach that I have also been classified as a binarist, perhaps only with the signs inverted. I have before had the pleasure of addressing the Society for Slovene Studies on a related subject, aspectual usage in the present tense. Now there the disclaimer of a binary approach was perhaps less called for, because it might even have emerged from the title. The title referred to a present tense and not to a non-past, which is the term, and the conceptual framework, with which the binary school operates.

Obviously, I am not denying that the aspect invests the form of a binary morphological opposition at all, only the tenet that this constitutes the sort of privative opposition in which a marked term exhibits a certain semantic feature, which its unmarked counterpart leaves undetermined, even though possibly a statistically dominant number of instances may actually mean the opposite feature. Instead, I do accept from the late regretted Roman Jakobson's scheme the idea of an invariant meaning, and I claim that this invariant meaning is always there and never left undetermined. The relationship between the two terms of the aspectual opposition is to my mind not privative, but, in logical terms, contradictory, which is to say that it is not a matter of A versus a strange kind of Non-A which, since the feature is left indeterminate, can also do service for A, like say an unmarked *vrábec* for the marked feminine *vrabúlja* in all cases where we are not concerned with or frankly ignorant of the bird's sex. The aspectual opposition offers no kind of parallel to this at all.

Am I therefore denying that one aspectual form of the verb may under certain circumstances occur in exactly the same context as the other? Not really, but I do not see such cases as Non-A functioning for A (which would be strange in logic), but rather a matter of the same state of affairs being viewed differently, precisely from a different aspect. Circumstances do, of course, probably in a majority of cases impose the selection of one aspect as against the other, but not in all, for the simple reason that I may see the very same event now as part of a succession of events, and now in isolation from it, and in this I see the essence or, if you like, the invariant meaning of the perfective (pv.) as against the imperfective (ipv.) aspect. This is why I declare the relationship between them as being contradictory, i.e. exclusive of each other. Nevertheless a Slovene may perhaps, even more than any other Slav, especially a northern one, view the same event perfectly and on another occasion imperfectly, and this certainly does not mean that one aspect functions for the other because it does not matter, as with the *vrabec* against the *vrabulja*. On the contrary, it does matter, it always matters which aspect is used, because at least it conveys a different feel of possibly the same situation. Even when I say *Vrabec vzgaja mladiče v gnezdu* or *Vrabci vzgajajo mladiče v gnezdih*, while I basically refer to the same state of affairs, it is not really an unmarked singular (about which opinions will in any case be divided) "doing service for" a marked plural, but the same event viewed differently—one sparrow as the typical representative of the whole species, or else the totality of sparrows, because they all do it. Maybe I really have in mind in the one case the type, to which, after all, the word refers, and in the other the whole lot of them. From such

a point of view, the relationship between singular and plural is not privative either, but rather contrary; I hesitate to designate it as contradictory, because while there are in Slavic only two aspects which between them map out all possible experience in time, it is precisely Slovene which shows us that I do not by any means have to refer to objects only either in the singular or in the plural, since it has kept the dual, and the contrary relationship say between "black" and "white" precisely does leave other possibilities open.

I leave it to proponents of the binary school to propose the mark, such as plurality or perhaps "articulation" for the plural, leaving the singular unmarked, or rather singularity for the singular, leaving the plural unmarked, and thus also explaining why certain *pluralia tantum* function for the singular, such as Slovene *vrata* which is plural for purely historical reasons, while its referent consists of one piece only now. *Duri so se odprle* involves but one surface at present.

Which is the mark of the allegedly positive term of the opposition, that is, the pv. aspect? Since "completed action" is so obviously silly, it has been replaced by the more respectable complexity, the complexive view of an event in its entirety with its limits, about which the imperfective aspect allegedly says nothing. In order to convey this nothingness, the Slovene language, along with its sister idioms, goes to a good deal of morphological trouble, like deriving *zanašati* from *zanesti*, *prodajati* from *prodati*, *prepričevati* from *prepričati*, *oklepiti* from *okleniti* with a resurrection of the *p* that had already gone into demise, and so on. Really a lot of trouble just in order to leave the feature suspended in thin air. One can, of course, also take the view that semantic and morphological marking work at cross-purposes, but things do not seem to work this way in Slavic. The past tense, supposed to be the marked one, shows it clearly by the *l*-form, and the nominative or semantically least marked case also shows a minimum of morphological marking.

In my theory, which I am not going to expound here in detail, the pv. aspect simply allots to an event its place in the temporal sequence, which means a point on the time axis between a preceding and an ensuing point; this is how the impression of complexity and limitation arises. Time is the dimension along which we order our experiences, and consists precisely of such a succession of points. This ever changing succession of point after point stands out most clearly against its dialectic counterpart, unchanging states which persevere while other events succeed each other. Since there is no limit prescribed in nature as to where one point ends and the next one begins, I can compress an event of longer duration, because duration is not really the criterion, into one such point on the time axis, which takes its place between a foregoing and an ensuing event, that is, points, as it were, filled with different contents. This I do in the pv. aspect, but I may, if the circumstances warrant it and I so wish, also dwell on the very same event in isolation from its environment on the time axis, disregard the succession, and then I will call in the ipv. aspect.

But this is not an unmarked aspect making do for the marked aspect, only a different way of viewing possibly even the same event; in fact, if any of the two were marked in preference to the other, it would be the ipv. one, in accordance with its morphological structure and this could be attributed to the fact that a sequence of events is closer to the nature of time with its single dimension along which everything moves, than an unchanging state, though this is its required foil or background. The morphological marking would then render the suspension of the succession.

The basic function of the pv. aspect in the past tense is, then, to render an event in its sequence, which is an expression I prefer to "sequence of events", especially as I

have been misunderstood on this score. Even a single event is quite enough to mark a sequence and necessitates the pv. aspect, as long as it is viewed as setting in at a particular point on the time axis and being over at the next point; by its very occurrence, the point which this event occupies, implies its setting between two points where it was not yet and where it was over as such, though possibly leaving a result. A simple example would be, from Ivan Cankar's "Hlapec Jernej i ngegova pravica": *Tako je rekel župan in je vstal*. Here we clearly have a succession of point-like events—the village headman had his say, which at least in this sentence does not get expanded, then he arose and went off.

However, it must be pointed out that the two events need not be in succession to each other, it is quite enough for each event to occupy its place in its own line of succession. If we read in the same source *In Bog ga je potolažil in bridkost je izginila in mirno je bilo njegovo srce*, it is not necessary to assume that the first God soothed Jernej, and then the bitterness vanished from his heart, because the two events were really co-extensive. The soothing effect shows itself precisely by the vanishing of the bitterness, which need not have set in after the comforting. Really they were simultaneous, but the pv. aspect obviously cannot express simultaneity as such, by its grammatical means. Rather, it places each view of the event within its own sequence, and these may find their place on the same locus on the time axis: First, Jernej was deeply troubled, but then his faith in God calmed him, which manifested itself as the disappearance of his bitterness.

It must, therefore, not be assumed that as succession of pv. past tense forms in a Slovene sentence necessarily renders a corresponding sequence of events, though this is likely, just as a sequence of events is very likely to call forth a succession of pv. forms. In another example, from the same author's "Krpanova kobila", the simultaneity is stressed lexically, since the pv. aspect cannot bear it out: *Tukaj ni poti! je pomislila Mařenka in v tistem hipu jo je spreletel mraz; groza ji je pogledala v lice in ni več odvrnila od nje oči do poslednje ure*. The last verbal form here is also interesting; whereas the three preceding ones refer basically to the same experience in its various faces, *odvrnila*, which is negated, condenses the failure of an event to materialize even once over a certain stretch of time, into a single point on the time axis, which in its compression makes it the more effective. It also shows that negation as such has no effect on the choice of the aspect, just as the indicative is used to convey the fact that a thing does NOT exist.

As against this, the event rendered in the ipv. aspect cannot be limited to a point, but another point coming along the succession from the outside, as it were, may come to limit its duration during which it has remained unchanged: *Matilda je sedla poleg njega in mu je gledala v obraz s strmečimi očmi. Nato je vstala, privila je svetilko ter vzdignila senčnik*. This ipv. form *gledala* is not unmarked, it stops the flow of events for a while, during which, however briefly, it remained stationary.

Obviously, I have not claimed that the ipv. meaning must be borne out by a visible imperfectivizing derivation, it all depends on what aspect the Slavic verbs acquired in their evolution out of the Indo-European material and while undergoing specific Slavic word-forming processes. The pv. counterpart, *pogledal*, on the next page in Cankar's "Poslednji dnevi Štefana Poljanca", limits the action to a point in time which has been reached and surpassed without the need to limit it through an explicit next point. Such a point, incidentally, also constitutes the minimum or limit in the mathematical sense which must separate the event in both the pv. and the ipv. aspect from the actual present in which by universal convention I speak about it. But this is part of the

definition of the past tense, which specifies location on the time axis and not the nature of the time axis itself, which consists of point after point after point.

Even when the basic reference is to the present, as in the following example illustrating the resultative shade of meaning, also from Cankar's "Kobila": *Mir se je naselil v mojo dušo in zredil sem se*, the present state is only the point following upon the changes in the past, which in their turn need not at all have followed one upon the other. Certain factors favor the resultative meaning, such as very often intransitivity of the verb and a minimum context, into which I cannot enter here.

On the other hand, the "unchanging state" couched in the ipv. past must not be understood too literally: *Ko je hitel po temni ulici v noč, se je bil s pestjo po čelu* surely makes allowance for plenty of actual change in position of body and fist, but these are not expressed; that is why I speak of a relatively unchanging state. Neither language itself nor its texts make—wisely!—the slightest attempt to render every irrelevant detail, only bad authors do; they do not know what to leave out. "Unchanging", at least for linguistic purposes, does not mean occupying the same locus in space in an identical posture for any length of time, this is only the limiting value. It is, therefore, perfectly possible to couch two steadily changing states, whose very change, interrelated, remains identical, as can perhaps best be expressed in a steadily rising curve $Y = F(X)$, in two ipv. past tense forms: *Kolikor dalje sem gledal v mrak, toliko bolj se je razmikal pred mojimi očmi* (from Cankar's "Podobe iz sanj"). The one change is a function of the other, and is a change really only in degree or intensity; the state of looking into the darkness and its dispersal remain as such unchanged.

The most usual setting for the co-occurrence of the two aspects is supplied by the situation described by a term that ultimately, I believe, goes back to the French slavist André Mazon, as "background with emergence", e.g. in Cankar's story: *In ko je stal in gledal, so se odprle duri nastežaj*. I think it is very clear that this is not unmarked vs. marked, but a dwelling on a state of affairs until an event impinges upon it at a certain point in time which brings about a change somewhere; the state may thereafter continue or not, as the case may be.

It is noteworthy that the very same succession of two verbal forms need not imply the same situation, because the invariant function of the two aspects covers more than one shade. Really, the syntactic use of the aspect can always be derived from its morphological one. Thus, in the same source, we have *Jernej je strmel, nič ni odgovoril*, where the second form is negated, i.e. during the whole duration (which is not measured!) of Jernej's rigid gaze a reply of his failed to materialize even once. The latter instance exemplifies what I call the summary usage of the pv. aspect, one of the facets of its invariant meaning. We find it also exemplified, without an ipv. background, in Cankar's *Peter nikoli ni zamahnil... ker se kaj takega še nikoli ne primerilo* (from "Poslednji dnevi"). (The last form corresponds to a pluperfect in English).

In fact, the pv. past tense form may not refer to a single event at all, but to a series of recurring ones, although repetition is otherwise very properly considered the domain of the ipv. aspect. Thus, also from Cankar's "Podobe iz sanj": *Časih se je kateri (tovariš) vzdignil, ozrl se ...* Why is the pv. form used here? It can be employed because in some Slavic languages, notably Czecho-Slovak, Slovene, and Serbo-Croatian, the iterativity can be adequately handled lexically, here by the introductory *časih* which leaves no doubt as to the repetition, and, once this is settled, the author can proceed to render more graphically the emergence of each event in the series at its point in time, the rising of some of the comrades and their subsequent glance, by fixing upon a typical instance. The reason why the pv. aspect is more effective is that in the ipv. nothing

really changes, of which you can satisfy yourselves by substituting the appropriate verbal forms. This is, of course, what qualifies the *ipv.* aspect, in a very positive sense, to render repetition, because the repeated event is by definition one which recurs unchanged as far as linguistic expression is concerned. I suppose it would have been perfectly possible for Cankar to say *Nekoč so se mu usipale po licih solze*, but he rightly felt that *usule* made the passage much more dramatic. Also in the negation, the *pv.* form is more dramatic: *Jernej pa se ni ozrl. V tla je gledal ...*

Verba dicendi, as the ancients already knew, are in a somewhat separate little group or subset of their own. Of course, they occur in the past tense in the *pv.* aspect to convey, as the need may arise, the succession of asking and answering or making a statement. We had one before (*rekel*); it is employed especially to refer briefly to an utterance, as in "*Toman je zapisan v zgodovini*", *je omenil Poljanec* (a calque from German *meinte*). But very often—and this explains why in the classical languages the imperfect tense, the nearest they had to an *ipv.* aspect in the past, is so often employed—we may want to dwell rather on WHAT was said than on the place of the utterance in its temporal sequence. Any dwelling on the contents of an event, however, has the effect of removing it from the succession, and entails the use of the *ipv.* aspect, not as being unmarked, but on the contrary as being positively qualified to isolate the utterance and concentrate attention on it: "*Misliš torej, da jo (= univerzo) kmalu dobimo?*" *je vprašal Poljanec*. Or "*Da čemu?*" *je odgovarjal sam, ko sem molčal plah*, from "*Krpanova kobila*". Dwelling on an event, for emphasis, may obviously also occur with other verbs, thus Jernej says: *Jaz pa sem širil svet (= zemljišče), in sem ga množil, s plugom in brano*—although the action was surely completed! The emphasis may be on the circumstances of an action, including the actor: *Kdo je dedoval, ti ali jaz?*, for another "completed action".

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the peculiar status of the verb *iti* in Slovene, with regard to which it links up, as in some other respects, with the position in Czecho-Slovak, indicating in this way, I believe, former geographic contact in what became Austria after the Bavarians had driven a wedge in their eastward thrust between Northern and Southern Slavs. Namely there is in Czech an apparently aberrant usage of the *ipv.* past of this verb, and other verbs of motion, denoting an event in a succession of movements, as e.g. in the following sentence from Jaroslav Durych's Wallenstein trilogy "*Bloudění*": *Císařovna sklopila oči, odvrátila je a šla. Dveře se zavřely za její vlečkou*. Following the investigations of the bilingual Czech-Bulgarian linguist Svetomir Ivančev, I have accepted his term "contextually conditioned", but partly supplied my own explanation to the effect that when the walking movement is part of a continuing co-ordinated series of movements, the *ipv.* aspect is resorted to, whereas the *pv.* past clearly articulates the sequence into its successive stages. To this must be added certain other considerations like the need to express with an impoverished verbal system that which used to be handled by an *ipv.* aorist (O.C.S. and O.R. *ide*), denoting a limited movement between two terminal points. Furthermore, the difficulty of perfectivizing the verb *iti* without altering its meaning also plays its part. Whereas the ingressivity (beginning a movement) is expressed by the prefix *po-* in the *pv.* present, employed inter alia with a future meaning, thus Sln. *pojdem* = Russ. *pojdu*, this nuance is not expressed in Sln. in the past tense and left entirely for the context to convey. Thus we find numerous examples in "*Jernej*", among them *In je odprl duri in je šel na hlev; tam je legel*. The movement between the opening of the door and lying down in the stable, which in Common Slavic probably was couched in an *ipv.* aorist, here comes out as an *ipv.* past tense, which has its limiting points imposed

from the outside, the preceding and the following position. But these do not always have to be supplied, especially the terminal point, which can be left in suspense: *Gospod je šel* ('has gone out') *in hlapec misli, da je prišla njegova ura* ("Poljanec"). *Predno je šel, se je ozrl in se je odkril in prekrižal* ("Jernej"). Sometimes *šel* is, however, very clearly ipv.: *Šel je po cesti in gledali so za njim* (ibid.). Other verbs of movement may follow the same pattern: *Sestra je vstala in je nesla v kuhinjo Štefanov krožnik in kozarec* ("Poljanec").

But the main problem, as I see it, is with *iti*, which is a peculiar verb in more ways than one, and nowhere more so than in Slovene. Its present tense form is supplied by *grem*, in addition to which there is, of course, also *hoditi* for an indeterminate movement: *hodim sem in tja*. This *gre* can also have future meaning, as in *Greš na Dunaj?* 'Will you be going to Vienna?' At least this is so in actual usage, whereas some grammarians would only like to admit *pojdeš* here. The same grammarians, perhaps most of them, do not admit a future *bom šel*, which does occur regionally, without or with the prefix *po-*; *bom hodil*, however, seems to be universally accepted. Here at least we have an aspectual division, because *pojdem* is pv. and *bom hodil* ipv.

But *šel* is not only bi-aspectual, that is to say, pv. in some contexts and ipv. in others, say like Russ. *ženit'sja*, but also ambiguous in meaning, covering as it does the sphere of Eng. 'he went away' as well as 'he arrived'. Not that prefixed forms with such a meaning cannot be formed, but they invest specifically the resultative nuance to which I referred before, and which apparently is especially important with derivatives of this verb, so that in an English rendering we shall resort to the perfect tense, thus *ona je prišla* 'she has arrived', *odšla* 'gone away'. I believe it can be said that the need for forms with a resultative shade of meaning, especially strong with this verbal group, has interfered with the free usage of the prefixed forms. In the examples which I gave above, there was mostly no resultative meaning intended, so that *šel sem* has to cover a variety of meanings always explicated by the context.*

I would like to add that in all this, Austrian German influence counts in my opinion for nothing—we are dealing with a peculiar situation that arose when the simple past tenses disappeared, notably the ipv. aorist. The Slovene future form consisting of *bom* + participle in *l* is genuinely Slavic, although it used to denote a future perfect (*bqdq dělalъ* = 'I shall have been doing'); in this, Slovene has in fact proved more resistant than the North Slavic idioms with their *bqdq* + infinitive loan from German which, interestingly enough, is again on the decline in Polish now. For the Slovene form, like the other Slavic compound tenses involving an *-l*, made sense literally in their juxtaposition—as long as the form was a future perfect. The curtailment of the conjugational wealth in most Slavic languages is a curious phenomenon that defies explanation along the cheap ideology-inspired lines of a progress in thinking achieved by greater simplicity. I hope to have demonstrated to you, among other things, that there are still some odd bits and pieces dangling about.

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