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THE BULGARIAN AORIST AND IMPERFECT

There are two main theories of the nature of the aorist/imperfect opposition in Bulgarian and in some other Slavic languages, such as Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian (for the latter, cf. Schooneveld 1959). According to the temporal theory, which prevails in the native Bulgarian grammatical tradition, it is an opposition of tenses. The imperfect is said to express action that is simultaneous with a past reference point (Bulg. orientacionen moment). The aorist is more difficult to define within this framework: if its reference point is not in the past, it must be simultaneous with the point of speech, as Stankov (1969) and Pašov (1976) actually propose. But in Reichenbach's (1947/1966) temporal logic, the simultaneity of R (point of reference) and S (point of speech) is only considered to be characteristic of the perfect tense, which describes the present state of affairs through past events (cf. Lindstedt 1983).

The aspectual theory compares the distinction between the aorist and the imperfect to the opposition between the perfective and imperfective aspect (Maslov 1959; Ivančev 1971, 1976; for other references, see Hult 1981: 148, footnote 4). I will now argue that the aorist and imperfect are opposed aspectually but, for this very reason, that there is a difference of temporal reference between them. (I will continue to refer to the aorist and imperfect as "tenses", because they are temporally opposed to the present and to the perfect, for instance. It is only the opposition between them that I consider prima-
rily aspectual.)

It is a commonplace to characterize the Indo-European imperfect as the "present in the past" (in Bulgarian, cf. Stankov 1966, 1976). This is not an inappropriate designation because both in the present and the imperfect tense, the point of reference \( R \) can be thought to be simultaneous with the point of the event \( E \). Moreover, the syntactic use of the Bulgarian imperfect closely parallels that of the present tense. But "present in the past" is in fact an aspectual characterization. In all languages the present tense cannot normally be used to denote a bounded situation, i.e., an event that contains its end-point; the present time reference is inherently non-bounded and therefore incompatible with the perfective aspect. In various Slavic languages -- also in Bulgarian -- we do find perfective present forms of verbs, to be sure, but they express habituality, potentiality, and similar non-bounded states, and do not refer to single bounded events. The semantics of the present tense contains an aspectual element; hence, the imperfect is opposed to the aorist aspectually just because it is a "present in the past".

Both in the present and the imperfect the speaker's vantage point is in the middle of the action, process, or state that is referred to. In Reichenbach's temporal logic this is indicated by making \( R \) and \( E \) coincide, though it would be more exact to conceive of \( E \) as an interval that includes \( R \). In the present tense both the beginning and the end of the situation are outside the speaker's view, but the same holds true for the imperfect where the point of view has been shifted to the past. **Tja pee** 'she is singing; she sings' asserts something about the present moment and does not tell anything about the beginning and end of the on-going process (or, in the habitual reading 'she sings', of the habit). Neither does the imperfect **tja peeše** 'she was singing; she used to sing' tell us when the singing had begun or when it was going to end. I maintain that this common time reference property of the present and the imperfect is a necessary consequence of their aspectual property, viz. non-boundedness, which they share with the imper-
fective aspect. If we are referring to a bounded situation, i.e. an event conceived of as a whole, we cannot look at it "from within" in this way.

Aorist forms refer to bounded events. They are said to "advance the plot" or "advance the main line of the narrative", which they certainly do, but this fact should be related to the temporal and aspectual properties of the aorist. Consider the following example:

(1) -- Tuk li e? -- šepneškom popita debelijat.

Karaibraxim ne se obärna da mu otgovori. Togava az otkäsnaq pogled ot planinata pred mene i vîdîax liceto mu. Pristignali bjaxme.

Daleč dolu, v dânoto na dolinata, tečeše reka... Tri sela se viždaxa kraj rekata...

"Is it here?" asked the fat one in a whisper. Karaibraxim did not turn to answer him. I took my eyes off the opposite mountains and saw his face: we had arrived. Far below, down in the valley, there was a river flowing... Three villages could be seen by the river...

(Anton Dončev)

The aorists (bold-faced) refer to successive events (one of which is a "negative event", ne se obärna). The temporal intervals between them are not overtly indicated but we can infer their approximate length from our knowledge of the world. This is what Erik Andersson (1977: 251ff.) has called the "natural progression of time" (in Swedish, "den naturliga tidsprogressionen"). Aorists of this kind are not related to any independent point of reference; they themselves move the R of the narrative forward, with small jumps. In example (1), the pluperfect pristignali bjaxme and the imperfects tečeše and se viždaxa are related to the R fixed by the latest aorist. The pluperfect refers to a situation anterior to that R, the imperfects to situations that are simultaneous with it.

I propose the following schemes for describing time reference in the imperfect, aorist, and perfect:
A more extensive description of the Bulgarian tenses along these lines can be found in Lindstedt (forthcoming).

We must now face the major counterargument of all aspectual theories of the aorist and imperfect: why are there imperfective aorists and perfective imperfects? Notice that everything said so far about the narrative functions of the aorist and imperfect largely applies also to the perfective and imperfective preterites in those Slavic languages in which the aorist/imperfect opposition has been lost, except that in those languages the preterite often has to assume perfect-like and pluperfect-like functions as well (Maslov 1980). But the existence of imperfective aorists and perfective imperfects seems to indicate that the opposition between the two simple past tenses in Bulgarian pertains to something outside aspectuality, after all.

I do not accept this counterargument, however. To begin with the simplest case, here is a perfective imperfect in a subordinate clause:

(2) ...oště v párvata minuta, sled kato otkriexa ogăn po nabližavaštite nemci, vårxu mošilata šteše da se izsipe adski zalp ot mini.

'At the first moment after they had opened fire at the approaching Germans, an infernal volley of shells would fall on the hill.'

(Dimităr Dimov)

The perfective imperfect otkriexa is here used as a past fu-
true: in certain subordinate clauses (mainly in those of time and condition), the imperfect replaces the past future (cf. šteše da se izsipe in the main clause), just as the present tense replaces the ordinary future. There is of course nothing strange with a perfective past future. Our analysis of the present tense requires that the perfective imperfect and the perfective present be explained in a parallel fashion.

Next, consider Stankov's (1980: 97) example of an imperfective aorist:

(3) Kato malăk vednăz padax ot tova dărvo.
    'As a child, I once fell from that tree.'

The sentence clearly denotes a bounded event, but the verb is nevertheless imperfective. The imperfective aspect is here used in what is called in Russian obobščeno-faktičeskoe (obobščefaktičeskoe) značenie or, in Forsyth (1970), "simple denotation". Whatever explanation we give for this use of the imperfective, it seems to be clear that it is an idiosyncrasy of Slavic which is not typical of imperfective-like grammemes in other languages (cf. Maslov 1973). (It is not equally represented in all the Slavic languages, either.) The Bulgarian imperfect does not share this function of the imperfective, being a more "prototypical" non-bounded aspect grammeme.

The perfective imperfect is also used in certain subordinate clauses to express habitual events (again, just as the perfective present is), and the imperfective aorist is used to express inherently non-bounded situations that are bounded from outside by a temporal limit. An example of both from Anton Dončev's Vreme razdelno:

(4) ... vseki păt, kogato izlezexme na poljana, viždaxme napred i vdjasno pločite ot pokrivite na părvoto selo i vseki păt te idexa po-blizko.
    '... and every time when we came out (of the forest) on a meadow, we saw slates of the roofs of the first village, and every time they drew nearer.'
(5) A kolko pja djado Galuško i koe vreme beše, nikoj ne znaješe. Vse edno če mina godina.
'And how long Old Galuško sang and what time it was, nobody knew. A year seemed to pass.'

These uses I have explained elsewhere (Lindstedt 1984; Lindstedt, forthcoming) as instances of "nested aspects", or as- pectual nesting, a universal phenomenon that allows there to be several nested layers in the aspectual structure of a sentence (cf. also Timberlake 1982: 309–310; Comrie 1976: 32). The opposition of the aorist and imperfect represents an outer, that of the perfective and imperfective an inner layer. In the imperfective aorist, the aorist imposes boundedness upon non-boundedness; in the perfective imperfect, an open series of bounded events is constructed. Because the distinctions aorist / imperfect and perfective / imperfective pertain to different layers, they can both be considered to be aspectual without there being any contradiction in a perfective imperfect or an imperfective aorist.

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