

Tense and aspect (in)compatibility in Serbian matrix and subordinate clauses[☆]



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Abstract

This paper proposes a compositional temporal analysis of restrictions on perfective aspect in morphological present tense contexts in matrix and (certain) embedded clauses in Serbian. The main idea is that the availability of perfective aspect depends on the duration of the time interval with respect to which the event is ordered. This time interval is further determined by the interplay of temporal and aspectual components higher in the structure. Moreover, it is shown that the observed restrictions on perfective aspect in Serbian are, to a large extent, parallel to restrictions on non-progressive, episodic, non-stative, non-generic predicates in English. Following the assumption that these predicates contain a perfective component (Kamp and Reyle, 1993; Smith, 1991; Cowper, 1998; Wurmbrand, 2014, *inter alia*), the proposed analysis allows for the unification of Aspect in Serbian and the abovementioned predicates in English. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In matrix clauses in Serbian, verbs that occur with morphological present tense and which denote events that temporally overlap with the Utterance Time (henceforth the UT), are compatible with imperfective aspect, as illustrated in (1a), but not with perfective aspect, as in (1b).^{1,2}

- (1) a. *Jovan prevodi pesmu.*
Jovan translate-**impfv**.3.sg.pres. poem
'Jovan is translating a poem.'
- b. **Jovan prevede pesmu.*
Jovan translate-**pfv**.3.sg.pres. poem

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¹ This restriction holds for non-stative, non-generic, episodic predicates. The distribution of perfective under other interpretations is not discussed in the paper.

² The intended interpretation of perfective in (1b) is the one where the point of finishing the translation overlaps with the UT. The only scenario under which (1b) is grammatical is the one which involves habitual/generic interpretation. Crucially, such interpretation is felicitous only in the presence of an overt QP, e.g. *svake nedelje* 'every week' (or if QP is present in the previous context). This is compatible with the analysis proposed in the paper and outlined in Section 3.

Intended interpretation: ‘Jovan has translated a poem (just now).’

Paunović (2001) has briefly discussed the restriction in (1), arguing that perfective in Serbian, in addition to containing an aspectual component, also introduces a temporal notion of precedence (see e.g., Lin, 2006 for similar ideas for Chinese). This notion of precedence forces a perfective event to precede the reference time interval (henceforth the RTI), i.e. the time interval for which a statement is restricted (see Reichenbach, 1947, *inter alia*).³ Since the RTI is the UT in the case of (1), and given the notion of precedence, the event needs to be crucially completed prior to the UT.

While Paunović can account for (1), this account (as is) faces problems with the lack of restriction on the perfective with forms that receive past interpretations, as in (2) and (4a), and future interpretations, as in (3) and (4b). Even if the events denoted by the perfective can be argued to have been completed prior to some point in the past (or prior to the UT) (2b), or prior to some point in the future (3b), the account cannot explain the grammaticality of the perfective in (4). According to one of the salient interpretations, the completion of the event occurs exactly at the point introduced by the time adverbial at 4:30 p.m. Rather than resorting to an asymmetry between a purely aspectual nature of the imperfective and an aspectual-temporal nature of the perfective (to comply with Paunović’s notion of precedence), I will argue that the distribution of perfective follows straightforwardly from a compositional temporal analysis of the event location.^{4,5}

- (2) a. *Jovan je prevodio pesmu.*
Jovan is translated-**impfv.** poem
‘Jovan was translating a poem.’
- b. *Jovan je preveo pesmu.*
Jovan is translated-**pfv.** poem
‘Jovan finished the translation of a poem.’
- (3) a. *Jovan će prevoditi pesmu.*
Jovan will translate-**impfv.inf.** poem
‘Jovan will be translating a poem.’
- b. *Jovan će prevesti pesmu.*
Jovan will translate-**pfv.inf.** poem
‘Jovan will translate a poem.’
- (4) a. *Jovan je preveo pesmu juče popodne u 4:30.*
Jovan is translated-**pfv.** poem yesterday afternoon in 4:30
Intended interpretation: ‘Jovan finished the translation of a poem at 4:30 p.m. yesterday.’
- b. *Jovan će prevesti pesmu sutra popodne u 4:30.*
Jovan will translate-**pfv.inf.** poem tomorrow afternoon in 4:30
Intended interpretation: ‘Jovan will have translated a poem at 4:30 p.m. tomorrow.’

Moreover, the observed restrictions on perfective aspect in Serbian are parallel to the distribution of non-progressive forms of predicates that receive episodic, non-stative, non-generic interpretation in English (henceforth eventive predicates, following Pesetsky, 1995; Enç, 1991; Bošković, 1996, 1997; Martin, 1996, 2001; Wurmbrand, 2014, *inter alia*). The restrictions on the distribution of eventive predicates in simple present tense have widely been discussed in Bennett and Partee (1972), Taylor (1977), Dowty (1979), Enç (1991), Smith (1991), Cowper (1998), Abusch (2004), and Wurmbrand (2014), *inter alia*. Non-progressive eventive predicates are not felicitous in matrix clauses when the event overlaps temporally with the UT, as in (5a); rather, they can only occur in the progressive form, as in (5b). Conversely,

³ Note that I resort to this term as it is a widely used one. However, assertion time from Klein (1995) and Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria’s (2004, *et seq.*) would be equally applicable.

⁴ According to some of speakers, (4a) and (4b) can also receive the inchoative interpretation, i.e. 4:30 p.m. marks the beginning of the interval within which the event of eating is contained. However, an anonymous reviewer observes that there are speaker-variations with respect to the availability of this interpretation. Moreover, for some speakers, the availability of the interpretation depends on the type of predicate. I provide a more detailed overview of the distribution in footnote 29.

⁵ An anonymous reviewer points out that if Paunović’s account is modified such that only the final endpoint of the event described by the perfective is allowed to co-occur with the relevant RTI, while the rest of the event occurs prior to it, then the problematic facts in (4) can be accounted for. While I agree that such a modification would make the data in (4) unproblematic, Paunović’s account would need to be modified even more in order to account for the inchoative interpretation of (4) accepted by some speakers with certain predicates. The inchoative interpretation allows for the RTI to overlap with the initial point of the event, so Paunović’s account would have to allow both the initial and final boundary of an event to overlap with a relevant RTI. Such a modification of her account would make it considerably different from her original proposal.

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