



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The origin of the Slavic imperfect

Kortlandt, F.H.H.

Citation

Kortlandt, F. H. H. (1986). The origin of the Slavic imperfect.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/1883>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/1883>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Origin of the Slavic Imperfect

Frederik Kortlandt (Leiden)

1. A few years ago J. Ferrell discussed the formation of the Slavic imperfect in some detail (1977). Since his treatment is in my view quite unsatisfactory, there is reason to return to the problem here.

2. The main points which require an explanation are the OCS. suffix *-ěa-*, the ORu. suffix *-ja-*, and the thematic flexion of the imperfect tense.¹ Like many of his predecessors, Ferrell derives *-ěa-* from **-ěja-*, adducing *novaago* from *novajego* as a parallel.² The comparison does not hold because it is the first vowel which determines the timbre of the second in the latter instance. If the original vocalism of the imperfect suffix had been **-ěja-*, the loss of intervocalic **j* would have yielded **-ěě-* and the backing of the second vowel to *a* would remain unexplained. The sporadic instances of *-ěa-* for *-ěje-* in adjectival loc.sg. and present tense forms can hardly be used as evidence for a phonetic development. Ferrell's additional argument that *it is almost inconceivable that the two low vowels in hiatus would have resisted for several centuries the normal process of contraction when not separated by a prefix or word boundary* (1977: 53-54) points to the correct solution: there was a boundary which subsisted up to the Late Proto-Slavic period. As Ferrell remarks himself, the construct **-ěja-* offers considerable difficulties for East Slavic (ibid.). These difficulties disappear if we assume that there never was an intervocalic **j*. When the boundary was lost, con-

¹ I shall not discuss the Slovene material, which is inconclusive.

² Similarly Pohl (1975), who conspicuously disregards Sadnik (1960) and does not offer anything new.

tracted *-ěa-* apparently merged with the denasalized vowel *ä* from *ę* in East Slavic. Note that the formative vowel of Old Polish *wiedziech* < *veděaxv* and Lower Sorabian *plešech* < *pletěaxv* also differs from the contracted vowel in Po. *siać* and LSo. *saś* from *sějati*. In North Slavic, as opposed to South Slavic, contraction was apparently earlier when there was no intervening **j*. The development can be dated before the raising of *ě* in West Slavic and after the denasalization in East Slavic.

3. While the Slavic aorist may be thematic, sigmatic, or thematic-sigmatic, the imperfect is sigmatic-thematic, except for the verb 'to be'. This seems to exclude the possibility of a secondary origin. It must be regretted that Ferrell leaves the thematic flexion of the imperfect out of consideration. A. Vaillant was well aware of the difficulty, but did not really know what to do about it: he explicitly rejects the possibility that the Indo-European thematic imperfect had been preserved long enough to have any direct influence upon the new formation (1966: 67). Thus, neither the aorist nor the original imperfect offers a suitable basis for the derivation of the Slavic paradigm.

4. The origin of the Slavic imperfect has essentially been clarified by C. S. Stang, who was only too reluctant to draw the final conclusion from his observations (1942: 82-84). He suggested the derivation of 3rd sg. *-aše* from a perfect form **ōse*, with *š* for **s* under the influence of the aorist, and called attention to the Old Irish preterit *táich* < **tōke* of *techid* < **tek-* 'flees'. The latter formation is unexplained. It is represented in a small class of non-reduplicated suffixless preterits with a lengthened non-palatal root vowel. The category is at least Insular Celtic, cf. Middle Welsh 3rd sg. *gwa-rawt*, which relates to *gwa-redaf* 'I deliver, succour' as OIr. *fo-rdith* 'helped' to *rethim* 'I run'. I would like to advance the hypothesis that it arose under the influence of a perfect **ōse* < **e-ose* which is actually attested in the Slavic imperfect. Stang's derivation explains two features simultaneously. First, it explains the sequence *-ěa-* because *a-* did not require a prothetic glide in Proto-Slavic. Second, it explains the thematic flexion of the imperfect paradigm.

5. The existence of a PIE. perfect of the verb 'to be' is doubtful. Apart from the reconstructed paradigms of Celtic and Slavic, there is a full-fledged perfect, distinct from the imperfect, of the root **es-* in Indo-Iranian. It may be instructive to compare the Vedic forms with the endings of the Slavic imperfect and sigmatic aorist:

	pf.	ipf.	ipf.	aor.
sg. 1.	āsa	āsam	-axъ	-xъ
2.	āsitha	āsīs	-aše	-∅
3.	āsa	ās(it)	-aše	-∅
du. 1.			-axově	-xově
2.	āsáthur	āstam	-ašeta	-sta
3.	āsátur	āstām	-ašete	-ste
pl. 1.	āsimá	*āsma	-axomъ	-xomъ
2.	*āsá	*āsta	-ašete	-ste
3.	āsúr	āsan	-axq	-šq

6. The Greek forms are less conclusive: sg. 1. ἦα, 2. ἦσθα, 3. ἦε-ν point to the addition of the perfect endings to the imperfect stem. This analogical development is totally unmotivated if we start from the original imperfect, but quite natural if we start from an *o*-grade perfect, where sg. **ōs-* alternated with pl. **ēs-*. The forms can therefore be adduced as evidence for an original perfect of the verb 'to be'.

7. The identification of 3rd sg. *-aše* as an original perfect raises the question *ob das erste Glied vom Imperfekt eine Verbalform oder eine Nominalform ist. Verbalstämme auf -ē- konnten vielleicht im Ieur. als Nomina auftreten* (Stang 1942: 84). However, *da ich keinen Fall zu nennen vermag, wo der präteritale Stamm auf -ā nominal auftritt, glaube ich, daß man in beiden Fällen mit einem Verb als erstem Glied operieren muß. [...] Falls man das erste Glied auf -a für eine Aoristform hält, ist man natürlich auch geneigt, im ersten Glied auf -ě einen Aorist zu suchen* (ibid.). This is a non sequitur: the formation in *-aa-* can easily have been created on the analogy of the formation in *-ěa-*. I think that the Baltic evidence actually supports the latter hypothesis.

8. This raises a preliminary question: *sind die auf -ě und -a ausgehenden Zusammensetzungsglieder mit den balt. Präteritalformen auf *-ē und *-ā identisch* (Stang 1942: 82)? In his

study of the Slavic and Baltic verb Stang answered this question in the negative because he assumed that the Baltic formations reflect in part an earlier voice opposition: *die ē-Stämme waren ursprünglich transitiv, während die ā-Stämme zwei verschiedene Typen umfassen: 1. intransitive Bildungen, und 2. alte ā-Präterita ohne Diathesebedeutung, die dem slav. Typus žideti : žīda entsprechen* (ibid.). By the time he wrote his comparative grammar of the Baltic languages he had changed his mind: he now denied the necessity of assuming two different *ā*-suffixes and dated the rise of an imperfect **vedē-* to the Balto-Slavic period (1966: 379, 387). But what is the origin of this *ē*-preterit? The problem is that the suffix cannot be identified with the formative suffix of Lith. *sėdėti*, OCS. *sěděti*, Latin *sedēre* for three reasons. First, the latter formation designates a situation that is the result of an earlier process, which is denoted by the root **sed-*. It thus resembles the perfect. The Balto-Slavic imperfect, on the other hand, expressed a process in the course of its completion. It rather resembles the English progressive form. Second, the stem *sėdē-/sědě-* is common to all verb forms except the present tense, whereas the imperfect formation is limited to the preterit. Third, the tonal difference between the Lith. circumflex ending *-ė* and the acute formative suffix of "Zustandsverba" precludes their identification. If the ending had originally been acute, the vowel would have been shortened in accordance with Leskien's law. To my surprise, I have been unable to find the latter, decisive objection in the existing literature.

9. It follows from the foregoing that Lith. *vėdė* can be identified as a nominal formation which yielded the Slavic imperfect through composition with the original perfect of the verb 'to be'. The type can be compared with the Indic periphrastic future, e.g. sg. 1. *dātāsmi*, 2. *dātāsi*, 3. *dātā* of *dā-* 'give'. Deverbal nouns in *-ē-* are found in Latin: *caedēs*, *sēdēs*, *clādēs*, *vātēs*, *compāgēs*, *ambāgēs*, *prōlēs*, *subōlēs*, *struēs*, *luēs* (cf. Pedersen 1926: 57-58). The original distinction between nomina agentis with a sigmatic nominative and nomina actionis with an asigmatic nominative was lost, Latin generalizing the sigmatic ending (*sēdēs* like *vātēs*) and Baltic the asigmatic

form.³ The coexistence of sigmatic and asigmatic nominatives has been preserved in Sanskrit compounds of root nouns, e.g. *śraddhā* 'trust', *śraddhās* 'trustful'. Similarly, the difference between Old English *wōp* 'song' and *wōd* 'mad', which corresponds with the difference between Welsh *gwawd* 'song' and Irish *fáith* 'poet' (Latin *vātēs*), points to the coexistence of a proterodynamic and a hystero-dynamic flexion of the same word.

10. The circumflex tone of the Lith. preterit ending *-o* must have been taken from the correlating ending *-é*. The original acute is preserved in Serbo-Croat, e.g. *napísa*, *napíta* (cf. Stang 1957: 131). The long vowel of *ðkovā*, where the stress betrays that it belongs to the type with mobile accentuation, is undoubtedly of secondary origin. The only athematic imperfect has acute tone in SCr. *bjěh* 'I was'. The absence of the ending *-awv* in this word can be explained from the meaning of the verb. The acute tone shows that the formation has a purely verbal origin and suggests a comparison with the "Zustands-verba" in *-ěti*. The rise of the stem *bě-* can be dated to the Balto-Slavic period in view of the Old Prussian cognate *bēi* '(he) was', which represents an extension of the same stem, and the Lith. prefix *be-*, e.g. *bevālgant* 'while eating', *betrūkō* 'was lacking only'. The compound form of the latter example is strongly reminiscent of the Slavic imperfect.

³ Conversely, Latin generalized the asigmatic form in the type *agricola*, *indigena*, with the possible exception of *paricidas*, *hosticapas*.

R E F E R E N C E S

- FERRELL, J. 1977: The history of the Slavic imperfect tense. [in:] WdSl 19-20, p.37-63.
- PEDERSEN, H. 1926: La cinquième déclinaison latine. København.
- POHL, H. D. 1975: Das slavische Imperfekt auf *-ěax-* und *-aax-*. [in:] ZslPh 38, p.349-360.
- SADNIK, L. 1960: Das slavische Imperfekt. [in:] WdSl 5, p.19-30.
- STANG, C. S. 1942: Das slavische und baltische Verbum. Oslo.
- STANG, C. S. 1957: Slavonic accentuation. Oslo.
- STANG, C. S. 1966: Vergleichende Grammatik der baltischen Sprachen. Oslo.
- VAILLANT, A. 1966: Grammaire comparée des langues slaves. III: Le verbe. Paris.