The History of the Accent in the Imperfect in South Slavic

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Most treatments of Slavic accent, such as Stang (1957), Dybo (1981), Stankiewicz (1993), say nothing about the accent of the imperfect. Vaillant (1966: 527-8) notes that in Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian, which are the only languages that preserve relevant data on the accent of the imperfect, the accent is the same as that of the present. He argues that this agreement with the present must be an innovation, since the imperfect not based on the present stem. It is based on a special imperfect stem with *-ē-, or on the infinitive stem. He cites *skončaváxu* from a Russian Church Slavic accented text, which disagrees with SC *skònčāvāh* < *skončâvāh.* What I would like to demonstrate in this paper is that there is a reasonable Proto-Slavic source for the accent in South Slavic.

Vaillant is certainly correct in stating that the imperfect was not in general based on the present stem. The use of the present stem to form the imperfect in Bulgarian and Macedonian, and to a lesser extent in Serbo-Croatian, is an innovation. Vaillant (1966: 63-68) agrees with Stang's (1942: 81-85) claim that the Slavic imperfect was formed periphrastically, by adding *ā̄še* to a stem in -ē- or -ā-. Stang bases this on the fact that in the earliest texts, which do not in general show loss of *j* between vowels, there is no *j* separating the *ax*- from the preceding vowel. This VV hiatus may well indicate an old word boundary. If the whole form were built on the third person singular, then the particle *ā̄še* could have been added to a third person form of the verb, with loss of final *t.* Stang suggests that *ā̄še* may be a form of the perfect of the verb 'be'. Vaillant relates it to constructions like *xodil byvalo* in Russian. The postposed verb form would have perhaps been *āse,* the third singular of the perfect, from *ōse* < *eose.* Once the verb was reinterpreted as a suffix, the ending -*e* could have served as the analogical basis for the formation of a thematic paradigm. The change of *s* to *x* does not need a special

analogical change. The when *x* replaced *s* after *ā* in the aorist **čītās-,* it could have replaced the *s* in the imperfect as well.

Stang and Vaillant share the view that the stems in *-ā-* or *-ē-* to which *-āx-* is added may be related to Baltic preterits in **-ā-* and **-ē-.* There are problems with this hypothesis of which they are well aware. Classes for which this hypothesis works are: short-vowel stems of the archaic unsuffixed verbs such as Slavic *nesti,* imp. *nesě-aše;* Lith. *nešti,* past. *nêšė,* and Slavic *-ovati, -ujǫ,* imp. *ova-aše;* Lith. *-auti, -auja, -avo).* Iterative causatives such as Slavic *prositi,* imp. *proša-aše* (? **prosjē-āše);* Lith *prašyti,* past *prašė* (**prašjē)* may correspond to each other, but Slavic merges **ē* and **ā* after *j,* and Baltic loses *j* before front vowels. A major class which disagrees is the class of Slavic *pĭsati, pišǫ,* imp. *pĭsa-aše;* Lith. *piešti, piešia, piešė.* Here only the present stems agree. East Baltic generalized a pattern of *-ē-* preterits when there is a present in -Cj-e/o-. This has the effect of generalizing palatalization of the stem-final consonant. The Old Prussian past passive participle *peisāton* indicates that Baltic may once have had *-ā-* preterits in this class.

In purely Slavic terms, the stem in *-a-* to which *-aše* is added is clearly an infinitive/aorist stem, e.g. *pĭsa-aše, bĭra-aše, zŭva-aše, kupova-aše.* Even *čita-aše* must be built on the infinitive/aorist stem, rather than the present *čitaje-,* if there was never a *j* between the *a* 's. The same is true of imperfects from verbs with infinitive/aorist stems in *-ě-,* such as *vidě-aše, xotě-aše, umě-aše.*

The situation is not so clear for the imperfect stem formed with the special imperfect suffix *-ě-.* Vaillant is right in saying that *-aše* is added to a special imperfect stem with *-ě-,* but that stem is secondary. The question is what stem the *-ě-* was added to. The confusion between the past tense stems and the present stems as the base for the imperfect arose first because the suffix *-ě-* was added to stems which were either identical or very similar to the present stem. We will for now ignore the verbs in *-nǫti,*

which are a Slavic innovation and which we will treat below. Excepting this class, we find that the -*ě*- suffix occurs with unsuffixed verb stems of four types:

1) Verbs with only one stem: These include verbs like *pasti* 'fall', pres. *padetŭ,* aorist *pade,* imperfect *padĕaše.* In Slavic we could include the i-stem verbs in this class. Diphthongal stems like *pěti,* pres. *pojetŭ,* aor. *pěx-,* imperfect *pojaše,* and perhaps *načęti* 'begin', pres. *načĭnetŭ,* aor. *načęs-,* imp. *načĭnĕaše* belong here. Because of the accidents of historical phonology, the imperfect, which, like the present, has a suffix which begins with a vowel, did not condition the changes in diphthongs which occur in the infinitive and the aorist, and therefore looks much more like the present than the aorist or infinitive. Because all sequences of front vowel plus nasal merged as *ę* before a consonant, the nasal stems do not unambiguously belong here. They could have belonged to class (2) or (3).

2) Verbs with one stem except for the sigmatic aorist. In these stems there is lengthening of the root vowel in the sigmatic aorist. The asigmatic aorist, which occurs in the second and third sing. in a suppletive aorist paradigm, has the short vowel of the rest of the paradigm. An example is *nesti* 'carry', pres. *nesetŭ,* sigmatic aorist *něsŭ,* asigmatic aorist *nese,* imperfect *nesĕaše*

3) Stems with original e-grade ablaut in the sigmatic aorist, the infinitive, and the supine, zero-grade in the rest of the paradigm. Examples are *čisti (*keit-tei)* 'count', and *cvisti* 'bloom'. If the OR aorist *mĭre* is old, then verbs like **merti* 'die' belong here. Paradigms are given below:

infinitive	čisti (*keit-tei)	cvisti (*kweit-tei)	*merti (OCS mrěti)
supine	čistŭ	cvistŭ	*mertŭ
s-aorist	čisŭ	cvisŭ	*merxŭ(OCS mrěxŭ)
pres.	čĭtetŭ	cvĭtetŭ	mĭretŭ

3 sing aorist	čĭte	cvĭte	mrě (OCS)/ mĭre (OR)
imperfect	čĭtěaše	cvĭtěaše	mĭrěaše
l-participle	čĭl-	cvĭl-	mĭrl- (OR)
pap	čĭtŭš-	cvĭtŭš-	mĭrŭš-

I have included a fuller paradigm to make it more obvious that the stem with zero-grade cannot easily be called a present stem. It includes the asigmatic aorist and the past participles.

4) Stems which have the one stem for the whole paradigm except for the present and optative (imperative), which have a suffix -j-. These stems end in liquids. Examples are *brati (*bor-ti)* 'struggle', aor. *brax-*, pres. *borjetŭ*, opt. *borji (*borjoit), mlěti (melti),* 'mill', aor. *mlěx-*, pres. *meljetŭ*, opt. *melji (*meljoit).* There are few verbs of this type, and fewer attested imperfects. We can tell whether the imperfect is based on the present stem with -j-, or the aorist/infinitive stem by the indication of a palatal ŕ, ĺ and because after *j* the *ě* is replaced by *a* in eastern OCS. The imperfect *borěaše* must be from the aorist/infinitive stem, as can be seen from the absence of the *j,* which is found in the present Similarly the imperfect *žĭrěaše* must be from the infinitive *žrŭti (*žĭrti),* rather than the present *žĭrjǫ,* attested in OCS (Vaillant 1966: 300). Supraslensis, which is a younger text with many innovative forms, has *meljaaše* from *mlěti, meljetŭ,* which shows the generalization of the *j* from the present.

Class (4) is the only class which has a distinct present stem with the distribution typical of the suffixed verbs (present and optative versus the rest of the paradigm). The sparse evidence from this class indicates that in the older language the imperfect was formed from the aorist/infinitive stem, which agrees with the pattern of the suffixed stems.

In the other three classes, the imperfect has the same stem as the present, but the stem is not distinctively present. It is shared by the asigmatic aorist and the past

participles. From an Indo-European point of view, the asigmatic aorists like *pade, nese, u-mĭre* are the formal descendants of the IE imperfect, which was a past tense formed from the same stem as the present. From the Slavic point of view, however, these were aorists. The IE aorist and imperfect past tenses merged as the Slavic aorist. This merger probably preceded the formation of the Slavic imperfect, since a logical reason for the formation of a new imperfect would be the loss of imperfect function in the old one. It is probably best to treat the Slavic imperfect in these paradigms as historically formed from the stem of the asigmatic aorist. In all but class (3) this is the infinitive stem as well. Vaillant (1966: 219) argues that the e-grade in the infinitive of class (3) is an innovation[1]. Synchronically, we might say that the imperfect, the asigmatic aorist, the present and the participles were all formed from the basic stem of the verb, and that in classes (2) and (3) there were secondary stems with particular distributions.

Nevertheless, the great majority of the imperfect stems formed with -*ě*- had that suffix added to same basic stem as the present. The few stems of class (4) hardly provide overwhelming evidence to the contrary. To a speaker of Slavic, the diphthongal stems where the imperfect looks like the present stem, but not like the infinitive/aorist stem, were probably of crucial importance. To anyone not trained as a historical linguist, even *borěaše* looks more like the present *borjetŭ* than the infinitive/aorist stem *bra-.*

There is one productive class where the imperfect is indeed based on the present stem: the class with present in -*n-e-,* infinitive in -*nǫ-ti,* e.g. *dvignǫti,* pres. *dvignetŭ,* aorist *dviže,* imperfect *dvignĕaše.* This class is a Slavic innovation, not shared with Baltic. It is likely that the infinitive and imperfect were rebuilt after an -*n*- infix had been restructured as a suffix. This one productive class outweighs isolated forms like *borĕaše, žĭrĕaše.* Historically the imperfect stem in -*ē*- may once have been built on a past tense or infinitive stem, but synchronically in OCS it could be interpreted as built on the present.

It is therefore not surprising to find other forms in OCS based on present stems. The imperfects *živěaše, daděaše* are unambiguously based on present tense stems. In younger texts, such as Supraslensis (where we find *meljaaše*) we find *obrę̌štaaxŭ* from *obrěsti, obreštǫ, zověaše* in competition with *zŭvaaše*, etc (Diels 1935: 236).

In OCS the possibility of basing imperfects on the present stem was limited to imperfects with *-ě-.* The tendency to base all imperfects on present stems received a tremendous impetus from the loss of *j* between vowels. This made stems with present in *-aje-* the same as the corresponding imperfects in *-a-aše.* With coalescence of vowels we get present *čitāš,* imperfect *čitāše.* Since the great majority of imperfects were imperfective, and the great majority of imperfective verbs had the suffix *-a-(je)-,* this made the verbs with imperfects unambiguously based on infinitive/aorist stems a distinct minority.

In Bulgarian and Macedonian this process continued until all the imperfects were based on non-past stems. More archaic forms are preserved in Serbo-Croatian. In Macedonian and Bulgarian, where length distinctions were lost, this had the effect of eliminating the opposition between the aorist and imperfect in such forms as *pisax* < *pisaxŭ* or *pisaaxŭ.* In Serbo-Croatian the distinction is preserved in aorist *písah* vs. imperfect *pîsāh.*

Given the long-standing tendency to make the imperfect in South Slavic agree in basic form with the present, it might not be surprising to find that the two forms agree in accent. However, it is a striking fact that the imperfect in Serbo-Croatian agrees in accent with the present even when it is clearly based on the infinitive stem. We thus find:

Infinitive	present	imperfect
Písati	pîšē	pîsāše
Kupòvati	kùpujē	kùpovāše
Kazívati	kàzujē	kàzīvāše

We can account for these particular facts with changes that are well established for Common Slavic or South Slavic. These are: (1) The neoacute retraction of the accent from the present tense marker in the oxytonic class of verbs, which included the verbs like *pisati.* The accent was retracted in all the persons of the nonpast inflection except the first singular (Stang 1957: 121). (2) The coalescence of vowels, which, when the accent was on the first of two vowels, produced a falling intonation. (3) The retraction of accent from non initial falling accents, with the same phonetic results as the neoacute. This may have happened several times, with falling accents from different sources. (4) The neoštokavian stress shift, which shifted the accent one syllable to the left, with resultant rising intonation. Any original accent which was on the initial syllable and could not be retracted shows up as falling.

Assuming that the imperfect had the accent of the infinitive we get the following sequence:

	Infinitive	Present	Imperfect
Late CS	pīsáti, kupováti	pīšètŭ kupújetŭ	pīsáaše, kupováaše
Neoacute		píše(tŭ)	
Coalescence of V's			pīsâše, kupovâše
Accent retraction			písāše, kupòvāše
Neošto. stress shift	písati, kupòvati	pîšē, kùpujē	pîsāše, kùpovāše

By including the loss of intervocalic *j,* we can account for the agreement of the accent of imperfect with the present in verbs like *pítati, pîtām, pîtāše:*

	infinitive	3rd. sing. pres.	3rd. pl.	Imperfect
Late CS	pītáti	pītáje(tŭ)	pītájǫ(tŭ)	pītáaše

j > zero		pītáe	
Coalescence		pītâ	pītâše
Retraction		pítā	pítāše
NS stress shift	pítati	pîtā	pítajū	pîtāše

In this case, the third plural of the present did not undergo the loss of *j,* and it therefore preserved the original place of accent until the neoštokavian stress shift.

Turning to the imperfects formed with the suffix *-*ē-,* we find that we can account for the accent if we accept the proposal for their Balto-Slavic origin found in Stang and Vaillant. We will also assume: (1) that the postposed *aše* was treated accentually like an enclitic particle, (2) that the accent of the form with *-ē-* was like that of the asigmatic aorist, and (3) that the paradigm was indeed rebuilt from the third person singular.

According to Stang's (1957: 107-154) analysis, there were three accentual classes of verbs in Common Slavic. These are: fixed accent on the root or stem vowel, fixed accent on the vowel following the stem (the theme vowel of the thematic paradigm), and mobile. We will not concern ourselves with the fixed stress paradigm, except to quote two examples: SC. *jẽsti* 'eat', pres. *jẽdē,* aorist *jẽde,* imperfect *jẽdāše; vȋdjeti* 'see', pres. *vȋdī,* aorist *vȋdje,* imperfect *vȋðāše.*

The verbs with the accent on the theme vowel retracted the accent in the present, except for the first person singular, which is in general lost in SC. The accent is generally leveled in Bulgarian. The retracted accent is the neoacute. The asigmatic aorist, however, retained the thematic accent. This is preserved in the basic thematic verbs in both SC and Macedonian (Stang 1957:130-133). We thus find SC present *mȍžē, ȉdē,* aorist *mòže (*mòžẽ), ìde;* Bulg. pres. *móže, íde,* aorist *možé, idé.* The i-stem verbs should have worked in the same way, but have undergone changes in both languages. SC has generalized a pattern of initial accent in the second and third

singular aorist (*nòsiti,* pres. *nősī,* aorist *nősī),* while Bulgarian has both possibilities (pres. *nósi,* aorist *nósi/nosí)* (Stojanov 1964: 352). To some extent medieval accented texts preserve the system hypothesized by Stang, but Bulgarian shows a tendency to merge the thematic stress and the mobile paradigm as early as the 14th century (Bulatova 1990: 165).

Assuming a stable accent one syllable to the right of the root, we can account for the accent of the imperfect in this class in the same way as for *pisaaše.*

id'ě-aše > idêše > ìdēše > SC íɗāše, Bulg. ídeše

nosj'aaše > nošâše > nòšāše > SC nőšāše, Bulg. nóseše[2]

The mobile class has final accent in the present, initial accent in the 2nd and 3rd singular aorist, e.g. Bulg. pres. *nesé,* aorist *nése,* SC *nèsē (*nes'ē),* aorist *nése, čìnī (*čin' ī),* aorist *čīnī.* Technically, the imperfect SC *nèsjāše,* Bulg. *neséše,* which had suffixal accent, does not agree with the Proto-Slavic accent of the present. With the possible exception of the 1st. singular, the Slavic present had absolute final accent (SC variant *neséte,* Rus. dialectal *nesetë).*

If the original imperfect stem in *-ě-* allowed mobility, and the accent of the imperfect was like the asigmatic aorist, it would have had initial accent in this class. Lithuanian past tenses with *-é-* from consonant final stems without acute accent are accentually mobile, which in Lithuanian means the accent falls on the prefix (3rd. sing. *nêšě, àtnešě).*[3] The Slavic asigmatic aorist had absolute initial accent, including the prefix (SC őtnese), but the Lithuanian pattern is so different that a detailed comparison is next to impossible.

In Slavic, when an enclitic particle was added to a form with this absolute initial stress, the accent shifted forward onto the particle. This is the source of accent shift like R. *mólod, molodój (*moldŭ-j'ĭ); náčal, načalsjá;* Bulgarian *nóvost, novosttá.* If the postposed *aše* was added to a form with absolute initial accent, we would expect the accent to fall on the particle. Stang (1957:103) suggests that the original rule was to

shift the accent to the end of the base word, and that the accent shifted onto the enclitic only if the base word ended in a weak jer. Dybo, using old accented texts, has provided evidence that it shifted onto the clitic (Bulatova 1990:54) e.g. aorist *pogrěší žè, pokloni sê* (Bulatova 1990: 243).

If the *aše* was a clitic, then we should expect **nesě-áše, činja-áše* (assuming that the accent fell on the first syllable of the clitic). In this case, the coalescence of vowels would produce a rising intonation, at least initially[4], and the accent would not retract. The accent would stay on the suffix in Bulgarian *neséše* and remain until the neoštokavian stress shift in SC, yielding **nèsijāše*, both of which agree with the presents.

What we see, then, is that we can account for the basic patterns of accent in the imperfect by assuming that it was originally formed with a clitic, and that the base word to which the clitic was added agreed in accentual behavior with the asigmatic aorist, rather than the present. The accent then may have been part of the leading edge of the restructuring of the imperfect to base it on the present, rather than a secondary effect of that change.

This is of course only a reasonable hypothesis. It would be far better for this argument if there were cases where this hypothesis yielded some results differing from a pattern of slavishly basing the accent of the imperfect on the present. In every potential case of this kind, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian seem to have colluded to eliminate the relevant data. I will list them in case dialectologists can provide relevant facts.

In any verb in *-aje-* or *-ěje-* where intervocalic *j* did not disappear, we would expect the present to preserve the original place of accent, while the imperfect would contract the two vowels and have accent retraction. In a minor way we see this in SC 3rd. pl. *pítaju < pītắju,* vs. imperfect *pîtāše < pítāše.* Bulgarian has a substantial

number of verbs without loss of *j,* but in every case the imperfect has been rebuilt from the present stem, e.g. pres. *igràja,* imperfect *igràeše;* pres. *živèja,* imperfect *zivèeše.*

There is also a potential problem with varying consistency in the retractions of accent. The accent retraction from the falling intonation from contraction where *j* was loss has some lexical and dialectal variation. SC has *čìtā,* reflecting older *čitâ,* from *čītǻje(t),* compared to *pîtā < pítā < pītâ < pītǻje(t),* mentioned above. Whenever this happens, the imperfect still agrees with the present, as in *čìtāše.* This seems to require a brute-force principle of having the two forms agree.

The accent retraction in the imperfect of verbs of the *pisati* class shows no dialectal distribution. Stang (1957: 20-25, 114-125) describes a variety of accent retractions with differing dialectal distributions, all from what he assumes to be falling intonations with different sources. The changes have to represent more than one retraction at different times. The accent retraction from sequences of vowels where there was never a *j* may have been earlier and more consistent than the retraction where a *j* was lost. The *j* in definite adjectives was lost well before the *j* in the present tense of verbs like *pítati.* The latter does not show up in OCS. This offers us an alternative to simply assuming a brute-force principle to make the imperfect of *čitati* agree with the present in accent. It is to me slightly more attractive to assume a more direct morphological influence of the present on the imperfect. Diels (1932: 237) provides evidence for an introduction of *j* into the imperfects of verbs from stems with presents in *-aje-, ěje.* We find spellings like *spějaše, znajaše* attested in OCS. Any form into which *j* was inserted would have a common fate with the corresponding present, including the loss of that *j* in the subsequent dialectal change. If this were widespread, it could easily account for the later dialectal variation.

A place where we might also expect differences in the accent of imperfects and presents is in *-ě-* stems with *-i-* presents. What comparative evidence we have seems to indicate that the aorist/infinitive stem with *-ě-* was never mobile, and therefore should

not have allowed enclitic stress. We would expect present *trupítŭ* > SC *tŕpi,* Blg. *tărpì,* but imperfect *trp'ĕaše* > *trpêše* > *tŕpēše* > Blg. *t'ŭrpeše,* SC *t'r̄pijāse.* What we get is Bulg. *tŭrpèše,* SC *tŕpljāše,* agreeing in accent with the present. At least in the case of SC, there is evidence that these imperfects have been rebuilt on the pattern of the i-stems. The consonantal alternations (*plj* as if from **pj)* would have been original only from -i-stems. This must be based on the present tense with *-i-.* Bulgarian has eliminated such alternations from original i-stems, so there is no formal evidence of restructuring. Given the total restructuring in Bulgarian to base the imperfect on the present, we should assume a similar development there.

Finally, there is a class of primary verbs with fixed accent on the infinitive stem, but old end stress in the present. An example is SC *strĭći,* pres. *strĭžē,* imperfect *strĭžāše,* aor. 1st. sing. *strĭgoh,* 2nd, 3rd sing. *strĭžē.* The circumflex on the second and third singular (old asigmatic) aorist indicates the initial accent associated with mobility, which agrees with the pattern of the present, but not with that of the infinitive or sigmatic aorist. Both Stang (1957: 130) and Dybo (1981: 253) argue that this was the original state. Given the strong tendency to generalize initial accent in the 2nd, and 3rd sing aorist, this might be open to doubt. If the aorist/infinitve stem originally had consistently fixed accent, or if the imperfect were based on the infinitive stem, then we might expect the oldest form of the imperfect to have acute intonation. In this case there is some dialect evidence of interest. Robert Greenberg (PC) reports that in his notes taken from the archives of the Serbo-Croatian dialect atlas, the Montenegrin dialect of Bjelopavlići has the regular agreement for *peći :* pres. 1st pl. *pečêmo,* imperfect 3rd pl. *pecĭjahū,* but from *strĭći* he found pres. *strižêmo,* imperfect *strĭzijahū.*

Notes

1. Lithuanian has an infinitive with zero grade in verbs cognate with class (3) verbs, but a different overall ablaut pattern. In general in Lithuanian, the stem to which the preterit morpheme is added is the same as the infinitive stem. The specific verb *mirti* 'die', has an irregular (?archaic?) past tense *mirė,* which happens to agree with Slavic *mĭrě-aše.*

2. Bulgarian has leveled the consonantal alternation and generalized a single form of the suffix.

3. The iterative/causatives like *prašýti* 'ask', past *prâšė* do not show mobility (*paprâšė).* The iterative/causatives in Slavic are likewise never mobile. The Slavic mobile i-stems are all denominal and do not have formal cognates in Baltic. Slavic *prositi* has post-root stress like *nositi..* The correspondence Lith. *prâšė,* Slavic **prosj'ē-aše,* with the Slavic accent one syllable to the right of a Lithuanian fixed circumflex accent, is typical of the nominal system. Ilič-Svityč and Dybo have argued for a shift of accent one syllable to the right in Slavic (cf. Dybo 1981: 20).

4. Compare Slovenian *báti se* from *bojáti se.,* vs. *znâ* from *znáje(t).* These contractions belong to a later period, however. The definite adjectives might provide better examples, but the data for adjectives are so complex that they require a work of dissertation proportions. At least I will claim that if there was no accentual difference at all between forms like **běla-jego* and **malda-jego* (*běl-* and *mald-* representing old theme-vowel stressed and mobile stems, respectively), then we would have expected a total merger in the accent of the definite adjective from oxytonic and mobile adjectives. That we do not get. The reason that the definite adjective is much more complex than the imperfect is that in every case with end stress in the simple adjective, the oxytones and the mobile adjectives would have merged. The gen. pl. would have presumably been **běl'ŭ-jixŭ, *mald'ŭ-jixŭ.* The result was mixed paradigms that were sorted out differently in different dialects.

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