

Some remarks on Latvian aspect

Dažas piezīmes par latviešu valodas aspektu

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The article provides some remarks on Latvian aspect. It discusses some semantic oppositions and cases of aspectual neutralization, and also proposes one of the criteria determining the aspect of aspectually neutral verbs in the context – case of temporal adverbials *locative/accusative*. Overall, the Latvian aspect can be characterized by its non-rigid expression of aspectual opposition and the possibility of mutual replaceability.

Keywords: aspect, perfective, imperfective, aspectual oppositions, aspectual neutralization, replaceability

1. Introduction

Does Latvian aspect represent the grammatical or the lexical? The question itself is a rhetorical one. It all depends on how we interpret the grammatical in contrast to the lexical and *vice versa*, not to speak of difficulties in delimiting them distinctly. A similar duality can be postulated between inflection and word-formation as well (Percov 1998; Zaliznjak & Šmeljev 2000, 14–16; Kalnača 1998, 247; Kalnača 2004, 6, etc).

Staltmane, one of the founders of Latvian aspectology, states that the Latvian aspect is “a lexico-grammatical category” and “the grammatical features of verbal aspect manifests themselves not as strict rules, but rather as tendencies” (Staltmane 1958, 266). Kalnača defines Latvian verbal aspect as a “functionally semantic category” which unites lexical, morphological and syntactic means for aspectual expression (Kalnača 1998, 248).

Due to the formal – and also semantic – similarities, the description of Latvian verbal aspect has been based on the Slavic, namely Russian aspectology. Indeed, an adjustment of the Slavic aspect system and methods of its description do work in Latvian aspectology as well, but only to some extent. In Russian, the verbal aspect, in other words, aspectual opposition is regarded as a grammatical category *a priori*, which allows to separate the grammatical (aspectual) meaning from the lexical one when one questions the opposition *grammatical/lexical*, and therefore their relationship and mutual influence have been focused on as noteworthy phenomena. In describing the Latvian aspect, it is impossible to base ourselves on a clear, “prepared” alignment *grammatical/lexical* from the outset as in Russian.

The traditional description in Latvian aspectology states that the aspectual opposition is expressed by two means: by the prefix – *lasīt* ‘read (imperfective, further ipf)’, *izlasīt* ‘read (perfective, further pf)’ and by periphrastic forms – *iet ārā* ‘go out (ipf)’, *iziet* ‘go out (pf)’. The “periphrastic pairs” are regarded equally with “prefixal pairs” as aspectual pairs, and indeed the periphrastic imperfective names the action in process oriented towards a spatial goal.

However, the positioning of two types of aspectual pairs should be reconsidered. The use of adverbs itself is not connected with the aspect, because one can observe a redundant use of adverb even with a prefixed verb such as *ieiet iekšā* ‘go in’ (Mathiassen 1997, 118, for further investigation see Holvoet 2001, 134–146) and the spatial goal can be expressed not only by prefixes, but also by adverbs or adverbial phrases (Nešpore 2009, 65). According to Staltmane, “when a context specifies motion expressed by the verb clearly enough, the adverb replacing the prefix is facultative or redundant” (Staltmane 1958, 116). Also it is noteworthy that the use of adverbs is observed more often in colloquial language and thus related to stylistics (Staltmane 1958, 188–189; Hauzenberga-Šturma 1979, 301–302).

Even when a prefix has a spatial meaning, it does not always mean that the verb has the imperfective counterpart with the adverb. Let us see examples with *sūtīt* ‘send (ipf)’. This verb has its prefixed verbs spatially modified (*aizsūtīt* ‘ship off’, *izsūtīt* ‘send around, send out’) and lexicalized, thus lacking their aspectual pairs (*izsūtīt* ‘deport’, *pasūtīt* ‘order’). Here the question arises: what is the aspectual counterpart of *nosūtīt* ‘send (pf) (for example, an e-mail)’? Indeed, *sūtu prom* ‘I am sending away (my e-mail)’ can be an utterance pronounced simultaneously when one presses a button “send an e-mail” (the example heard by the author). However, as we see in the further example with *nosūtīt/sūtīt*, aspectual counterpart of the prefixed verb would not be qualified as *sūtīt prom* ‘send away (supposedly periphrastic ipf)’, but rather as the unprefixed verb *sūtīt* ‘to send (ipf)’. The status of the “periphrastic pair” still remains unclear and aspectual pairing of the verbs needs further investigation. Further, I will present examples mainly with prefixal pairs.

2. Semantic oppositions related to *perfective/imperfective*

As is well known, the aspectual opposition does not cover the whole verbal lexis in Latvian. It is relevant mostly for the “accomplishment verbs” in the traditional Vendlerian classification of verbs (Holvoet 2001, 153–158; Wälchli 2004, 148), or in other words, telic verbs.

The most primal opposition lies in that the imperfective verb denotes an action in process, while the perfective verb denotes a complete action. Only imperfective verbs can be used in response to the classical question “What are you doing now?”.

- (1) *Ko tu tur dari? – Ēst taisu.*
 what you.NOM there do.PRS.2SG eat.INF make.PRS.1SG
 ‘What are you doing? – I am making (ipf) something to eat.’

(Diena 20.08.2011)

- (2) (...) *brauc ciemos, es uztaisīju ēst.*
 come_over.IMP.2SG I.NOM make.PST.1SG eat.INF
 ‘[...] come over, I made (pf) something to eat.’
 (Mājas Viesis 29.06.2007)
- (3) *Kādas durvis atvērās un aizvērās. Iestājās miers.*
 one.NOM.PL door.NOM.PL open.PST.3 and close.PST.3 settle.PST.3 peace.NOM
 ‘A door opened (pf) and closed (ipf). Peace settled.’
 (Kurzemnieks 20.10.2005)
- (4) (...) *tās pašas no sevis nemitīgi vērās vaļā*
 it.NOM.PL itself.NOM.PL from self.GEN unceasingly open.PST.3
vai ciet.
 or close.PST.3
 ‘[A door] was unceasingly opening (ipf) or closing (ipf) of its own accord.’
 (NRA 17.05.2003)
- However, if a verb denotes a generalized action, this opposition is not actualized and neutralized. Kalnača names a semantic opposition *concrete/general* related to aspectual opposition (Kalnača 2004, 19). In this semantic opposition, even if both actions named by the perfective and imperfective verbs can be relevant for usual or habitual events, the perfective verbs are preferred to denote more concrete, sometimes quantified action. As in the examples (5)-(7), the semantic opposition is realized by complements or the circumstances of each action.
- (5) *Varētu teikt, ka neēdu kūciņas, bet tad es*
 can.COND say.INF that not_eat.PRS.1SG cake.ACC.PL but then I.NOM
melotu – gadā vienu, varbūt divas kūciņas apēdu.
 lie.COND year.LOC one.ACC maybe two.ACC cake.ACC.PL eat.PRS.1SG
 ‘I could say that I don’t eat (ipf) cakes, but then I would be lying – I eat (pf) one, maybe two cakes per year.’
 (Diena 31.10.2009)
- (6) *Vienīgi Mātes dienā piezvanu mammai. Bet es*
 only mother.GEN day.LOC call.PRS.1SG mum.DAT but I.NOM
zvanu mammai arī citās dienās.
 call.PRS.1SG mum.DAT too other.LOC.PL day.LOC.PL
 ‘Only I call (pf) my Mum on Mother’s Day. But I call (ipf) Mum on other days, too.’
 (Diena 28.02.2004)

- (7) (...) *kritika arī tika izteikta attiecībā par iespēju*
 šos pieteikumus (...) ik dienu **sūtīt** pa faksu.
 this.ACC.PL application.ACC.PL every_day **send.INF** by fax.ACC
Vidēji tika rēķināts, ka dienā vajadzētu nosūtīt aptuveni 150 lpp.
 day.LOC should.COND send.INF about pp.

‘[...] the criticism was also expressed in relation to the possibility of sending (ipf) these applications [...] every day by fax. On average, it was estimated that about 150 pages would have to be sent (pf) per day.’

(sic. Dienas Bizness 20.01.2010)

Contextually some imperfective verbs function as conative which denotes an effortful action targeted towards accomplishment. This meaning is actualized by their repetitive use and the perfective verbs used nearby.

- (8) *Iznācu no viesnīcas, centos iedarbināt moci,*
 come_out.PST.1SG from hotel.GEN try.PST.1SG start_up.INF bike.ACC
darbinu, darbinu, bet nekādas reakcijas.
 start_up.PRS.1SG start_up.PRS.1SG but no.GEN reaction.GEN

‘I came out of the hotel, I tried to start up (pf) the bike, I’m starting up (ipf) and starting up (ipf), but no reaction.’

(Klubs August 2009)

- (9) (...) *es viņam **devu** santīmus, taču viņš neņēma.*
 I.NOM he.DAT **give.PST.1SG** santim.ACC.PL but he.NOM not_take.PST.3
Iedevu vismaz ābolu. Viņš uzreiz iekodās
give.PST.1SG at_least apple.ACC he.NOM immediately bite_into.PST.3
un slavēja rudens ražu.
 and praise.PST.3 autumn.GEN harvest.ACC

‘[...] I gave (ipf) him santims, but he did not take them. I gave (pf) to him an apple at least. He immediately bite into it and praised the autumn harvest.’

(Diena 26.07.2007)

The conative meaning may not be coherent to the lexical meaning of the verb. For example, the verb *pirkt* ‘buy’ in the example (10) does not denote a conative action ‘try to buy’. However, it designates gradual sales to a goal that is a number of sold cars.

- (10) (...) *pircēji vispirms nespēja pierast vai*
 buyer.NOM.PL at_first not_can.PST.3 get_used.INF almost
*veselu gadu, bet pēc tam **pirka**, **pirka**, līdz*
 whole.ACC year.ACC but after that.DAT **buy.PST.3** **buy.PST.3** until
***nopirka** veselu miljonu New Edge dizaina mašīnu (...).*
buy.PST.3 whole.ACC million.ACC design.GEN car.GEN.PL

‘[...] at first, for almost a whole year, buyers could not get accustomed [to new model car], but then they bought (ipf) and bought (ipf) until they bought (pf) a full million of the New Edge design car.’

(Diena 20.10.2004)

The example (11) is an utterance of an actress who received and had to reject two-time proposal of the role, but accepted the third one, respectively expressed by *nāca* ‘[the role] came (ipf)’ and *atnāca* ‘[the role] came (pf)’. Thus the imperfective verb denotes an action in process, oriented towards its goal.

- (11) *Loma* *nāca,* *nāca* *un* *atnāca.*
 role.NOM **come.PST.3** **come.PST.3** and **come.PST.3**

‘The role got closer (ipf) and closer (ipf) and arrived (pf).’

(Diena 12.02.2000)

Imperfective verbs divert attention from the result of an action and rhematize the circumstances of an action. In this use of the imperfective verbs, concurrence of aspects occurs and one aspect is replaceable with another aspect, but from a communicative point of view, the imperfective verbs are more preferred (for Russian see Grenn & Filjuškina Krave 2007, 56–58). Thus, the imperfective verbs focus the attention on the circumstances of action: in the examples (12) and (13), “for what he bought his house” and “in what language she read the book”.

- (12) *Tad* *to* *arī* *Leontijs* *nopirka.* *Tiesa,* *viņš* *to* *pirka*
 then it.ACC too **buy.PST.3** true he.NOM it.ACC **buy.PST.3**
kreditā, *māja* *maksāja* *ap* *2000* *latu.*
 credit.LOC house.NOM cost.PST.3 about lat.GEN.PL

‘Then Leontijs bought (pf) it [the house]. True, he bought (ipf) it on credit, the house cost about 2000 lats.’

(Vakara Ziņu Žurnāls 13.03.2009)

- (13) *Es* *izlasīju* *viņa* *pēdējo* *grāmatu* „*No dziļumiem*”,
 I.NOM **read.PST.1SG** he.GEN last.ACC book.ACC from depth.DAT.PL
lasīju *krievu* *valodā.*
 read.PST.1SG Russian.GEN.PL language.LOC

‘I read (pf) his last book “The Profundis”, I read (ipf) it in Russian.’

(Santa November 2008)

In the example (14), in parallel with the example (11) *Loma nāca, nāca un atnāca* ‘The role got closer and closer and arrived’, of relevance is how many times the role was proposed to the actress in total, regardless of whether it was accepted or rejected. Here all chances to get the role are incorporated in the imperfective verb. If a perfective verb would have been used, it would imply that the actress had accepted the role three times.

- (14) *Loma nāca trīs reizes.*
 role.NOM come.PST.3 three.ACC time.ACC.PL
 ‘The role came (ipf) three times.’

(Diena 12.02.2000)

From the point of view of the word order, the imperfective verb, based on previous information expressed by the perfective verbs, introduces new information as rheme in the text, thus functioning as theme. In the example (15), what the refugees took with them emigrating from the country is explained in more detail with the imperfective verb *ņēma* ‘took (ipf)’ after a general statement that what the refugees took (*paņēma*) with them deserves an interest. In the example (16), being visited by friends on one’s name day is a self-evident fact, but the status of guests as being uninvited is emphasized.

- (15) *Zīmīgas un interesantas ir mantas, ko bēgļi paņēma līdzī, jo bieži viņi ņēma līdzī ne tikai sadzīvei un eksistencei vajadzīgos priekšmetus, bet arī relikvijas un latviskus priekšmetus.*
 refugee.NOM.PL take.PST.3 with
 because often they.NOM take.PST.3 with
 necessary objects, but also relics and Latvian objects.

‘Significant and interesting are the belongings which refugees took (pf) with them, because they took (ipf) with them not only objects that are necessary for daily life and existence, but also relics and Latvian objects.’

(Latvijas Vēstnesis 19.06.2003)

- (16) *Vārdadienā atnāk draugi, un visi nāk neaicināti.*
 name_day.LOC come.PRS.3 friend.NOM.PL and all.NOM.PL come.PRS.3
 not_invite.PTCP

‘On one’s name day friends come over (pf), and they all come (ipf) uninvited.’

(Vakara Avīze Vakara Ziņas 03.02.2000)

However, the choice of imperfective verbs highly depends on the communicative intent of a speaker and is difficult to be absolutized. For example, the last sentence may be paraphrased in three other ways, replacing one verbs with another or by combining them.

- (17) a. *Vārdadienā nāk draugi, un visi atnāk neaicināti.*
 b. *Vārdadienā nāk draugi, un visi nāk neaicināti.*
 c. *Vārdadienā atnāk draugi, un visi atnāk neaicināti.*

The verbs can be shuffled as well in the example (18) where the present passive participles both of the imperfective and perfective verbs *pirkt/nopirkt* ‘buy’ denote the meaning ‘able to be done’. True, the perfective verbs are connected to a larger content with this meaning, and here the aspectual opposition may be

interpreted as *general/concrete*, since the perfective verb is used with an additional, more concrete component (for “big” money).

- (18) *Viss šajā pasaulē ir pērkams par naudu. Un, ja*
 all.NOM this.LOC world.LOC be.PRS.3 **buy.PTCP** for money.ACC and if
nav pērkams par naudu, tad nopērkams par lielu
 not_be.PRS.3 **buy.PTCP** for money.ACC then **buy.PTCP** for big.ACC
naudu.
 money.ACC

‘Everything in the world is can be bought (ipf) for money. And if it cannot be bought (ipf) for money, then it can be bought (pf) for big money.’

(Vakara Ziņas 19.06.1998)

To summarize, I argue that the semantic oppositions expressed by *perfective/imperfective* are actualized only contextually and in some cases the choice of the verb depends on the speaker’s intent and the use of one aspect cannot be absolutized. Thus, such a replaceability of aspect represents the non-rigid character of Latvian aspect and this is an answer of Staltmane’s question why in Latvian one may use the verbs interchangeably (Staltmane 1958, 192).

3. Bi-aspectual verbs and temporal adverbials

Besides the non-rigid character of Latvian aspect, a quite number of prefix verbs which are aspectually neutral, or bi-aspectual, has to be discussed. Since one can determine the aspect of these verbs only by context, a diagnostic approach is inevitable. In the Latvian aspectology, interpretation of aspect in context has been provided (Ozola 1984, 124, and more concretely, by objective complements see Kalnača 1998, 250, Kalnača 2004, 19).

What I suggest here as one of the criteria to diagnose aspect in context is the opposition of temporal adverbials *locative/accusative*. Though MLLVG does not mention it directly, in its sections for temporal locative and accusative, verbs used in the examples are respectively imperfective and perfective (MLLVG 1959, 399, 407), that is to say, temporal adverbials are relevant to verbal aspect. Temporal accusative denotes the time during which an action continues and therefore is connected with imperfective verbs, while temporal locative indicates the time requested for a complete action and is used together with perfective verbs. The temporal locative in this meaning is synonymous with the construction *genitive noun + laikā*, as it is proved with the following dialogue:

- (19) – 55 *kilogrami trijos mēnešos – tā ir*
 kilogram.NOM.PL **three.LOC** **month.LOC.PL** it.NOM be.PRS.3
nenormālība.
 abnormality.NOM
 – *Jums ir taisnība, trīs mēnešu laikā 55*
 you.DAT be.PRS.3 truth.NOM **three.GEN** **month.GEN.PL** **time.LOC**

kilogrami – *tas nav normāli.*
 kilogram.NOM.PL it.NOM not_BE.PRS.3 normal

‘– [About a diet] 55 kilograms in three months – that’s abnormal.

– You are right, 55 kilograms within three months’ time, – it isn’t normal.’

(Latvijas Radio 04.12.2008)

In the examples (20)-(22), the verbs *uzcelt/celt* ‘build, construct’ and *izaugt* ‘grow’ are used respectively with temporal locative and accusative:

(20) *Baznīcu uzcēla trīs gadus, tagad pienācis laiks*
 church.ACC build.PST.3 three.LOC year.LOC.PL now come.PTSP time.NOM
lielākam remontam (...).
 bigger.DAT restoration.DAT

‘The church was built (pf) within three years, and now the time has come for more extensive restoration.’

(Druva 11.11.2009)

(21) *Baznīcu cēla četrus gadus un celtniecību veikusi*
 church.ACC build.PST.3 four.ACC year.ACC.PL and construction.ACC do.PTSP
 SIA „Jēkabpils PMK”.
 Ltd.

‘The church was built (ipf) for four years and the construction was done by “Jēkabpils PMK” Ltd.’

(Latgales Laiks 27.08.2004)

(22) *Briežu bullim ragi aug divus mēnešus un*
 deer.GEN.PL bull.DAT horn.NOM.PL grow.PRS.3 two.ACC month.ACC.PL and
var izaugt līdz pat 20 kilogramus smagi.
 can.PRS.3 grow_up.INF till even kilogram.ACC.PL heavy.NOM.PL
Divu mēnešu laikā!
 two.GEN month.GEN.PL time.LOC

‘The horns of a deer bull grow (ipf) for two months and they can grow (pf) up to 20 kilograms in weight. Within two months time!’

(Santa November 2008)

This diagnostic test with the help of the case of temporal adverbials does work for prefixed verbs aspectually neutral, too. Here are examples with the aspectually neutral *pārdot* ‘sell’, where the prefix *pār-* is lexicalized:

(23) (...) *visas biļetes pārdeva nepilnas stundas laikā.*
 all.NOM.PL ticket.NOM.PL sell.PST.3 not_full.GEN hour.GEN time.LOC

‘[...] all the tickets were sold (pf) in just under an hour.’

(BNS 26.02.2009)

- (24) *Pēc atgriešanās Latvijā divus gadus pārdeva IT*
 after returning.GEN Latvia.LOC two.ACC year.ACC.PL sell.PST.3
infrastrukturās risinājumus.
 infrastructure.GEN solution.ACC.PL

‘On returning to Latvia [he] sold (ipf) IT infrastructure solutions for two years.’

(Lietišķā Diena 05.04.2011)

The use of the temporal locative and the construction *genitive noun + laikā* can accompany the verb *izpārdot* ‘sell out, sell (all, in a large quantity)’ derived from *pārdot*: *izpārdot 40 minūtēs* ‘sell out in 40 minutes’ or *izpārdot stundas laikā* ‘sell out within a hour’. The derivative is modified by the prefix *iz-* which indicates totality or exhaustion of the object. The perfective meaning of *pārdot* may contextually coincide with that of *izpārdot*, if the action of selling covers all the objects completely, as in the example (23). However, here the problem of aspectual pairing arises: their lexical meanings are not sufficiently equal to be aspectually paired. The colloquial language attests the verb *nopārdot* ‘sell’ marked as perfective by the prefix *no-*, but it has not been admitted from a normative viewpoint.

The bi-aspectual verb *notikt* ‘happen, take place’ is used both as perfective and as imperfective according to the case of temporal adverbials.

- (25) *Amerikāņi jau pieraduši pie šīm stihiskajām*
 American.NOM.PL already be_used.PTCP to this.DAT.PL elemental.DAT.PL
nelaimēm, tāpēc evakuācija notika
 disaster.DAT.PL so evacuation.NOM happen.PST.3
dažās stundās.
 some.LOC.PL hour.LOC.PL

‘The Americans are already used to these natural disasters, so the evacuation took place (pf) within a few hours.’

(Rīgas Balss 16.09.2009)

- (26) *Svinības notika dažas stundas. Tika*
 festivity.NOM.PL happen.PST.3 some.ACC.PL hour.ACC.PL be.PST.3
teikti daudzi tosti.
 say.PTCP many.NOM.PL toast.NOM.PL

‘The festivities went on (ipf) for some hours. Many toasts were proposed.’

(Latvijas Avīze 23.02.2004)

It is noteworthy that the lexical meanings of nouns have a relation with verbal aspect. An evacuation itself supposes telicity and is quite closely associated with the time needed for its completion. Festivities too, may be connected with the time required, but in the example (26) the temporal accusative designates the time during which the action was going on.

The different cases of temporal adverbials conditioning aspectual opposition apply to unprefixed verbs like *veikt* ‘do, accomplish’ which lexically seems closer to a perfective verb, though it has the perfective counterpart *paveikt*:

(27) *3608 km garo distanci viņš veica 86 stundās,*
 long.ACC distance.ACC he.NOM accomplish.PST.3 hour.LOC.PL

15 minūtēs un divās sekundēs.
 minute.LOC.PL and two.LOC.PL second.LOC.PL

‘He completed the 3608 km distance within 86 hours 15 minutes and 2 seconds.’

(Sporta Avīze 23.07.2013)

(28) *1500 metru distanci Valērija paveica 4:38,92 minūtēs (...).*
 meter.GEN.PL distance.ACC accomplish.PST.3 minute.LOC.PL

‘Valērija completed the distance of 1500 m in 4:38.92 minutes (...).’

(Latgales Laiks 25.05.2012)

Thus the opposition of cases of temporal adverbials allows to profile aspectually relevant semantics of verbs and leads to a necessity to investigate further not only aspectually paired verbs, but also bi-aspectual verbs in connection with lexical meanings of words surrounding the verb overall.

4. Conclusion and outlook

The Latvian aspect is characterized by a non-rigid character of aspectual opposition *perfective/imperfective*. Due to its neutralization and the replaceability of one aspect with another, it complicates a formal approach, thus requiring a textual and pragmatic one. Aspectually relevant linguistic elements such as complements, temporal adverbials and their lexical meanings should be investigated in more detail to identify the nature of Latvian aspect more clearly.

Abbreviations

ACC	Accusative
COND	Conditional Mood
DAT	Dative
GEN	Genitive
INF	Infinitive
IMP	Imperative mood
ipf	imperfective
LOC	Locative
MLLVG	<i>Mūsdienu latviešu literārās valodas gramatika</i>
NOM	Nominative
pf	perfective
PL	Plural

PRS	Present
PTCP	Participle
PST	Past
SG	Singular

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Kopsavilkums

Raksta mērķis ir sniegt dažas piezīmes par latviešu valodas aspektu. Rakstā tiek apskatītas vairākas semantiskas opozīcijas un to neitralizācijas gadījumi, kā arī tiek piedāvāts kritērijs, ar kuru iespējams noteikt aspektuāli neitrāla verba aspektu kontekstā – laika apstākli, kas izteikts ar locījuma *lokatīvs / akuzatīvs* opozīciju. Latviešu valodas aspektam kopumā nepiemīt stingra aspektuālā opozīcija un verba veidu savstarpējas aizstāšanas iespēja.