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## О системе временны́х форм в древнерусском языке

*Аннотация*: В статье рассматривается глагольная система восточнославянского диалекта праславянского языка, особенность которой в том, что временны́е значения передавались путем противопоставления презентной формы – форме на **-л-**. Все прочие временны́е формы являлись средством оформления модальных значений. Автор констатирует: в восточнославянском диалекте форма на **-л-** – единственный способ передачи значения действия или состояния в прошлом, причем для обозначения лица используются личные местоимения или личная форма глагола **быти**.

*Ключевые слова*: восточнославянский диалект праславянского языка, глагольная система, временны́е формы

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## The Old Russian Tense Forms

*Abstract*: This article discusses verbs in the East Slavonic dialect in Proto-Slavic whose temporal meanings were made largely through an opposition of the present form and the **-л** form. Other kinds of temporal forms served to make modal meanings. It is argued that in the East Slavonic dialect the **-л** form was the only way of rendering the meaning of a past action or state, the category of person was shown either through a personal pronoun or a personal form of the verb **быти**.

*Key words*: East Slavonic dialect in Proto-Slavic, verb system, tense forms

The structure of tense forms in Old Russian has been studied for a long time. Research into monuments of written Russian enabled linguists in the 19th and 20th centuries to hypothesize that in the earliest period of Old Russian spoken language a past action or state was denoted either by an opposition aorist / imperfect or a group of perfect tenses. This assumption was widely accepted. It is assumed that in the 12th–13th centuries, spoken language began to lose aorist and perfect forms. Later the perfect tense began to change not only its form, but its meaning.

When scholars brought into scientific discourse new sources of business written communication including Novgorodian birch bark letters, which showed how elements in the old system of past tenses worked, it was found that the earlier texts are identical

to the later texts as they have rare uses of aorist and just single uses of imperfect; both aorist and imperfect alternate with the participial form with **-л**, aorist forms are few and they are used but occasionally. This is to suggest that there was no opposition aorist / imperfect throughout the whole of Old Russian period. The fact that scribes would use old, Church Slavonic, tense forms in their texts has no proof as there are no contexts which would necessarily require such forms. And although we admit the occurrence of fragments with a complex system of past tenses in the "right" contexts from well-known Church Slavonic texts, the Sobornoye Ulozhenie of 1649 (the Russian Legal Code) and official papers (or *gramoty* in the vernacular) written in the 16th–17th century, there is no doubt that simple preterites had vanished by the time.

Rare uses of imperfect forms in official papers witness to the fact that in the East Slavic dialect zone of Proto-Slavic the imperfect meaning did not get a grammatical form, and in this dialect the meaning of an action or a state in the past was originally conveyed through a group of perfect tenses and aorist. Assuming that there was no imperfect form in the tense system of eastern dialects, however, we have to admit this weakened the position of aorist, which had been an essential member in the opposition 'aorist / imperfect'. Neither perfect tense or pluperfect, nor aorist in most cases was able to convey the meaning of imperfect or to replace it. This makes us think that aorist was missing in the grammar of East Slavic dialects within Proto-Slavic. Apparently, imperfect and aorist came into Old Russian official papers and legal documents as grammatical church slavonicisms.

There is no denying that Old Slavic business texts contained slavonicisms of various levels. The use of literary grammatical elements in opening and closing parts of official papers is attributable to the fact that these parts were more conventionalized in terms of genre and style and able to maintain archaic features of language. The use of aorist in 12th and 13th-century papers can be put down to the influence of literary language which was characterized by regular use of simple past tenses up to the 17th century. Yakubinsky justly claims that the penetration of Church Slavonic into the language of official papers was consistent as it greatly influenced the culture of Russian as the language of church, which was actually the literary language itself, and which meant a great deal to the ideology of society.

It should also be borne in mind that there was a hefty corpus of legal and business texts written in Church Slavonic and translated from Greek. This fact should be taken into account while discussing why and how grammatical slavonicisms emerged in written business East Slavonic texts.

Yakubinsky gives a good example of how Church Slavonic influenced the language of official papers. In the contract note between foreign merchants and Russian Prince Alexandr Nevsky representing Novgorod residents the first twenty lines use aorist to refer to a past action, the subsequent seventeen lines use no past tense at all, and the last lines use perfect in the same meaning as the aorist at the beginning. Yakubinsky makes a strong point that "the author had apparently wanted to make the paper sound terrifically learned and began to stuff the text with literary forms of aorist but after a break strayed from the point and switched to vernacular perfect forms"[1].

The author appears to be free in his choice of tense forms describing the same meaning. Writing an official paper, he fills it with past tense forms that are typical of everyday speech and literary language, and without a second thought about meaning he chooses one form or another with the intent to embellish the text. This is done by

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[1] *Якубинский Л.П.* История древнерусского языка. М., 1953. С. 290.

someone who is well aware of his actions. And all this can be possible only if there is already no connection between the form and its original (Old Slavonic) meaning. The possibility of "alternating" tense forms for stylistic purposes shows that each separate form has no semantics of its own. There is no escaping the impression that this is all about intentional use of Church Slavonic forms in written discourse rather than about the influence of Church Slavonic on written discourse.

Scholars might argue that this paper was made up in the 13th century, which is why it has a variety of past tenses, but it is in the 12th and 13th centuries that simple preterites began to disappear. Yakubovsky's example is just a glaring one.

There is a similar picture with birch bark letters, historically most remote Old Russian texts. In them simple preterites alternate with perfect and the -л form. Moreover, participles ending in -л show a mere sequence of actions and may act in aorist, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect contexts.

This therefore raises a problem of Old Russian perfect as an independent grammatical form having semantics of its own, a phenomenon in Old Slavonic literary texts that has a certain place among preterites.

Was there the perfect form in the Old Russian grammar?

Birch bark letters provide evidence that the use of the perfect form and its "fragment" – a participle ending in -л – is regulated by the rule: in the opening part of the paper the pattern with the first singular and plural pronouns is се газъ далъ (продалъ, купилъ, менялъ, or пожаловалъ in various contexts) ксмь (ксми); the body of the paper either uses a phrase ксмь, кси купилъ or a phrase with a participial form and personal pronouns газъ (*I*) or ты (*you*), the -л form is used with the third person singular pronoun (купилъ). There are very few digressions from this rule. The forms are clearly distributed in short papers, where, according to the rule, they follow one after another in perfect logical order.

In official papers therefore the past tense can be expressed either by the -л form (купи-л-ъ), a combination of a personal pronoun and the -л form (газъ купилъ), or a combination of a personal form of the verb быти + the -л form (ксмь купилъ) wherein the personal form might serve as a functional equivalent of a personal pronoun: in all structural parts of official papers, except the opening, they are used randomly, and the personal form of the verb быти becomes necessary only for avoiding ambiguity while indicating the subject of an action. It shows that the -л form is the only form to indicate past tense in official writing.

The use of perfect forms in the opening part is conventional. Perfect forms in the body of the paper are not perfect forms, semantically or formally, because the present form of the verb быти is a functional variant of a personal pronoun, which can be proved by the place of negation before the -л form in negative sentences and by the possibility to use personal forms of auxiliary verbs instead of a personal pronoun in subjunctive sentences.

Since the -л form was the only way to render the meaning of past tense in Old Russian, the complex perfect form used in the opening part of official papers became a stylistically marked, phraseologically-bound grammatical slavonicism. This accounts for the use of aorist in the opening parts of Novgorodian and Dvinian official papers. For the writers both of the forms belonged to a literary genre.

It is common practice to call Russian pluperfect *new* as it is normally regarded as the result of loss of simple past tenses in the vernacular. Nevertheless, since the material shows that the aorist / imperfect opposition was not observed in the official and vernacular papers of the 11th–13th centuries, imperfect is therefore absent from the lan-

guage of official and vernacular papers of the 11th–13th centuries. As long as it has not been proved that the aorist / imperfect opposition existed in the language of eastern Slavs, Russian pluperfect can be regarded as an original, and only, Old Russian form. It is known however that the old pluperfect meaning of priority to another action in the past was also rendered by other tense forms: the -л form in monuments of vernacular and official written language, aorist in monuments of Slavonic literary language, imperfect in the Grammar by Milety Smotritsky.

Studying the forms of Russian pluperfect, G. Khaburgaev managed to characterize its semantics. He argued that "until the 14th century examples of Russian pluperfect can be found only in official papers and only in contexts that indicate an action or a state which further in the text is interrupted, *cancelled*, or unrealized"[2]. This shows that the Russian pluperfect had a modal meaning, and not a temporal meaning, and that the correlation between the -л form and pluperfect was not of the 'absolute versus relative' type but as a past tense form and two intrinsically linked verbs having a modal meaning.

There is every reason to believe therefore that the -л form in Old Russian vernacular and official papers is the only form of past tense in the Indicative Mood which stores an aggregate of meanings characterizing a past action or state.

It can be assumed that a special feature of the grammar system of the East Slavonic dialect in Proto-Slavic was a verb system that rendered temporal meanings through an opposition of the present form with a perfect or imperfect meaning and the -л form. The rest of 'temporal forms' – verb combinations – aimed to make modal meanings (Russian Pluperfect, First Future Complex Tense, Second Future Complex Tense). All this makes the impression that scholars have been studying why and how the age-long complex system of Old Russian preterites vanished because they do not differentiate between Old Russian and Church Slavonic as the sources for studying morphology of the verb.

It can be argued that the East Slavonic dialect of Proto-Slavic was characterized by the -л form as the only way of rendering the meaning of a past action or state, which denoted the doer of an action – either through a personal pronoun or a form of the verb **быти**.

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