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The Current Use of the Past Imperfect Tense in Albanian and Serbian – a Case Study

Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to bring scholars' attention to the indirect influence of Albanian grammar among the native speakers of Serbian who study Albanian as a foreign language as an awareness and transformation process when translating the past imperfect forms from Albanian as a foreign language into their mother tongue Serbian, more specifically the past imperfect of Albanian into their mother tongue. The past imperfect tense in Albanian is moderately used by its native speakers. The fact that it is one of those grammatical forms which has disappeared in the Serbian spoken discourse has influ-

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enced the Serbian students studying Albanian at the University of Belgrade not to use the past imperfect of Albanian as their second language medium of speech, even when the past imperfect is used in the original text in Albanian. However, when the students are stimulated grammatically of its existence in the Albanian language, their past imperfect forms in Serbian become obvious in the process of their passive usage only (the students are aware of its usage only when the grammatical concept is being mentioned in the task given to them.). The main objective of the research conducted has contributed to the grammatical description of the state of arts in a very recent and active usage of the past imperfect in Serbian and Albanian, among the speakers of the both language groups, not based on formal descriptions from the grammar books, but emphasizing the real usage of the tense in both languages.

1. Verb tense system in Serbian and Albanian

In many Indo-European languages, as well as in numerous natural languages, verbal tenses are grouped into three categories. Past (preterite), present, and future tenses. Albanian verbal tenses are: *Koha e tashme* – The Present Simple Tense; *Koha e kryer* (*The Present Perfect*), *Koha e kryer e thjeshtë* (*The Past Simple Tense (Aorist)*), *Koha e pakryer* (*The Past Imperfect*), *Më se e kryera* (*The Pluperfect*), *E kryera e tejshkuar* (*Aorist II¹ or Pluquamperfect*) – Past (preterite) Tenses; *Koha e ardhme* (*The Future Tense*) and *E ardhmja e përparme* (*The Future Tense II*) – Future tenses. The total number of verbal tenses that make up the verbal tense system in Albanian is 8. The Albanian imperfect is a verbal tense that belongs to the category of preterite tenses, more exactly of absolute preterite tenses, together with the aorist the present perfect, while the pluperfect and the aorist II belong to the category of relative past times. It is also considered as a synthetic verbal tense and, due to this characteristic, it does not differ from the imperfect in Serbian. The Albanian imperfect is a completely living preterite tense, which is actively used in both, oral and written language. Everyday conversation could not be imagined without the imperfect, because this Albanian verbal tense conveys dynamism and, depending on the context, it can have a present and a future meaning. It is used in narration. Without it,

¹ This verbal tense is designated as aorist II by Sh. Demiraj (1971).

it would be impossible to write newspaper articles, scientific papers, news etc. Its proper use is also a feature of style, i.e. of stylistic expression, not only for writers, but also for current speakers of Albanian.

The Albanian imperfect is also the most characteristic indicative past tense, because its personal endings are simple and identical for almost all conjugations (except for auxiliary verbs and verbs so-called *mi-conjugation*²). As a simple verbal time, the imperfect is formed from the verbal basis of the second person plural of the present indicative. The personal endings of the imperfect are: *-ja, -je, -tel/-nte, -nim, -nit, -nin*. The verbs with bases ending in a vowel in the third person singular receive an *-n* between the base and the ending (as in the following examples: *laj* (wash) – *laja, laje, lante, lanim, lanit, lanin*), while the verbs with bases ending in a consonant in the third person singular receive the ending *-te*. In the Grammar of the Albanian Language of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, it is emphasized that the basic meaning of the imperfect is “to render an action that is ongoing at a particular moment in the past” (Agalliu, Angoni, Demiraj, Dhrimo, Hysa, & Lafe, 2004, p. 308). Shaban Demiraj considers that the first characteristic of the imperfect is its capacity to express an action (or state) that has not been completed yet at a particular time in the past. This particular moment in the past is often expressed by a temporal clause or sentence, but there are also cases when such determination is implicit, because it stems from the very context (Demiraj, 1971, p. 189). E. Hysa points out that the imperfect expresses an action in progress without denoting its beginning and completion (Hysa, 1975).

The verbal tense system in Serbian has 6 verbal tenses: *present simple, present perfect, aorist, imperfect, pluperfect* and *future* (while the *future II* belongs to the group of verbal moods). Serbian grammarians defined the imperfect as a preterite tense that renders actions, which were performed in the past, most often simultaneously with another past action and certainly at a particular time. M. Stevanović, echoing most other grammarians, points out that this verbal form is used for events that lasted for a certain time in the past (Stevanović, 1967). However, such lasting character is not related to the temporal meaning of the verb in the imperfect, but to its aspect. The imperfect

² Classification of the verbs into conjugations according to the historical criterion of G. Meyer (1888). According to this criterion, all the verbs in Indo-European languages are divided into two groups. The first group includes verbs with the old Indo-European ending *-mi* (in Albanian, these verbs are *kam, jam, them* (to be, to have, to say)).

is built exclusively from imperfect verbs. Although lasting, it is an incomplete action, which does not necessarily need to be extremely long, but it can also indicate a very short duration of the action, such as in:

A kad bili agi mimo dvora, / Dvije šćerce s pendžera *gledahu*. A dva sina pred nju *ishođahu* / Tere majci svojoj *govorahu*. (“Hasanaginica” example given by M. Stevanović, 1967, p. 107) (And when they were approaching the palace, / Two daughters *were watching* from the window. Two sons *were coming* in her direction/ and this is what they *were saying* to her.)

Also in Serbian, the imperfect is not used only for actions in the past, but also for those determined by that past. In the opinion of M. Ivić, the imperfect serves to revive or evoke in the past something that once represented the present. Every present implies a live dynamic of action, a process in progress. In this respect, the revived present takes all the forms of the actual present (Ivić, 1958, p. 144). Just as in the case of the verbal form of the present simple, which renders a present action in progress, also the verbal form of the imperfect is built exclusively from imperfect verbs, which should be the main indicator of the parallelism that exists in certain features of the imperfect and the present simple. Serbian linguists consider that one of the essential characteristics of the imperfect is that it denotes an action experienced in reality or in the imagination (cf. Sladojević, 1953, 1953–1954, 1961; Stevanović, 1967; Vuković, 1967). It primarily means action that was experienced only by the speaker, but it can also be used to ask the collocutor about what he/she experienced at a certain time:

Što *zborāše* Amza i Nikšići? (P. P. Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath (Gorski vijenac)*, verse 1423, example given by M. Stevanović, 1967, p. 113) (What Amza and Nikshici *were saying*?)

Albanian grammar does not give great importance to this aspect, but it is regarded as self-evident. The emphasis is on the current, evoked past. Albanian authors do not devote a great deal of attention to the issue of the use of this tense as indicative or relative. This issue was very significant for Serbian linguists. By the end of the nineties, when less and less linguists dealt with this issue, no single unified stance was reached on the use of this tense as indicative or relative.

In Serbian, the imperfect can be labeled as an “archaic tense” (comment M. K.), which is very rarely used and tends to be completely lost. Based on the recordings of interviews conducted in the period 1982–1983 and the samples taken from the elderly, mostly highly-educated people, V. Polovina says in her article On the Use of Verbal Tenses in Modern Serbo-Croatian Spoken Lan-

guage” that the present simple was used 4986 times, the present perfect 1739, the future 257 and the aorist 25, while the imperfect was used only once (Polovina, 1985). In Serbian, the imperfect is built from the base of the present simple or the infinitive, while the endings are the same for all verbs. The imperfect of all the verbs, the base of which ends by the vowel *a* (verbs type II, IVb, V and VII) are built from the base of the infinitive. The ending of the imperfect form of these verbs is always *-ah*. The base of the present tense, reduced by removing the final vowel is used to build the imperfect of all the other verbs together with twofold endings. The ending *-ijah* (more frequent than *-ah*) is used to build the imperfect of verbs, when the base of their infinitive ends by a consonant: *tresijah*, *pletijah*, *predijah* etc. From the base of the presents simple plus the ending *-ah*, it is possible to build the imperfect of all the verbs, the base of which ends by any vowel except the vowel *a* (verbs type III, IVa and VI). In the case of the following verbs, the consonant at the end of the base is iotized before the ending) *brinjah*, *gonjah*, *nošah*, *vožah*, *građah*, *praćah* etc. (Stevanović, 1991, p. 338).

2.1. Aspectual functions of the imperfect in Albanian

1. *The imperfect can show an action that has been repeated from time to time in the past.* The repetitive sense of the action is rendered by the context of the sentence. In these cases, the verb in the imperfect is followed and supplemented by certain temporal modifiers that make it repetitive (Agalliu et al., 2004, p. 309). Such modifiers indicate a certain time period, through which the action is repeated, such as: *çdo mëngjes* (every morning), *çdo javë* (every week), *çdo vit* (every year), *çdo muaj* (every month), *herë pas here* (from time to time) etc. It can also be a dependent, mainly temporal, but also local or causal sentence that has a verb in the present simple as predicate. E.g.:

Sa herë që Irma shkante në kishë, ndizte një qiri e i lutej Zotit qe edhe asaj një ditë postieri t'i trokiste në derë me zarfin e endërruar... (Kongoli, 2003, p. 103). (Every time when Irma was going to a church, she was lighting a candle so that the postman would knock to her door with the dreamt envelope in his hands ...)

2. *The imperfecti shows an action that lasted a longer or shorter period of time in the past.*

Ato kohë *banonim* në një apartament në katin e dytë të një pallati në rrugën “Myslim Shyri”. (In that time we were living in apartment on a second floor at the building in the street Myslim Shyri.) (Kongoli, 2003, p. 7)

3. *The imperfect indicative is also used as present in the past.*

In Albanian, the imperfect is firmly connected with the present. This connection originates not from the temporal, but from the aspectual field. Both verbal tenses express an action that is in progress and characterized by an imperfect (unfinished) aspect. Out of all the verbal tenses in Albanian, only the imperfect can be used with the particle *po*, which is characteristic of the present tense and renders an action that takes place at the time of speech (Agalliu, 1982; Dodi, 1968; Sadiku, 1979). This relationship is evident also from the connection that exists between these two tenses, when making transformations from direct into indirect speech. Every verb in the present indicative in direct speech becomes imperfect, when transformed into indirect speech. As long as the imperfect does not change in indirect speech, it remains unchanged. It renders an action that is in progress (i.e., unfinished) at a particular moment in the past and therefore can be replaced by no absolute or relative past tense.

Tani ato me siguri *flinin*, të lodhura e të këputura nga rruga, në çadrën e tyre ngjyrë lejla. (Now they were, for sure, sleeping in their purple color tents.) (example given in The Grammar of Albanian language, Agalliu et al., 2004, p. 309)

4. *The imperfect renders an action in past, without indicating its beginning or completion.*

In the narrow sense of the word, the imperfect does not refer to a past action, but it rather indicates the coincidence between an action and a certain time point in the past, which precedes the moment, in which the speaker speaks. E.g.: Marta mbrëmë (po) *qante* në rrugë. (Last night Marta *was crying* on the street.) The temporal adverb *mbrëmë* is actually a time point in the past. The reference time point for the present simple is the moment when the speaker speaks, while in the case of the imperfect, it is the moment, about which the speaker speaks (Sadiku, 1974, 1978). Thus, the action rendered by the imperfect has not actually passed, but the angle, in which the speaker was placed, in order to see the action in its course.

5. *The imperfect may also indicate the parallelism of two or more actions that have taken place over the same time period of time in the past. E.g.:*

Kur *qeshte* i *dilte* trëndafili nga goja e kur *qante* i *rridhnin* margaritarë nga sytë. (When she was smiling a rose was coming out from her mouth and when she was crying perls were falling down from her eyes.) (Sheqiri, Islamaj, & Syla, 2010, p. 36).

6. *The imperfect can also express an action that continues at a certain point in the past, when another preterital action ends.*

Kur Faika u gjend pranë meje unë po pija një cigare. (When Faika approached me I was smoking a cigare.) (Kongoli, 2003, p. 181).

2.2. Aspectual functions of the imperfect in Serbian

1. *In Serbian, the imperfect renders a lasting action in the past.* It indicates a past, unlimited and unfinished action in progress. The term “unlimited action” actually refers to just one segment of the given action, which does not have to include either the beginning or the end. Sladojević points out that this limitlessness consists in the fact that the imperfect does not show the action as a temporal totality, but as a duration, in which there are no limits present in our awareness, a timeline, whose edges are foggy (Sladojević, 1953–1954). The Serbian aorist (including the aorist of imperfect verbs) denotes a completed past action with a beginning and an end, regardless of its length. Although the imperfect indicates an action with an unlimited duration, this does not mean that the action has a long duration. The action expressed by the imperfect can last much less than the one of the aorist.

Zalud su ga drugovi tešili, zalud ga i Balegan mazio, on jednako *lijaše* suze. (Matavulj, 1948, p. 61) (In vain his friends *were comforting* him, in vain even Balegan *was cuddling* him, he *was pouring* the tears the same.)

2. *An action that takes place at the time of speech, i.e. in the present.* M. Stevanović explained this trait, by suggesting that it stems from the very nature of the meaning of the imperfect, because it denotes an action that is regularly extended beyond the moments, to which it is associated. The speaker takes into consideration that the action expressed by the imperfect continues or unfolds in the present. It is temporarily determined in such a way that the speaker perceives it as parallel to the present situation (Stevanović, 1959, p. 23). Some Serbian syntaxists attribute the modal meaning to this use of the imperfect and consider that it is unnecessary to seek its temporal character. E.g.:

Šta ti ono *govoraše*? (What *were* you *saying*?) At the moment when the conversation is interrupted between the two interlocutors, due to some objective distractions (such as the appearance of a third party or several other people, noise etc.), but continues and when the interlocutor is expected to continue his narration as if he had just begun it.

3. *The imperfect renders an action that has been repeated from time to time in the past.* Very often, it is a series of actions that repeat themselves and are regarded, at a given time in the past, as actions that can be resumed.

Od tada Naćvar ne izalaše iz ćelije, nego mu Bakonja *donosaše* jelo, a Tetka i Srdar *pohađahu* ga. (Matavulj, 1948, p. 147) (From that on he was not leaving the cell, Bakonja *was bringing* the food to him and Tetka and Srdar *were visiting* him.)

4. *The imperfect may also indicate the parallelism of two or more actions that have taken place over the same time period of time in the past.*

Pred gostionicom već *seđahu* i *stajahu* gladni gosti. (Lazarević, 1963, example given by Roglić, 2000, p. 14). (In front of inn the hungry guests *were already sitting* and *standing*.)

5. *An action that has not been seen or experienced in any way by the persons that participate in the conversation* Examples of this type of imperfect can be found in historical writings and documents of different types and purposes.

Pod Mlečićima pojedini delovi Boke *uživahu* narodnu samoupravu. (example given by Stevanović, 1991, p. 659). (Under the Venetians some parts of Boka *were having* a national self-government.)

6. *The imperfect can indicate a feature, state or characteristic of an entity, which exists as such for a longer period of time* (not only at the moment of speech, but also for a longer period after that). E.g.: Pred nama *se prostiraše* nepregledna ravnica. (example given by Stevanović, 1991, p. 662) (An unclear prairie *stretched* out in front of us.)

3. Common and general characteristics of the imperfect in Albanian and Serbian

In both Albanian and Serbian, the imperfect renders past, unfinished actions in progress, most often parallel to some other action or situation. In both languages the imperfect renders: the parallelism of actions, the unlimited duration of an action, as well as the perception and determination of an action. It can signify:

a) the complete parallelism of two actions, if they are rendered by the same verbal form:

Tifozët që ishin në publik këndonin dhe brohoritnin. (The football fans who were in the audience *were singing* and *shouting*).

On *staj*aše a kazandžija se neprestano *vrtija*aše. (Lazarević, 1963, p. 207) (He *was standing*, the cauldron craftsman *was constantly moving*.)

b) the partial parallelism of two actions. In this case, one action is rendered by the imperfect, while the other one is expressed by another preterite tense, usually an aorist or present perfect. Given that the imperfect is characterized by an aspect of unfinishedness, the action rendered by the imperfect often lasts longer than the action expressed by some other preterite tense.

Kur *po kthente* shpinën, shikimi i tij *kapi* vetëtimthi një profil të njohur. (While he *was turning* around, his eyes, in a flash, *caught* a familiar face profile.)

Ona se *vрати* natrag u sobu a ja *stajah* na vratima. (Lazarević, 1963, p. 83; example given by Roglić, 2000, p. 16) (She *has returned* to her room while *I was standing* at the door.)

c) succession of actions: Flaka *shtohet*, *rritet*, *bëhet* gjithnjë më e madhe, *përpinte* gjithçka. (The flame *was spreading*, *increasing*, *getting bigger and bigger*, it *was consuming* everything.)

Ja *lupah* orahe i *davah* joj, ona ih *zamaka*aše u med. (Lazarević, 1963, p. 25; example given by Roglić, 2000, p. 17) (I *was cracking* the nuts and *giving* them to her, and she *was dipping* them into honey.)

d) Alternativity of actions (alternative action): Ditën *flinte*, natën *bënte roje* në shkollë. (In the daytime he *was sleeping*, in the nighttime he *was working* as a guard in the school.)

Ujutru *ulaza*aše u radnju sa osmehom, a uveçe *izalaza*aše bez osmeha. (In the mornings he *was entering* the shop with the smile, but in the evenings he *was going out* of the shop without it.)

In both languages, the imperfect renders a past, unlimited, unfinished action in progress. The term “unlimited” actually refers to one segment of the given action, which does not have to include either the beginning or the end. The imperfect does not show the action as a temporal totality, but as a duration, in which there are no limits present in our awareness. Unlimited duration, as we pointed out in the previous part of this work, does not necessarily mean a long duration of the action. In both languages, the action expressed by the imperfect can last much less than the one expressed by the aorist. In both, Albanian

and Serbian, the imperfect can be used with temporal adverbial modifiers and syntagms, such as: *dje* (yesterday), *pardje* (the day before yesterday), *mbrëmë* (last night), *atë vit* (that year), *gjatë rrugës* (while traveling) etc. in Albanian and: *juče* (yesterday), *sinoć* (last night), *jutros* (this morning), *pre neki dan* (a few days ago), *u nedelju* (on Sunday), *letos* (this summer), *jesenas* (this autumn) etc. in Serbian. In Albanian, it can be used with the conjunction *kur* (when) and the expression *sa herë* (whenever), while in Serbian it is used with the conjunctions *kako* (as), *već* (already) and *kada* (when). The semantic-temporal and aspectual functions of the imperfect in Albanian and Serbian are almost identical. Also in Serbian, the imperfect denotes a concrete, abstract and iterative action, but unlike its Albanian counterpart, the Serbian imperfect cannot have an aorist meaning, because it is exclusively built from imperfect verbs. In Serbian, the imperfect can be combined with the aorist, the present simple and the present perfect within complex sentences. However, it is most often found in combination with an aorist or another imperfect. Nowadays, such sentences sound very archaic and unusual. In Albanian, the imperfect can be combined with the present, the aorist, the present perfect and the pluperfect. Such constructions are quite common in contemporary Albanian. They do not sound archaic and do not disturb the beauty of expression. However, we consider that the combination of aorist and imperfect brings liveliness into the narration and that it is the most common combination in Albanian (in relation to the above).

In Serbian, the situation is completely different. In contrast to the frequent use of the past imperfect in Albanian, in Serbian this tense is disappearing. It has completely gone out of use in modern literary language and it is kept nowadays only in a few Serbian dialects. M. Stevanović stresses that the past imperfect is kept in almost all ijekavian štokavian speeches, while in ekavian speeches, it is kept only in older ones, with quite a limited frequency (Stevanović, 1967, p. 103). In his opinion, this tense is more frequent in the speeches of Vrnjačka Banja area and Aleksandrovačka župa, while it is extremely rare in the speeches of Levac, Resava and Rača Kragujevačka, as well as in north-eastern and Kosovo-Resavian speeches (Stevanović, 1967, p. 104). The areas where the past imperfect is still in active use are the southwestern parts of Montenegro, Boka, parts of eastern Herzegovina and western Serbia. The general tendency of Slavic languages (with the exception of Bulgarian and Macedonian) of losing the past imperfect tense has engulfed Serbian as well. From the second half of the nineteenth century, a large number of writers began to use the past imperfect in their works. With the exception of P. P. Njegoš, S. M. Ljubiša and some other

authors from regions where the past imperfect is still in use, a good part of Vuk's follower, beginning with Đ. Daničić, used the past imperfect but lacked the "feeling for the use of the past imperfect", because it had already disappeared in their regional speech. Such a situation lasted until the second half of the twentieth century, when the use of the past imperfect was abandoned even by writers from regions that keep this tense.

Most Serbian authors point out that the definition of the past imperfect given by V. Karadžić in *Писменица* (1814) is a very accurate one. According to this definition the past imperfect is an imperfect verbal form, which "shows that the action of the verb was still lasting when something else happened" (Stevanović, 1991, p. 654). He classified it as a "vreme poluprošavše», i.e. "partially past tense" (Cf. Караџић, 1814). More recent studies on this preterite tense have contributed to a better understanding of the important semantic value of the past imperfect. This work has been undertaken by numerous grammarians, including: M. Stevanović, J. Vuković, P. Ivić, P. Č. Sladojević, A. Stojićević, M. Ivić, D. Jović and of course, first of all – A. Belić, whose works, especially those devoted to the system of tenses, were of great importance in solving the problematic related to the use and meaning of this tense. In spite of everything, the past imperfect has not ceased to be a form of the contemporary literary language. In all the grammars of the Serbian language, the past imperfect has still a place in the system of tenses. However, the mere linguistic reality leads us to the idea that it is just a grammatical form, which does not exist actively in the speech of the vast majority of Serbian native speakers.

4. Past imperfect in Albanian: Aspect or Tense?

The very frequent use of the past imperfect, the whole range of meanings and functions and the appropriate use of this tense, which can be a feature of style, have attracted the attention of many Albanian syntax researchers. The past imperfect in Albanian began to be studied in the fifties of the twentieth century. K. Cipo made the first steps towards the study of verbal tenses, when he published his *Grammar of the Albanian language* in 1949, which treated the problematic not only of morphology, but also of their meaning and function. In 1961 Sh. Demiraj published his book *Morphology of the Modern Albanian Language*, which provides a detailed description of the system of tenses in Alba-

nian and sets out their basic functions. After that, a large number of Albanian scholars devoted themselves to the study of the past imperfect, among whom we should mention: A. Dodi, F. Agalliu, Z. Sadiku, E. Hysa, A. Sytov, A. Zhugra, R. Përnaska, M. Domi, A. Dhrimo, T. Kelmendi and many others. R. Ismajli (1977) was the first one to study the function of verbal tenses in supra-sentential units. Given that the past imperfect is one of the preterite tenses that is actively used in Albanian and that it has not disappeared from the literary language, Albanian linguists continue to dedicate their efforts to its study.

Kelmendi (2006) views past perfect from the context perspective and he states that Past Imperfect has generally been considered to be used with all types of verbs in Albanian. Within its basic semanticity, past imperfect does not contain in itself the beginning or the end of an action, but it can match with a certain point or a certain period in the past, having the qualities of pretemporal expression in reference to the deictic time of utterance: *Vjosa (po) qante (ishte duke qarë) në rrugë. (Vjosa was crying in the street.)*. According to Kelmendi (2006, p. 87), it is not the imperfect which should be considered a past tense, it is the speaker's viewpoint in the past (the angle from which the speaker refers to the action) since *Vjosa* could be still crying when the speaker reports on this activity a minute later.

However, Kelmendi is wrong when contrasting the forms *po qante* and *qante* within the same aspectual description by not taking into consideration the fact that *po qante* refers to a specific period of time which could cover a continuous period of time (telic moment), whereas *qante* refers more specifically to a habitual act, process or state, which could include the moment of *po qante*, but not pointing at it as a specific moment. Past imperfect *qante* emphasizes more the act of crying, by addressing its frequency and time-after-time expression, its consistency and its iterativity. There are cases when past imperfect could be used instead of aorist when describing the attributive qualities which do not last one second but are permanent for some time: *Djali ishte i shqetësuar. substituting Djali qe i shqetësuar. (The boy was upset.)* The past imperfect is typical for impressionistic description text types, combined within phenomenon registering sentences and modified very often by place and manner adverbials: *drita ua merrte sytë vullshëm, kënga e bareshës jehonte maleve, nëna i këndonte ninulla çdo mbrëmje (Serbian: svetlost ih je silovito zalepljivala, pesma čobanice je odjekivala planinama, majka mu/joj je pevala uspavanke svako večë, English: the light was blinding them heavily, the shepherdess' song was echoing in the mountains, the mother was singing lullabies every evening).*

In Albanian, the past imperfect belongs to the category of preterite tenses, more exactly of absolute preterite tenses, together with the aorist and the past perfect, and it is designated as a synthetic tense, i.e. it does not differ by this feature from its counterpart in Serbian. In Albanian, it is a very lively preterite tense, which is actively used in both, oral and written language. Everyday conversations could not be imagined without the imperfect, because it is a tense that brings dynamism. Depending on the context, it may have even present and future meaning (Kelmendi, 1993) and it is used in storytelling. Without it, it would not be possible to write scientific papers, newspaper articles, news, etc., whereas in Serbian, the past imperfect is labeled as archaic and it is used very rarely, which shows a tendency of losing it completely.

5. The Research Methodology

In order to prove the assumption that the Serbian speaking students of Albanian, being under a continuous influence of Albanian grammar and other language courses that they study at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade and being for some time in a direct contact with the Albanian speaking teachers and students in Prishtina, have managed to preserve the past imperfect tense in their other tongue, two slightly different questionnaires have been conducted: one in Belgrade and one in Prishtina, with different outcomes expected. The first questionnaire attempted to answer the very first assumption given at the beginning of the article (Past imperfect is one of those grammatical forms which has disappeared in the Serbian spoken discourse and this fact has influenced the Serbian students studying Albanian at the University of Belgrade not to use the past imperfect of Albanian as their second language medium of speech, even when the past imperfect is used in the original text in Albanian), and the second questionnaire attempts to enforce the original idea that even in Albanian (under the influence of Serbian during their education system and in particular in their written form) the Albanian speakers who have a good command of Serbian do not use past imperfect frequently and aorist is preferred instead. However, some of these hypotheses have not been proved to be the case when questionnaires have been conducted with the speakers of both languages at both universities.

6. Research findings and data analyses

Students whose mother tongue is Serbian and who study Albanian language and literature at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade were given a questionnaire which consisted of four questions. Twenty-two students from the Department of Albanology participated in the survey, eight from the second year, eight from the third year and six from the fourth year (native speakers of Serbian of ages between 20 and 25). Only those students that studied the past imperfect in Albanian as a teaching unit and made exercises that allow them to adopt and understand this tense were involved in the research. Given that the participants in the study were students of philology, it was assumed that they knew the characteristics of the verbal system in Serbian. Firstly, they were asked to translate the following text into Serbian:

Ishte pranverë. Unë after kthehesha nga shkolla, kur më ndaloi harder. Ajo s'më lëshonte pa më futur në ëmbëltore. Ndërkohë më pyeti gjerë e gjatë si e kaloja me Verën. Nuk i ankohesha kurrë. Mirëpo dhe aq mirë nuk shkoja. As vetë s'e di pse nuk merresha vesh me të për çdo gjë... I ktheja fjalë.

U vonova shumë. Në shtëpi gjeta Verën. "Trëng" ma bëri zemra. Sikur ta parandieja që do shamatohesha me të. Hyra drejt në dhomë, lëshova çantën në divan dhe nisa të kërkoja diçka nëpër sirtarë. (Sh. Vreto, Vit i paharruar, taken from the textbook Petro, Pepivani, Jubani, Sula, Çerpja, & Metani, 2015).

All the participants translated the Albanian verbs in past imperfect with Serbian verbs in past perfect. None of them used any other tense.

The second question was – In what tense is the verb *kthehesha* used in the given text?

Seventeen students answered correctly and said that the verb is in past imperfect tense (3 replies – I do not know; 1 reply – present tense; 1 reply – past perfect). When asked to translate the verb *kthehesha* (was coming back) into Serbian, the following answers have been given: 16 participants answered – *vratio sam se* (past perfect); 2 – *vratih se* (aorist); 1 – *vračajući se* (present active participle); 1 – *vrativši se* (past active participle); 1 – *vratiti* (present infinitive); 1 – I do not know. Although the students knew that the Albanian verb was in past imperfect, none answered that it should be translated with a Serbian verb in past imperfect – *vračah se*.

The third question was related to the verb *lëshoj* which means “let, release”. They were asked to give the past imperfect of that verb in Serbian and the following answers were given: 9 answered with *puštah* (past imperfect); 8 answered

with “I do not know”. And five of them with *pustih* (aorist). As a result, when they were given a question with no grammatical indication, such as: Translate the following word into Serbian, the answer was not affected by the grammatical awareness of the verb tense and the students responded freely, without any past imperfect used. When the students were asked a question which incited their grammatical knowledge on imperfect tenses in Albanian and Serbian, half of their answers consisted of past imperfect form in Serbian, which is not a case in their everyday communication process.

The answers to this question showed that students often have doubts about the tense that they should use. These doubts are mainly reflected in the fact that they confuse the verbal forms of past imperfect and aorist. We believe that this is not a coincidence. Aorist is still used in the everyday speech of Serbian speakers, although its use is sporadic. When speakers use a verb in the aorist, they know or perhaps intuitively feel that they have used a tense that indicates that the action of the verb was completed at the time of speaking and that this tense is not specific to everyday conversation, because instead of the aorist, they would have certainly used the past perfect.

However, in the questions to follow the students were asked to choose the verb in past imperfect out of the two verbs. A verb was deliberately provided in aorist and one in past imperfect. It was considered that the linguistic sense regarding the use of verbal tenses in their native language, as well as their knowledge of Serbian grammar, would help them clearly distinguish the verb in past imperfect. Three examples were given to them:

- a) *bejah, bih*
- b) *skupih, skupljah*
- c) *sastadoh se, sastajah se*

Eleven correct answers have been obtained (*bejah; skupljah; sastajah se*); eight of them with (*skupih; sastadoh se*) and only three of them with the verb *bejah*, five respondents did not answer at all to the second and third question. Half of the surveyed students did not know the correct answer, even though they did not have to write the past imperfect form of the verb. The task was about recognizing the past imperfect form and distinguishing it from the aorist form.

As a final task, a sentence in Albanian was given to them: *Gjatë ditës ai rrinte mbyllur, tërë kohën ulur para skrivanisë* (Kongoli, 2003, p. 40) and its translation into Serbian *Tokom dana ne izlazaše iz sobe, sve vreme seđаше za radnim stolom* (English: During the day he would stay inside, the entire time sitting in front of his working table.).

The respondents were asked whether the translation was accurate. The results were the following: Nine of them responded negatively: No, the translation is not accurate, nine positively: Yes, the translation is accurate. And only one student added a comment of the type: „but it is not in the spirit of the language!“. Three of them gave no answer and one of them responded with: – “I do not know.”.

The answers of the students have shown their great uncertainty, even when they were given a very easy task, such as recognizing the past imperfect in a specific grammatical person and number.

Afterwards, they have been asked whether the translation of the sentence was accurate or not (a. Yes; b. No; c. I do not know), they have also been asked about the way how the above sentence should have been translated properly. Out of the nine students who responded that the translation was accurate, only seven answered this question. Five of them put the verb into the 3rd person singular (just like in the given sentence, *sedāše-was sitting*), but in the combination with the 3rd person plural pronoun (*oni*), without agreement in number (it should be *oni sedāhu* and they gave the answer *oni sedāše*). Moreover, two of them used past perfect instead.

In order to have a better overview of the usage of past perfect in Albanian, in a real time everyday discourse, a similar questionnaire has been conducted in Prishtina, too, so that our hypothesis that past imperfect in Serbian is used among the Albanian mother tongue speakers when communicating in Serbian gets supported. The questionnaire in Prishtina has been conducted with the teaching staff aged 40–50 having in mind the fact that during their education they have learned and studied Serbian in their primary and secondary school and they were part of the former Yugoslavian system of education, when Serbian has been taught as a compulsory course from the age of 8 or 9. It is worth mentioning that most of the active students (aged 18–22), who study Albanian language at the University of Prishtina have little to no command of Serbian, therefore it was impossible to conduct a questionnaire with them. Thirty members of the teaching staff have been asked to translate a paragraph from Albanian into Serbian (dominant by the past imperfect forms) and then five sentences from Serbian into Albanian, consisting of the past imperfect verb phrases extracted from several examples taken from a fictitious text (novel) in Serbian.

The data collected from the University of Prishtina questionnaire showed that out of twenty interviewed respondents, only three of them could identify

past imperfect forms in Serbian. Seventy percent of the answers, who have been given a text full of imperfect forms in Serbian to be translated into Albanian, mainly responded with the usage of aorist forms instead). Even when imperfect forms have been given to be identified only, sixty-five percent of the respondents answered negatively, by not circling the correct imperfect forms.

When translating a text from Albanian into Serbian, which consisted of twenty examples of verbs used in past imperfect, out of twenty respondents, only two of them used sixteen past imperfect forms in Serbian target text, whereas eighteen others used ten to fifteen aorist forms instead.

When asked to translate the verb *odgovarah* into Albanian, ninety percent of the respondents used the past simple passive *u përgjigja* (answered in passive: *was answered*). The research data showed that very often past imperfect forms of Serbian text were mainly translated as passive aorist in the Albanian translated version of the text.

7. Conclusion

Based on the processed data of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that in the active speech of the students, who are native speakers of Serbian language, the imperfect is not used. Whereas Albanian native speakers prefer aorist in most of the translations from Albanian into Serbian and vice-versa. When translating from Albanian into Serbian, the past imperfect of students at the University of Belgrade would be translated with past perfect in 100% of the cases. A large number of students have problems recognizing the past imperfect, especially to distinguish it from the aorist, as well as to generate the verbal forms of the past imperfect. A small percentage of respondents at the University of Prishtina, native speakers of Albanian, were able to recognize the difference between the aorist and past imperfect in Serbian, almost 90% used aorist even when the text belonged to the descriptive text form. The last fact could be also a result of a long and continuous passive usage of Serbian in their everyday activities.

Although all the surveyed students at the University of Belgrade had linguistic feeling for the use of verbal tenses in their native language, the survey also showed that this feeling is very questionable when it comes to the past imperfect. Knowing Serbian grammar is certainly a necessary prerequisite

for the proper use and identification of verbs in the past imperfect, but it is not enough to ensure 100% certainty when generating the verbal forms of this tense for any randomly chosen verb, as well as when distinguishing a verb in the past imperfect from a verb in the aorist. The students feel the imperfect as archaic and the artificial tense, just as most speakers of Serbian. The equivalent translation of an Albanian verb in past imperfect is a Serbian verb in past perfect. Whereas Albanian native speakers at the University of Prishtina lack the feeling of distinguishing between the past imperfect and aorist in Serbian. However, it could be assigned to their uneven command of Serbian due to the distance created by not using the language actively any more. One of the respondents even emphasised in the answer sheet that forms such as *bejah* and *odgovaraše* are not used in Serbian any more!

The results of the questionnaires do not answer most of the questions raised by today's real life situation of past imperfect usage among speakers of Serbian and Albanian in general, it tends to create an overview on how language speakers, being continuously under the influence of some grammatical stimulus and awareness for another language system, tend to use or not use a particular form in their own mother tongue, even only in their passive communication process. The results also stress the dominance of aorist in both languages, regardless of their separate developments in recent years due to the influence of preterite tense in English and the overall process of globalization.

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Współczesne użycie *imperfectum* w języku serbskim i albańskim

Artykuł dotyczy bezpośredniego wpływu gramatyki albańskiej na język serbski wśród Serbów uczących się języka albańskiego jako obcego. Przedmiotem opisu jest przekład albańskich form imperfektywnych w tłumaczeniu z albańskiego na serbski, w którym ta forma werbalna nie jest już używana. Autorki podkreślają, że studenci, tłumacząc, nie kierują się formalną wiedzą gramatyczną na temat funkcjonowania *imperfectum* w obu językach, ale realnymi zastosowaniami tej formy temporalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: *imperfectum*, aspekt, analiza kontrastywna, serbski, albański

The Current Use of the Past Imperfect Tense in Albanian and Serbian – a Case Study

The article deals with the indirect influence of Albanian grammar among the native speakers of Serbian who study Albanian as a foreign language as an awareness and transformation process when translating the past imperfect forms from Albanian as a foreign language into their mother tongue Serbian, more specifically the past imperfect of Albanian into Serbian as their mother tongue. The emphasize that while translating, the students are guided not by knowledge of formal grammar but by actual by real usage of this tense in Albanian and Serbian.

Keywords: past imperfect tense, aspectual features, contrastive analysis, Albanian language, Serbian language

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