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Current relevance in Croatian: a cognitive account

Introduction

Croatian is a largely unexplored territory for cognitive linguistics. Studies of Croatian in a cognitive linguistic vein are rather scarce and tend to deal with various issues in lexical semantics (cf. Žic Fuchs 1991) and conceptual metonymy (cf. e.g. Brdar and Brdar-Szabó 2003). Croatian grammar and syntax seem to be even less open to the cognitive linguistic purview, despite a rich traditional descriptive and prescriptive practice, which occasionally offers insights that could easily appear in a cognitive linguistic description of grammar. This paper builds on the traditional syntactic accounts of Croatian, trying to enhance the existing description by two elements: a theoretical base capable of systematically capturing elements impervious to the traditional analysis and some data from current Croatian usage. Combined, these two elements will point to certain inconsistencies in the traditional account which will be the point of further analysis.

Some authors (e.g., Katičić 1991:50; Barić et al. 1995:406) describe the Croatian *perfekt* tense as a tense which expresses an action that was completed in the past, but that has a “vivid connection with the present” (Katičić 1992:176). Such usage is dubbed *gotova sadašnjost* (hereafter: the completed present¹; cf. Katičić 1992:176), and it purportedly connects the consequences of an action to a given moment – that is to say an action that was completed in the past has some ramifications for the present.

In the analysis of the English present perfect tense a similar notion is expressed by “current relevance”. According to some grammarians (see, e.g., Comrie 1985:25; Palmer

¹ We have decided on a non-idiomatic translation of the Croatian term *gotova sadašnjost* so as to distinguish it from the more familiar international term *perfect*, to which it does not completely correspond, and so as to avoid possible confusion with terms perfective/imperfective which we employ for verb aspect.

1987:48-51; Givón 2001:296-297), the defining characteristic of the English present perfect tense is the fact that an event described using this tense suggests that the past events are somehow pertinent for the reference point because, e.g., the results of the event may still be in force (there are various other types of current relevance; see examples in Langacker 1991:211-212 and references cited therein). For illustrative purposes let us take the much-quoted distinction between the English present perfect and the past simple (examples from Thomson and Martinet 1986:167):

(1) *John Smith wrote a number of short stories.*

(2) *John Smith has written a number of short stories.*

The event described using the present perfect tense in (2) implies that the action of writing is still possible; whereas the event described using the past simple in (1) does not automatically offer such a possibility. In other words, the John Smith of (2) is still an active writer, whereas the John Smith of (1) no longer writes. More drastically, the past simple in (1) is compatible with John Smith dying, whereas the present perfect in (2) is not. Compare examples (3) and (4) (adapted from Givón 2001:297):

(3) *John Smith wrote a number of short stories before he died.*

(4) **John Smith has written a number of short stories before he died.*

The present perfect in (2) “strongly implies that the writer is still active at the time of speech, which is the temporal reference point for the lingering relevance² of the perfect-marked event” (Givón 2001:297), which is why (4) is infelicitous. Cognitive grammar enhances the existing functionalist analyses of current relevance by explaining in detail the symbolic nature of current relevance in the English present perfect construction (Langacker 1991:211-225). In brief, current relevance of an event in the present perfect tense relies on the role of the auxiliary *have*, which situates the event in the dominion of the reference point. The auxiliary serves two purposes. Firstly, it enables mental contact between the reference point and the landmark³. Secondly, the auxiliary establishes a subjective relation of potential relevance between the reference point and

² Givón (2001:296) uses the term “deferred ‘lingering’ relevance” for what we have termed “current relevance”.

³ In this sense the English present perfect is a reference-point construction (Langacker 1993), in which the reference point serves as the viewpoint for the event (cf. Fauconnier 1997:80).

the landmarked event, the same type of potential relevance that is present in some less grammaticalized usages of the verb *have* (cf. Langacker 1991:211-215). Thus, current relevance is “the last vestige of *have*’s original sense of physical control” (Langacker 1993:17).

Our aim in this paper is to prove that the completed present is not a relevant grammatical category in the description of the Croatian *perfekt* tense, because it is not expressed by symbolic means. More specifically, we claim that the l-participle, believed by Croatian grammarians to be the main element responsible for the completed present, does not inherently express current relevance. Instead, the symbolic core of the Croatian *perfekt* tense is vague as to whether the process it designates is connected to the present time. We speculate that the current relevance analysis of the *perfekt* is a result of merging its contextual with its symbolic value. Such a merger relies on the aspectual characteristics of the content verb: whereas perfective verbs facilitate current relevance construal, imperfective verbs do not. This calls for a significant reanalysis of the traditional structuralist view of the role of current relevance in Croatian grammar.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section contains a traditional description of the formation and usage of the Croatian *perfekt* tense, with special regard to the completed present. In the central section we provide evidence that contradicts claims about the inherent current relevance meaning of the *perfekt* tense. Based on a corpus of sentences used as an illustration of the completed present of the Croatian *perfekt* from Croatian grammars, we show that there are no grammatical means of expressing current relevance that are unique to the *perfekt* tense and valid for it in all contexts. The fourth section is a discussion which offers a possible cognitive grammar reanalysis of the meaning of the Croatian *perfekt* and speculates that the traditional analysis is a result of a failure to distinguish symbolic properties of the grammatical construction making up the *perfekt* tense and its discourse implications (end-point profiling enables inferences about current relevance). Based on this discussion, the final section will offer a conclusion and suggest avenues for future research.

The Croatian *perfekt* tense and the completed present: a traditional account

The Croatian *perfekt* tense is formed using the imperfective present tense of the verb *biti* ('to be') and the I-participle of the (perfective or imperfective) content verb, which is inflected for gender and number (cf., e.g., Težak and Babić 1994:129). The Croatian *perfekt* is a tense which is typically used for an action that was completed in the past, i.e., an action that does not extend into the present (Katičić 1992:177). It is further characterized as the most stylistically neutral of all Croatian past tenses (cf., e.g., Barić et al. 1995:412), which include the *aorist* (a past tense used primarily with perfective verbs), the *imperfekt* (a past tense used primarily with imperfective verbs) and the *pluskvamperfekt* (a past perfect tense). The *perfekt* is also considered the most frequently used of the Croatian past tenses (Težak and Babić 1994:264). The characteristic that we will focus on in this section is the completed present of the Croatian *perfekt* tense: how it is defined and tested.

One of the central points concerning the use of the Croatian *perfekt* according to prominent Croatian grammarians (Katičić 1991:50-56; Katičić 1992:172-183, Barić et al. 1995:406-412) is that the *perfekt* represents an action which has some ramifications for the present. In fact, these grammarians claim that such usage of the *perfekt* is primary to all of its other usages. They believe that it sets apart the *perfekt* tense from the *aorist* and the *imperfekt* tenses and that it is symbolically expressed in the I-participle (Katičić 1991:50). So certain are they as to the centrality of this use that, based on their claims concerning the *perfekt*, they put forward the existence of a conceived time category of the completed present in the Croatian grammar. Here is a typical example of the completed present that they give (from Katičić 1991:50):

(5)	<i>Ključ</i>	<i>sam</i>		<i>joj</i>
	Key	be-IMPERF-1 st sg-PRES		she-DAT
	<i>vratio,</i>		<i>ja</i>	<i>nemam</i>
	return-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc		I	no-have-IMPERF-1 st -sg-PRES
	<i>ništa</i>	<i>njenoga.</i>		
	nothing	her-GEN.		

'I have returned her the key, I have nothing that belongs to her.'

Katičić (1991:50) interprets the *perfekt* form of the perfective verb *vratiti* ('return') as expressing the completed present. According to his interpretation, the action was completed in the past, but it has certain ramifications for the present, which are made explicit by the second clause in the present tense. As Katičić puts it: "The completed present expresses that something is as it is because something else was and is now over, and this fact marks the present" (Katičić 1991:50). Therefore, he claims, there is a "vivid connection" (Katičić 1991:50) between the past action expressed by the *perfekt* tense and the present time.

In order to test whether an action expresses the completed present, traditional grammars contrast the *perfekt* tense with another past tense, the *aorist*. The *aorist* is a simple tense which, according to traditional grammars, cannot express the completed present. The action expressed by the *aorist* was completed before the reference point and it cannot be in any way connected to the present. Thus when we say (example from Katičić 1991:58):

- (6) *Momci ubrzo zaspāše.*
 Boy-PL-NOM soon fall-asleep-AORIST-3rd-pl
 'Soon, the boys fell asleep.'

the action of falling asleep was finished at a particular point in the past and has no relevance for the point of reference. Because of its supposed lack of current relevance, the *aorist* is used as a testing for the current relevance of an action in the *perfekt* tense. Let us take another example from Katičić (1991:52):

- (7) *Jedini Zele se nije skupa su iznenadio,*
 Alone Zele refl-pron not-be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-sg
 surprise-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc together be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-
 pl
satkali plan.
 devise-PERF-PARTICIPLE-pl-masc. plan-ACC
 'Only Zele was not surprised, they (had) devised the plan together.'

According to Katičić (1991:52), the first clause in (7) is used in the absolute way, with no currently relevant consequences, i.e. its current relevance is “neutralized” (“neutralization” is explained below). The second clause (“skupa su satkali plan”, ‘they (had) devised the plan together’) expresses the completed present. In accordance with what has been said about the *aorist*, Katičić claims that it is impossible to keep the same meaning of the whole sentence by using an *aorist* form “satkaše” ‘devised’ instead of the *perfekt* verb form “su satkali” ‘(had) devised’:

(8) *Jedini Zele se nije iznenadio, skupa satkaše plan.*
devise-PERF-AOR-3rd-pl

‘Only Zele was not surprised, they devised the plan together.’

Katičić (1991:52) explains that in the original example (7) “Zele’s lack of surprise and the state that came about as the consequence of their devising the plan together” are co-temporal. In contrast, if the *aorist* is used instead of the *perfekt* in the second clause as in (8), “the lack of surprise is co-temporal with the devising of the plan” (Katičić 1991:52), which would mean that a relationship linking the result (lack of surprise) with its explanation (devising the plan) would be lost.

Problems with the completed present

In the preceding paragraphs we have discussed the Croatian *perfekt* tense of both perfective and imperfective verbs, which previous authors have claimed connect the consequences of a past action with the present moment by virtue of the l-participle. Grammars that mention this completed present meaning of the *perfekt* also claim that the *aorist* tense is a reliable test for this type of meaning: the *aorist* form purportedly cannot be used with this meaning. In this section we are going to take issue with these claims. Our analysis of examples used to illustrate the completed present and its “neutralization” in Croatian grammars shows that the completed present meaning is primarily claimed in sentences where the connection with the present is recoverable from the context (with the help of, e.g., adjuncts of time and the choice of tense in the surrounding clauses), and that its “neutralization” is claimed in sentences wherever this is not the case. There is also evidence in grammars and in current Croatian usage that the *aorist*, which it is

traditionally claimed is not exchangeable for the *perfekt* in completed present contexts, may also have the contextual value of the completed present.

Neutralization of the completed present

Croatian grammars give the completed present a prominent place in the description of Croatian. However, they also recognize contexts in which the Croatian *perfekt* tense does not connect the consequences of the action with the present moment, i.e., contexts in which there is no current relevance of the past action. They call this “neutralization” of the completed present (cf. Katičić 1991:53; Katičić 1992:177-178; Barić et al. 1995:407). A typical example of such “neutralization” would be (from Katičić 1992:179):

- (9) *Konj je preskočio grabu.*
Horse-NOM be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd sg
jump over-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc ditch-ACC
‘The horse has jumped over/jumped over the ditch.’

Katičić (1992:179) claims that in this sentence “it is not necessarily important to say that the horse is on the other side of the ditch, so we are left with the fact that it jumped over the ditch at a particular time in the past”. Thus, the current relevance of the action, so far claimed to be inherent to the Croatian *perfekt* tense, is “neutralized”: the completed event of the horse jumping over the ditch is merely reported. This means that, in contrast to English (see examples (3) and (4) above), the Croatian *perfekt* tense is compatible with contexts in which no current relevance is possible because of some objective factors. Thus, in Croatian (10) is a well-formed sentence:

- (10) *Ivan Kovač napisao je devet knjiga prije nego što je umro.*
Ivan Kovač write-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd sg
nine books-GEN-pl before that what be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd sg
die-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc

In this way, Croatian grammarians claim that the *perfekt* tense enables two construals: on the one hand an inherent completeness construal symbolically established by means of the I-participle, and on the other a standard past tense construal, in which the purported symbolic connection with the present is somehow suspended. However, Barić et al. (1995) and Katičić (1991; 1992) offer no syntagmatic criteria that would make it possible to establish whether the completed present construal, which they consider primary, is suspended (i.e., “neutralized”) or not. They give only paradigmatic criteria: if the completeness of the action is not significant, the *perfekt* tense verb form can be replaced by the *imperfekt*, the *aorist* or the historical present without a significant change in meaning (cf. Katičić 1991:54; Katičić 1992:179; Barić et al. 1995:412). Thus we are left with a model traditional functionalist-structuralist explanation: the existence of the “category of the completed present” is accounted for by means of a different function of the *perfekt* tense in opposition to the other past tenses (the *imperfekt* and the *aorist*), and by the fact that “completeness as a category” makes for a seemingly very neat system of tenses, both morphologically and in meaning.

Croatian grammarians, aware of the fact that no criteria have been offered as to whether a particular sentence includes “the category of completeness or not”, point out that there are numerous cases where a sentence can be interpreted either way. The construal decision is left to the speaker/listener (Katičić 1991:54-55). Katičić goes on to mention and explain some examples where two construals are possible. For instance, Katičić claims that in the sentence:

- (11) *Izdao* *je*
 publish-PERF-PARTICIPLE-masc-sg be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-sg
dosad *devet knjiga* *pjesama*
 up to now nine book-pl-GEN poem-pl-GEN
 ‘He has published/(published) nine books of poetry so far.’

two things may be expressed: either the subject’s “current characteristic of being a poet” or, on the other hand, “his past poetic work” (Katičić 1991:55). We believe that in this particular example the expression *dosad* ‘so far’ facilitates the current relevance construal (not least because it precludes the possibility of the subject having died). Also

notice that in English the present perfect tense would be more natural in such a sentence. If the English past simple were to be used, this would somehow suggest that additional information is to follow (concerning, for example, the time when the books were published).

The perfekt and the completed present: analysis of examples

In spite of neutralization of the completed present, and in spite of the fact that “numerous sentences” can be interpreted in either way, both modern Croatian grammars that claim the existence of the category of completeness list examples where completeness is not “neutralized”. We have analyzed all of the sentences that illustrate the completed present and its neutralization in Katičić’s syntax (1991:50-56) in an attempt to reconstruct how the examples were assigned to each of the two groups. The results show that various contextualizing elements are the deciding factor in assigning examples to one of the two groups. We defined contextualizing elements as all those elements surrounding the Croatian perfekt tense construction that may be semantically responsible for “a vivid connection with the present”. Speaking in cognitive grammar terms, these elements allow mental access to the past action through the reference point, which is a precondition for current relevance. We have found two groups of such elements. The first group includes clauses or sentences (other than the clause in the *perfekt* tense with claimed current relevance) that explicate the consequences of the action for the present time. For instance, in the example (5) above, *Ključ sam joj vratio, ja nemam ništa njenoga*, the second clause *ja nemam ništa njenoga* ‘I have nothing that belongs to her’ in the present tense makes explicit the results of the past action expressed in the first clause by the *perfekt* tense (*ključ sam joj vratio* ‘I have returned her the key’). The second group includes non-clausal elements, such as the expression *dosad* ‘so far’ in (11) above, and other similar expressions, e.g., *danas* ‘today’, *sadašnji* ‘current’ (predicated of the subject). Note that most of these merely facilitate a current relevance construal, but do not necessarily preclude a non-current relevant construal, as is evident from (11) above.

The results of our analysis, presented in Tables 1 and 2, confirm that the context is the deciding factor in assigning examples to one of the two groups. Table 1 shows that

the majority of examples in the claimed completed present group contain contextualizing elements linking the action to the time of reference, whereas that only one such example is given in the neutralization group.

Table 1. Contextualizing elements in the claimed completed present and neutralization groups

	Claimed completed present	Claimed neutralization
contextualizing elements	37	1
lack of contextualizing elements	10	76
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>77</i>

Even more revealing is the analysis of the function of the contextualizing elements in the completed present group, presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The function of contextualizing elements

Group	Contextualizing element	Claimed completed present
1	Explanatory clause	30
1a	Reference time = time of speech	22
1b	Reference time = other	8
2	Non-clausal explanatory elements	7
3	Lack of contextualizing elements or ambiguity	10
	<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>47</i>

Table 2 shows that the preferred method of assignment to the completed present group is explication in the form of a clause/sentence (group 1). In group 1, the reference time may correspond to the time of speech (group 1a), in which case the clause or sentence other than the one with the *perfekt* tense occurs in the present tense (15 examples), the imperative (5 examples) or the future tense (2 examples). In group 1b tenses are used relatively, i.e., the time of speech does not correspond to the time of

reference. Examples are structurally similar to examples (7) and (8) above. Group 2 contains non-clausal elements, which point to the reference time. This group smaller probably because non-clausal elements do not necessarily preclude a non-current relevance interpretation. Finally, group 3 contains ambiguous examples, which are structurally completely the same as examples given for claimed neutralization, and there does not seem to be any reason why they have been assigned to the completed present group.

Let us consider some examples where the contextualizing element connecting the action to the time of speech is clearly stated. One of the examples in group 1a is the following:

- (12) *Nema* *više sunca.*
no-have-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-sg more sun-sg-GEN
Zašlo je.
set-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-neutr be-PRES-IMPERF-3rd-sg.
‘There is no sun. It has set.’

In this example (from Katičić 1991:50) the negative form of the imperfective verb *imati* ‘have’ is used in the present tense in the first sentence. The reference point is “now”, and the sun being no longer in the sky is constructed as a consequence of the sun having set, which is described in the second sentence. This consequence is the claimed completed present. Similarly, in the sentence (from Katičić 1991:50):

- (13) *Gledaj ga.*
Look-IMPERF-IMPERATIVE-2nd-sg he-GEN
Igrao se⁴ u blatu.
play-IMPERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc refl-pron. in mud-sg-LOC
‘Look at him. He has been/was playing in the mud.’

the imperative form “*gledaj ga*” (‘look at him’) inherently refers to the time of speech/reference point – by virtue of its grammar it mandates a construal with at least the speaker and the hearer in the same physical/temporal space – and, consequently,

⁴ In this example the auxiliary verb *biti* ‘to be’ is left out because of the reflexive pronoun *se*. Croatian grammars explain this fact on the basis of avoidance of two successive similarly sounding syllables (Katičić 1991:56).

discourse space. Therefore it is the imperative form that makes the action of playing in the mud relevant, i.e. completed. Current relevance in the following example from group 2 is not achieved by grammatical means, but by other means that draws on our knowledge of the discourse situation. Compare:

- (14) *Majko moja, pa on je*
Mother-VOC my resultative conj. he be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-sg
pošašavio.
become crazy-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc
‘Oh my, he has gone nuts.’

Here the expression *majko moja* ‘oh my’ and the resultative particle *pa* evoke a situation in which the speaker is conveying surprise to the hearer concerning the recently completed action of a third person.

Examples of the completed present from group 3 as well as examples where current relevance is claimed to be neutralized are by and large simple sentences with no additional context. For instance,

- (15) *Svega je*
All-GEN be-IMPERF-PRES-3rd-sg
nestalo
disappear-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc.
‘Everything has disappeared/disappeared’

could very easily be assigned to either of the two groups. In fact, this example appears in the completed present group, but seems to be structurally at least as problematic as example (9) above, which Katičić admits is ambiguous. The ten examples of group 3 are in no way different from the 77 neutralized examples, and it is unclear why they have been included in this group. Perhaps, the answer could be found in the more extensive context; however it has not been given.

The aorist and the completed present

Our analysis so far shows that the context in the claimed completed present examples tends to specify the ramifications that the action in the *perfekt* tense has for the time of reference, and we believe that it is the deciding element in assigning the

completed present interpretation to a particular usage of the *perfekt* tense. In the following section we are going to supplement our analysis with an examination of the *aorist* tense, the paradigmatic factor used as a test for the completed present. We will attempt to prove that the *aorist*, given an adequate context, may also be used with a completed present meaning. The need for the inclusion of the context in order to achieve the completed present meaning of the *perfekt* and the possibility of using the *aorist* with a completed present interpretation make for a strong case against the completed present as defined by Katičić (1991, 1992) and Barić et al. (1995).

As has been mentioned above, grammars that posit the existence of the completed present in Croatian test it by opposing it to the *aorist*, a simple tense which, they claim, has no completed present meaning (cf. above, examples (6) to (8)). Indeed, the examples of *aorist* given in these grammars (Katičić 1991:58-59; Barić et al. 1995:413) make it seem as if the *aorist* is only used in older written texts, referring to a past action which has no connection with the present. However, this is not entirely so, as these Croatian grammarians are well aware. In an essay on the completed present, Katičić (1992:177) makes a keen observation concerning the *aorist*, comparing its use to the use of the *perfekt* in the following two sentences:

(16) *Stigao sam*
 Arrive-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc be-IMPERF-PRES-1st-sg
iz daleka i sada sam tu.
 from far-away and now be-IMPERF-PRES-1st-sg here

‘I have arrived/arrived from afar, and now I am here.’

(17) *Stigoh iz daleka i sada sam tu.*
 Arrive-PERF-AORIST-1st-sg.

‘I have arrived/arrived from afar, and now I am here.’

Katičić claims these two sentences do not differ as to the completed present, which means that he does allow the possibility of the *aorist* expressing the completed present in example (17). He explains that the difference in the meaning is to be found in the verb form itself: whereas the verb form *stigao sam* in (16) refers to a “vivid” connection with the past by the very fact that it is in the *perfekt* tense, it is only by virtue of the comment *i*

sada sam tu that the *aorist* verb form *stigoh* in (17) can do this. Therefore, the inclusion of the comment *i sada sam tu* in (16) is “redundant to a certain degree” (Katičić 1992:177), but there is no such redundancy in (17). This seems to be in contradiction with the previous claims about neutralization and with our analysis of the examples of the completed present. If, in fact, no context were needed in sentences such as (16) to establish the completed present of the action, then the situation with the “neutralization” of the completed present would be reverse: it would be the addition of contextual elements that would neutralize the completed present, and not vice versa, as our analysis shows. That is to say, if the completed present were a cognitively real category in the grammar of Croatian symbolically expressed by means of the l-participle, grammarians would not have to strive so much to explain how a particular sentence expresses the completed present, but rather how the completed present is neutralized.

The problem of the *aorist* as the testing tool for the completed present is exacerbated by some more contemporary uses and grammatical accounts of the *aorist*. In fact, Raguž (1997:185) claims that the *aorist* is used for a “vivid representation of past events, experienced directly”, which comes conspicuously close to the definition of the completed present. Another grammar characterizes the *aorist* as the tense used for a past action that happened “immediately before the moment of speaking” (Težak and Babić 1994:265). Some examples of use of the *aorist* are on a par with examples given for the completed present in Katičić (1991) in their inclusion of the context (example from Težak and Babić 1994:265):

- (18) *Majko, evo dođe otac.*
 Mother-VOC here come-AORIST-3rd-sg father-NOM.
 ‘Mother, father has come.’

The particle *evo* ‘here’ in this example is the contextualizing element which makes the action currently relevant. Similarly, in the following example (from Težak and Babić 1994: 265):

- (19) *Stiže ti napokon. Dugo*
 Arrive PERF-AORIST-2nd-sg. you-NOM finally. Long

sam *te* *čeka*.
be-IMPERF-PRES-1st-sg. you-ACC wait-IMPERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-masc
‘You are finally here. I’ve waited for a long time.’

it is *napokon* ‘finally’ that connects the action of coming with the reference point.

Certain new trends in the usage of the *aorist* tense in electronic communication (particularly in short text messages) seem to indicate that the usage of the *aorist*, probably because of its short form, is growing. Thus, Žic-Fuchs (2002-2003:605) mentions the following example:

(20) *Nadjoh* *onu* *knjigu,*
 find-PERF-AORIST-1st-sg that-fem-ACC book-ACC
kad *hoces*.⁵
when want-IMPERF-PRES-2nd-sg
‘I’ve found that book, when you want it’

in which current relevance of the *aorist* form *nađoh* ‘find’ is established by means of the present tense in the second clause.

Examples (18) to (20) pose a problem for the theory of the *perfekt* expressing the completed present primarily because they show that there are at least some contexts in which the *aorist* can be used to express the completed present. The deciding factor in its interpretation as the completed present seems to be the context. This, in turn, means that the *aorist* cannot be used as a reliable paradigmatic test for the completed present meaning of the *perfekt*.

Discussion: the completed present untangled

The analysis of examples of the *perfekt* tense with claimed completed present, neutralization, as well as the analysis of the *aorist* tense show that the completed present, as described by Katičić (1991) and Barić et al. (1995), cannot be a significant grammatical category in the description of the Croatian *perfekt* tense. The symbolic core of the Croatian *perfekt* seems to be vague as to its completed present value: the

⁵ No changes have been made to the original spelling of the short text message, in which special Croatian signs have been omitted (i.e. digraph *dj* was used for *đ*, and no diacritics were used). This is standard usage in short text messages, because the technology does not allow for Croatian signs.

completed present and/or its neutralization cannot be symbolically expressed by the *perfekt* tense, and are only a matter of the context. In this section, we are going to examine this claim based on the factors distinguishing past tenses/usages from perfect tenses/usages in various languages. Next, we will offer a short cognitive sketch of the establishment of current relevance in Croatian.

Givón (2001:283-297) discusses the distinguishing features of the past and perfect, which he summarizes in the following table:

Table 3. The features of the past and perfect (from Givón 2001:297)

feature	past	perfect
anteriority	+	+
absolute reference	+	–
perfectivity	+	+
termination	+	+/-
lingering relevance ⁶	–	+
sequentiality	+	–

If we apply these characteristics to the usage of the *perfekt* in Croatian, we can see that it exhibits characteristics of both the past and the perfect. Thus, it is used to refer to a past action (the feature of anteriority; Givón 2001:293-294), which can be seen in all of the above examples. It may have or lack absolute reference. Most of the above examples of the perfect do not have absolute reference (because they illustrate its perfect use), but note that they are compatible with the usage of an adjunct of time placing the action of reading in the distant and not-so-distant past (e.g., *prije dvije godine* ‘two years ago’, *u ožujku* ‘in March’, *jučer* ‘yesterday’, etc.). Moreover, the Croatian perfect, just like the past and perfect tenses, includes perfectivity, that is to say, completion of the action (Givón 2001:294). Furthermore, the Croatian *perfekt* is characterized by termination (Givón 2001: 294-295): in order to refer to an action that has started in the past and still goes on, one must use the present tense and not the *perfekt* in Croatian. Finally, as we have discussed above, the Croatian *perfekt* is vague as to current relevance, that is to say

⁶ See footnote 2.

it may or may not express it. Finally, it is also vague as to sequentiality (Givón 2001:295-296). Thus, the *perfekt* may be used in a sequential way, where the order of events in the discourse corresponds to the order of events, but it may also be used counter-sequentially.

Since various usages of the Croatian *perfekt* tense can be subsumed under the past or under the perfect depending on the context, the question that we have to ask is whether the symbolic core of the *perfekt* is vague as to these features or whether one of the categories is an extension of the other. As we have seen, Katičić (1991) and Barić et al. (1995) believe that the *perfekt* has a core perfect meaning (which they call the completed present), which is neutralized in particular contexts. This means that they take what they call neutralization as a sort of a discourse extension of the core completed present meaning. However, their completed present does not correspond fully to the perfect as described above: it refers only to current relevance, but does not mention the characteristics of absolute reference or sequentiality. Since the Croatian *perfekt* may or may not express the features of current relevance, absolute reference and sequentiality depending on the context, we believe that the Croatian *perfekt* schema is vague in this respect: it may, in fact, be used as both the past and the perfect, without any special symbolic requirements. Traditional grammarians have mistaken the contextually determined time frame which encompasses the time of reference in some examples of usage of the *perfekt* tense for symbolic properties of the tense itself. What they have failed to elaborate on is the aspect of the verb and its interaction with the I-participle, which we believe to be highly significant. We will discuss these factors and their interaction in the following paragraph.

The completed present is claimed to be more frequent for perfective than for imperfective verbs (cf. Barić et al. 1995:410; Katičić 1991:50-51), because “the consequences of the completed action, event or state are more important than their continuation in time” (Barić et al. 1995:410). We attribute this to easier pragmatic inference (Givón 1984:283) of current relevance for the I-participle of perfective verbs.⁷ Perfective verbs profile a bounded region in time; i.e., the complete process including its endpoints is construed as being in the scope of view. As opposed to this, imperfective

⁷ This further depends on the interaction of grammatical perfectivity with the Aktionsart of a particular verb, but for the sake of simplicity we will take into account only aspect in the rest of the discussion.

verbs are construed in such a way that the scope of view is completely filled with the process and that its boundaries are indeterminate – they extend outside the scope of view (Langacker 1987: 260-261).⁸

We believe that the l-participle as used in the Croatian *perfekt* tense is responsible for temporal anteriority and a certain degree of terminal prominence, just like the PERF₄ participle in English (cf. Langacker 1991:221). For perfective verbs, the l-participle suspends the sequentially scanned perfective process by creating an end-point that coincides with the last developmental stage of the process. Thus, there is a simultaneous accomplishment achieved by the perfective process of the verb and the end-point imposed by the participle, which further enables pragmatic inference of current relevance. The fact that the last part of the process is profiled is also evident from the possibility of adjectival usage of the l-participle in Croatian:

- (21) *uvela* *ruža*
 dead-PERF-PARTICIPLE-sg-fem rose-NOM
 'dead rose'

The auxiliary verb *biti* 'to be' is used as a vestige of a grounding element, providing primarily trajector properties (through person and number agreement) and a temporal profile for the l-participle.⁹

With imperfective verbs the l-participle is also responsible for temporal anteriority. It suspends a series of identical stages of the imperfective process and creates an end-point by cancelling the process and "leaving" the event in the past. Since the imperfective process is unchanging throughout its duration and since none of its components signal any change of state towards achievement, the end-point imposed by the l-participle simply cancels the process. Thus, current relevance is more readily inferred with perfective verbs, and less so with imperfective ones.

⁸ In Croatian there is also the issue of biaspectual verbs, i.e. those verbs that are vague as to their aspect, especially in the *perfekt* tense (cf. Babić et al. 1991: 670).

⁹ However, we believe there is some evidence across Slavic languages that the *be* auxiliary in perfect tenses is losing its role as a provider of the temporal profile. In Croatian it can be left out in the *perfekt* tense when the trajector is recoverable, in Polish it has been grammaticalized as person ending on the l-participle, and it has been completely lost in Russian (which mandates the usage of the personal pronoun). Whether this is indeed the loss of the role of the *be* auxiliary as a temporally grounding predication, and, if so, what consequences this may have for Slavic grammar (e.g. for the usage of l-participle forms as adjectives) still remains to be investigated. These issues, however, are not relevant for the present analysis.

This short analysis raises many issues related to the structuring of the scene involving the Croatian l-participle, which we would like to pursue in the future. These include the relation of Aktionsart and grammatical perfectivity/imperfectivity, the role of transitivity in inferring current relevance, the (change of) semantics of the content verb, the role of the l-participle in other constructions and the contrast between the l-participle and the n-participle.

Conclusion

Positing the category of completeness is a reasonable step based on the grammatical tradition of describing Croatian within a structuralist theory, which considers language a system and which values highly the ideal of descriptive economy. Indeed, the intuitions of Croatian grammarians concerning the current relevance of prototypical examples are correct, but their explanations seem to be off target. They hypothesize the existence of a system of tenses which symbolically includes a conceived time category of completed present. However, based on the analysis of their own examples of the completed present, we have shown that the present ramifications of the action, which they claim to be an inherent part of the l-participle, are a matter of the context. The context is further supported by pragmatic inference of current relevance, which tends to be greater for perfective verbs. This fact explains why imperfective verbs seldom have current relevance, as noted by traditional Croatian grammars.

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