OLD CHURCH SLAVONIC PERFECT: SEMANTIC DIFFERENCES UNDERLYING FORMAL VARIATION?

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Old Church Slavonic “perfect”

• A periphrastic construction with (mainly) past-time reference
• Includes /-participle of the main verb and the auxiliary ‘be’ in the present / past tense [not considered here]
• In the domain of the past, opposed to aorist and imperfect
• Not very transparent rules specifying the choice of perfect forms
• NB: Uniquely, no direct Greek counterpart!
Old Church Slavonic “perfect”

• ρυδαахѫ же въсн. и плакаахѫ сѧ еѩ. онъ же рече. не плачите сѧ еѩ. нѣстѣ омрѣла нѣ спитѣ (Lk 8.52: Cod. Mar.)

• And all were weeping and mourning for her, but he said, “Do not weep, for she is not dead (lit. ‘has not died’) but sleeping.” (ESV)

• Ἐκλαιον δὲ πάντες, καὶ ἐκόπτοντο αὐτήν; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν: μὴ κλαίετε, οὐ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν [AOR], ἀλλὰ καθεύδει
Formal variation

• Auxiliary position vis-a-vis participle (pre- vs. postposed)
• “Full” vs. “short” form of the 3SG auxiliary (есть [prs.] / быть [pst.] vs. е / бы)
• Presence vs. absence of the 3SG auxiliary (“bare participle”)
• The variation is attested, but never explained (to our knowledge)
Semantically driven rules?

- Many cases of formal variation can be explained in semantic and/or pragmatic terms.
- Main types of explanation:
  - argument / predicate focus
  - special syntactic contexts: embedded clauses, relative clauses, interrogative and/or negative clauses
  - description vs. commentary in discourse
Argument / predicate focus

• The auxiliary enclitic can mark the **focused** constituent within the sentence, cf. examples (2)-(6)
• Special sub-cases involve **relative clauses**, cf. examples (7)-(8), and **wh-questions**, cf. examples (9)-(11)
• Post-verbal auxiliary often implies **predicate focus**, cf. examples (12)-(15)
“Full” vs. “short” form of the 3 SG auxiliary

• A specific trait of *Codex Suprasliensis*
• However, reminiscent of what is observed in Old Russian
• “Truncated” forms strongly tend towards non-assertive contexts including general questions with negation (which, in this case, are close to logical assumptions); cf. examples (16)-(21)
• NB: the same distribution for *можетъ / може* ‘can:PRS:3SG’
No auxiliary in 3SG present

• Again, a specific trait of *Codex Suprasliensis* (but with numerous counterparts in almost all modern Slavic languages)

• Seems to convey two different discourse functions: namely, describing the events vs. commenting / assessing the events described (no auxiliary in the last case); cf. examples (24)-(26)
To conclude

- OCS perfect is mainly a *pragmatically oriented* category
- Highly sensitive to focalization, as well as involving specific discourse parameters
- An “aspectual” component may be secondary (if existing at all)