

# Aspect and prefixation in Old Church Slavonic and Ancient Greek

Both Ancient Greek and Old Church Slavonic (OCS) have aspectual inflectional forms, and both languages have extensive prefixation of verbs. In this paper we use parallel data from Greek and OCS to shed light on the controversial question of OCS verbal aspect.

The question of verbal aspect in Old Church Slavonic (OCS) is unresolved. The language has aspectual inflectional forms in the past tense system (imperfect, aorist, perfect) in the common Indo-European style, but there is also evidence that a system of aspect expressed in lexical verb pairs (by prefixation and suffixation), in the style of that of modern Slavic languages, is fairly well established in these first attested Slavic texts. Collocating OCS verb forms with the Greek forms from which they are translated sometimes displays this pattern very clearly, sometimes less so.

In Table 1 we see a Greek simplex verb which has three OCS translations, all formed from a single stem. The Greek aorist is rendered by a prefixed variant in the aorist, the Greek imperfect by the simplex or a secondary prefixed variant in the present, the Greek present by the simplex or secondary prefixed variant in the present and the Greek future by the prefixed variant in the present. From a modern Slavic point of view, this looks like a case of perfectivization by prefixation, with an accompanying process of secondary suffixation of already prefixed verbs, producing a second imperfect verb in addition to the simplex. The inflectional aspect marking in the past tense seems redundant, since the same effect could apparently be achieved by crossing lexical aspect with a neutral past tense form, as lexical aspect may be crossed with the present tense to produce regular present and (perfective) future respectively. However, matters are not that simple: In Table 2, we see a Greek simplex rendered by two simplex verbs from different stems, in apparent free variation, and we see that the past tense forms do not match up perfectly between original and translation: We find both aorist-to-imperfect and imperfect-to-aorist translations.

Thus it is reasonable to assume that OCS had a lexical verb pair or verb group system similar to that found in modern Slavic languages, but that it was not fully developed. There is little agreement in the literature as to what the role of this verb pair system was.

- Dostál (1954) argues that OCS had Czech-style aspectual pairs, and that (almost) all verbs could be classified as perfective or imperfective. He argues that the aorist:imperfect distinction is not aspectual, but in practice his definition of the aorist’s semantics is hard to distinguish from the definition of the perfective aspect’s semantics
- Amse-De Jong (1974) argues that OCS had perfective, imperfective and non-aspectual verbs. The non-aspectual verbs may occur in any tense, imperfective verbs may not occur in the aorist, whereas perfective verbs may marginally occur in the imperfect, since she argues that

	aorist	imperfect	present
aorist	сѣ-blazn-i-ti		
imperfect		blazn-i-ti, сѣ-blažn-ja-ti	
present			blazn-i-ti, сѣ-blažn-ja-ti
future			сѣ-blazn-i-ti

Table 1: OCS translations of Greek *skandalizō*

	aorist	imperfect	present
aorist	div-i-ti, čud-i-ti	div-i-ti	
imperfect	čud-i-ti	div-i-ti, čud-i-ti	
present			div-i-ti, čud-i-ti
future			

Table 2: OCS translations of Greek *thaumazô*

	Greek simplex	Greek prefixed
suffixed (ipf)	495	104
suffixed (pf)	25	9
prefixed	2569	2026
secondary prefixed	736	827
simplex	5093	490

Table 3: Verb types in Greek and OCS

imperfect tense can be used for situations where the event time is not identical with the narrated time.

- Łazorczyk (2010) argues that the imperfect and aorist express viewpoint aspect, whereas OCS verb pairs express Aktionsart: prefixed verbs are telic, and secondary prefixed verbs are atelicized. In her opinion, imperfective viewpoint aspect may not be combined with telic predicates, which makes secondary prefixation necessary. A problem with this approach is that ‘perfective imperfects’ are actually attested.

A reasonable question to ask, then, is whether the inflectional and lexical systems expressed two different things, or whether OCS was in a transitional stage where the same category was expressed by two overlapping means. In this paper we contrast OCS and Greek data from the PROIEL corpus to answer this question. The OCS text is aligned with the Greek original at token level, and both texts are fully annotated for morphology, syntax and derivational verb morphology.

<sup>1</sup>

	aorist	imperfect	l-form	past act.ptc.	present	pres.act.ptc.
aorist	2823	38	98	26	607	4
aor.act.ptc.	30	2	1	801	11	13
future	12	0	1	3	716	1
imperfect	80	630	15	1	3	6
perfect	159	1	18	3	120	0
pluperfect	14	30	12	1	1	0
present	392	17	10	3	1763	10
pres.act.ptc.	4	5	1	13	24	926

Table 4: Greek–OCS form correspondences, selected forms

When we compare the Greek and OCS systems, we find that they are clearly independent of each other. OCS verbs are much more frequently prefixed than Greek ones, and although Greek prefixed verbs are likely to be translated by OCS prefixed verbs, we find an equal amount of OCS prefixed verbs are translations of Greek simplexes (Table 3). We notice that secondary prefixed verbs easily translate Greek prefixed verbs. This suggests that if Greek prefixation marks telicity,

<sup>1</sup>The OCS text has annotation for verbal prefixes, verbal suffixes and verb stems, the Greek text has annotation for verbal prefixes and base verbs (but no annotation for suffixation).

the distinction between prefixed and secondary prefixed verbs in OCS should amount to something else.

When it comes to inflectional aspect (as found in the aorist, imperfect and arguably also in aorist/past and present participles), we find that OCS largely follows the Greek, but that there is also a fair number of deviations (Table 4). We find that the deviations also have verb type patterns: OCS aorists rendering Greek imperfects are formed from prefixed or simplex verbs. OCS imperfects rendering Greek aorists, on the other hand, are formed from simplex or secondary prefixed verbs.