Serbian verbs front to be expressive*

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Abstract. The squib shows that the Serbian Aorist, an aspectual tense, is peculiar in that whenever it occurs in sentence initial position it necessarily triggers an expressive meaning. We argue that this expressive interpretation is associated with a discourse-oriented projection to which Aorist raises. Aorist, we propose, may come with a focus feature, in which case this feature needs to be licensed by an operator in the Foc head. Raising the Aorist to the Foc head results in expressive interpretation. In wh-exclamatives, however, it is the wh-phrase which introduces the focus feature and brings in the expressive component, rendering the position of Aorist irrelevant.

Keywords. Serbian, Aorist, expressive component, initial position, Focus

1. Introduction

In addition to periphrastic past tense forms (1), Serbian makes use of an aspectual tense, Aorist, which describes punctual, completed actions (2a). Although it is somewhat archaic, the Aorist is still used in vivid narration. But what is peculiar about the Aorist is that when the verb occurs in sentence-initial position, it carries an expressive component, in addition to the descriptive one. In (2b), the speaker also expresses his/her attitude (great surprise in this case). This fronting of the Aorist comes with a particular intonation, which is characteristic of exclamatives. Crucially, however, this does not hold when the Aorist is not fronted, as in (2a), i.e. the sentence is not an exclamative and there is no expressive component.

(1) Jovan je udario Mariju.
Jovan is hit Marija
'Jovan has hit Marija.'

(2) a. Jovan udari Mariju.
Jovan hit-aor. Marija
'Jovan has hit Marija.'

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Moreover, this expressive component does not come naturally with other verb forms in initial position ((3a) for periphrastic past and (3b) for a form denoting future).

(3) a. Udario je Jovan Mariju.
    Hit is Jovan Marija
    'Jovan has hit Marija.'

b. Udariće Jovan Mariju.
    hit. Will Jovan Marija
    'Jovan will hit Marija.'

The aim of this squib is to provide an analysis of the fronted Aorist in Serbian and to account for the expressive interpretation it induces.

2. Fronting the Aorist

2.1 Zanuttini & Portner (2003): semantic-pragmatic component of exclamatives

In order to fully understand the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of this phenomenon in Serbian, we provide Zanuttini and Portner (2003)'s account of exclamatives, which our analysis relies on.

Regarding the semantic-pragmatic component, Z&P argue that domain widening and factivity are two components of the meaning of exclamatives. Factivity introduces the presupposition that the propositional content of exclamatives is true (to be defined in the context of exclamatives below). Regarding the widening, it is important to note that the major set of data that Z&P discuss includes wh-exclamatives like (4). In that sense, the widening component of exclamatives refers to widening "the domain of quantification for the Wh-operator which gives rise to the set of alternative propositions denoted by the sentence" (Z&P 2003:40), as in (5).

Applied to (4), the propositional content or the initial domain of quantification would be the set of things the person in question eats in general, whereas the widened domain (which is forced by the non-empty set requirement in (5)), includes the new things which have not been previously expected to be part of the set. It is precisely this domain widening that derives the pragmatic 'sense of surprise', 'unexpectedness', 'extreme degree', etc.

(4) Che roba che l magna! (Paduan) (Z&P 2003:51)
    what stuff that he eats
    'The things he eats!'

(5) **Widening:** For any clause $S$ containing $R_{widen}$, widen the initial domain of quantification for $R_{widen}$, $D_1$, to a new domain, $D_2$, such that

(i) $[S]_{w, D_2, -} - [S]_{w, D_1, -} \neq \emptyset$ and

(ii) $\forall x \forall y [(x \in D_1 \& y \in (D_2 - D_1)) \rightarrow x \neq y]$. 
Now, the exclamative construction in (2b) in Serbian is clearly not a wh-exclamative like (4) (but see section 2.4. for a discussion of the interaction of the fronted Aorist with wh-exclamatives). However, Z&P (2003) discuss a potentially relevant construction, as in (6). They observe that (6) can be used in a situation where a person is known to rarely eat their meal, and who, on a particular occasion, ate everything, hence the surprise. Regarding the domain of widening, which in this situation does not contain the wh-operator, Z&P suggest that we are dealing with “widening the domain of events under discussion” (2003:54): from the domain of expected events to the domain which also includes the exceptional ones. Put formally, the operator $R_{\text{widen}}$ in (5) would widen $D_1$ to $D_2$ by adding the true proposition ‘He ate everything’ to the existing proposition-set in $D_1$. In order for widening to apply, the proposition ‘He ate everything’ needs to be true with respect to $D_2$, and it must not be true with respect to $D_1$, i.e. the domain must be extended by the unusual case.\footnote{Z&P (2003) also observe that the effects are similar to the effects achieved by mirativity (DeLancey 1997), where the speaker also does not expect a particular outcome. In Turkish, the morpheme $m\ddot{u}g$ denotes mirativity. Z&P (2003) observe that the component of unexpectedness can potentially be tied to widening (although they do not provide the details). If that analysis is on the right track, it exemplifies yet another environment where domain widening is not necessarily tied to wh-elements.}

(6) No ga-lo magnâ tuto! (Paduan) (Z&P 2003:51)
\[ \text{neg has-s.cl eaten everything} \]
\[ \text{He ate everything!} \]

Finally, Z&P define factivity in exclamative constructions as in (7), where every proposition that is added to the domain $D_2$ is presupposed to be true.

(7) Factivity: For any clause $S$ containing $R_{\text{factivity}}$ in addition to $R_{\text{widen}}$, every $p \in [S]_{w,D_2} \prec \prec [S]_{w,D_1}$ is presupposed to be true.

Now that we have outlined Z&P’s proposal, we have the necessary ingredients to explain how the exclamative meaning arises with fronted Aorist.

### 2.2 Extending the account to the Aorist in Serbian

Having described Z&P’s theory of exclamatives, in this section we apply it to fronted Aorist in Serbian, exemplified by (2b), repeated below in (8) (with the syntactic component discussed in section 2.3). We propose that domain widening with Aorist is similar to the case of (6) in Paduan. Widening refers to extending the domain of events under discussion. In this particular case, the existing domain $D_1$ would comprise the proposition-set of events where the person usually does not hit Marija or does not hit her at all. Note that in Z&P’s analysis, nothing prevents the initial
domain from being an empty set. The only requirement that needs to be satisfied is that the proposition 'Jovan hit Marija' is true with respect to D2, and that it is not true with respect to D1; the domain must be extended in the unusual case and this, we propose, brings in the effect of surprise, i.e. the expressivity component with fronted Aorist.

(8) Udari Jovan Mariju!
    hit-aor. Jovan Marija
    'Jovan has hit Marija! (which is surprising)'

Furthermore, the meaning effect of exclamative sentences like (8) is that of a factive: whereas the new information is the speaker's surprise, it is presupposed that the the event in question (Jovan's hitting Mary), which widens the domain, actually happened (cf. (7)). From this it follows that any tense forms which invoke worlds different from the actual one and thus non-factivity in the actual world will be excluded from such exclamatives – indeed, future (cf. (3b)) and all the non-indicative verb forms, e.g. (9), are banned from such exclamatives:

(9) #Zelim da udari Jovan Mariju!
    want that hit Jovan Marija
    Intended interpretation: 'I want Jovan to hit Marija (and the hitting would be surprising)'

The account, however, does not provide the full picture – it is still not clear why periphrastic past tenses would be excluded under this interpretation in indicative environments (cf. (3a)). Since periphrastic past forms combine with either imperfective or perfective aspect, one possibility is that those specified for imperfective aspect will be excluded because they do not entail the completion of the event and, due to the lack of termination, the event is not taken for granted, i.e. presupposed. This would also exclude the present tense which combines with imperfective verbs when it receives the interpretation ongoing at the Utterance Time.⁴ We leave the lack of this interpretation with periphrastic past forms specified for perfective aspect for further research.

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² See Z&P's analogy between negative questions in English and yes/no exclamatives in Paduan. Assuming that a yes/no-question has only a singleton set as its denotation, widening extends this set by adding the proposition with the opposite truth value (Brandner 2010).

³ We would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the suggestion how to exclude certain forms. The reviewer also observes that this division correctly excludes exclamatives with the present tense in Russian.

⁴ An anonymous reviewer suggests another possibility and that is to exclude periphrastic past on syntactic grounds, i.e. to assume that only heads and not phrases can front to a designated position, i.e. FocP, which we assume is the position where the relevant element raising, as discussed in section 2.3. Participles, which are part of the periphrastic past forms, and which have nominal properties in Serbian, i.e. display gender and number agreement, would be treated as phrases, whereas verbs in Aorist are heads. Consequently, the Aorist would be able to front, but not participles. While this option is certainly worth pursuing, it is also problematic since it would wrongly predict that raising wh-phrases to SpecFocP should be illicit.
Having accounted for the semantics and pragmatics of the fronted Aorist, in the next section we turn to its syntax.

2.3 The syntax of fronted Aorist

Z&P (2003) argue that that the two syntactic properties which define the class of exclamatives are the set of alternatives and factivity. In particular, “(a) exclamatives denote a set of alternative propositions, a result of the operator–variable structure, (b) exclamatives are factive, i.e. their propositional content is presupposed; this presuppositionality is the result of the abstract morpheme F” in the CP domain (Z&P 2003: 40). Similarly to Z&P, based on the data presented so far, we would like to argue that Aorist in sentence initial position involves an exclamative and therefore the set of alternatives which are associated with the focus feature (see below), and this is accompanied by an expressive component (one of surprise, as noted above). Thus, when using a fronted Aorist, the speaker considers the existence of the state-of-affairs denoted by the fronted Aorist to be a deviation from a certain norm.

Regarding the syntax of fronted Aorist, we propose that Aorist may come with a focus feature, in which case this feature needs to be licensed by an operator in the Foc head, in the discourse-layer. Thus, while (2a), with canonical word order, only denotes a real or hypothetical state of affairs, in the sentence in (2b), with a fronted Aorist verb form, Jovan’s hitting Marija is presented as being a deviation from a norm and expressing the speaker’s surprise/amazement at the very possibility of the hitting having happened. This interpretation is syntactically achieved by raising the verb (via all the necessary functional projections) into the Foc head which licenses/introduces the set of alternatives:3

\[
\text{(10) FocP} \quad \text{Spec} \quad \text{Foc'} \quad \text{TP} \quad \text{Foc} \quad \text{[foc]} \quad \text{TP} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{Jovan} \quad \text{T} \quad \text{vP} \quad \text{T'} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{v} \quad \text{v'} \quad \text{v} \quad \text{vP} \quad \text{VP} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{Marija}
\]

Now, in simple declarative sentences, the Focus head is simply not there, the Aorist does not carry a focus feature and the sentence simply denotes a state of affairs. However, if the derivation also involves a Focus head, with its attract-all-focus instruction, any element that has a focus feature will have to raise to the FocP. What

3 The diagram has been significantly simplified in terms of the number and type of projections. For proposals of the clausal structure of Serbian see Bošković (1997, et seq.), Halupka-Rešetar (2011), Progovac (2005), Stjepanović (1999).
the diagram in (10) shows is that the Aorist in sentences like (2b) needs to raise to the Foc head in order to satisfy the attract-all-focus instruction. Namely, Bošković (1999, 2007) argues in favour of the existence of focus heads with this property. Being a head, Aorist raises to Foc. However, there are also other elements which may satisfy the attract-all-focus instruction of the Foc head, such as wh-phrases and focused non-wh-constituents. Thus, the proposed account predicts that these, too, will raise into the left-peripheral FocP projection. This calls for an explanation of the interplay of fronted Aorist and other focused elements, offered in the next section.

2.4 The interplay of Aorist and focused XPs

Wh-words are generally considered to carry a focus feature. In fact, wh-phrases in Serbian have been shown to be inherently focused and as a consequence of this, must raise to SpecFocP (Stjepanović 1999, 2003, Halupka-Rešetar 2011). The order of wh-phrases in multiple wh-questions in Serbian is free (11) and they may co-occur with (contrastively) focused non-wh-phrases as long as at least one wh-word precedes a focused non-wh-constituent (12).

(11) a. Pitam se gde li će šta Marija ostaviti.
     wonder se.refl where li will.Cl what.Acc Marija.Nom leave
     ‘I wonder where Marija will leave what.’

b. Pitam se šta li će gde Marija ostaviti.

(12) Znam ko je šta kupio Petru na moru. Pitam se samo ... (I know who bought what for Peter at the seaside. I am just wondering ...)

a. ko je šta kupio Mariji.
   who.Nom is.Cl what.Acc bought Marija.Dat
   ‘who bought what for Marija.’

b. ko je šta Mariji kupio.

c. ko je Mariji šta kupio.

d. ??Mariji ko je šta kupio.

e. *Mariji je ko šta kupio.


In order to account for the above situation, Halupka-Rešetar (2013) proposes that all the elements that bear a focus feature move to the multiple Specifier of the Foc head,

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6 Note that the present tense is also a simple tense/syncretic form, i.e. a head, and when it is used in vivid narration of past events (the "historical present"), it can indeed be fronted and have an expressive flavour, like the verb bije (‘beat’) in (i) below but not in (ii), where the verb is not initial:

(i) Sedim ja juče u kafani I imam šta da sit.1.sg.pres I yesterday in bar and have-1.sg. what that
   vidim: bije Jovan onog malog iz Beograda.
   see.1.sg.pres. hit.1.sg.pres. Jovan that little from Belgrade
   ‘I am sitting in a bar and you wouldn’t believe what I see; Jovan is beating that kid from Belgrade!’

(ii) Sedim ja juče u kafani i imam šta da vidim: Jovan bije onog malog iz Beograda.
in line with the attract-all-focus instruction. From there, only one of the \textit{wh-XPs} will raise to SpecForceP, as required by the attract-one-\textit{wh} instruction and in order to type the clause as a question (Cheng 1997).

Now, consider the interaction between Aorist and wh-exclamatives. In wh-exclamatives, i.e. exclamatives which involve a fronted \textit{wh}-phrase, like (13), the expressive interpretation is obtained regardless of the structural position of the Aorist verb form. We propose that this is a consequence of the fact that it is the \textit{wh}-phrase which introduces the focus feature, and the set of alternatives, widening the domain and bringing in the expressive component and this renders the position of Aorist irrelevant. In other words, we assume (along with Z&P 2003) that in wh-exclamatives, the initial domain of quantification is widened by adding new elements to it, and the surprise and the expressive component are the result of the choice of the newly added alternative, which also happens to involve the highest degree (cf. Castroviejo 2008, Rett 2011). To illustrate this, in (14), the set of alternatives could also contain the element \textit{neopisivo lepu} ‘beautiful beyond words’, extending the previously established set, given in answer to (13). And it is exactly the addition of this alternative and the focusing on a \textit{wh}-phrase which contains a degree component (and thus creating a high degree effect) that the expressive component is due to.

\begin{align*}
(13) & \text{Kakvu ženu oženi Marko?} \quad \{\text{lepu, zgodnu, ružnu}\} \\
& \text{what-like woman married Marko beautiful, good looking, ugly} \\
& \text{‘What kind of a woman did Marko marry?’}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
(14) & \text{Kakvu ženu oženi Marko!} \quad \{\text{beautiful beyond words, beautiful, good looking, ugly}\} \\
& \text{what woman married Marko} \\
& \text{‘What a woman Marko married!’}
\end{align*}

This conclusion is supported by the data in (15), where expressive interpretation is obtained regardless of the word order contrast in (15a) and (15b). This further corroborates our claim that, it is not the Aorist which is responsible for the expressive interpretation in (15), but the \textit{wh-XP}, which focus-fronts in Serbian (Stjepanović 1999).

\begin{align*}
(15) \text{a.} & \text{Kakvu ženu oženi Marko!} \\
& \text{what woman marry-aor. Marko} \\
& \text{‘What a woman Marko married!’}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
(15) \text{b.} & \text{Kakvu ženu Marko oženi!} \\
& \text{what woman Marko marry-aor.} \\
& \text{‘What a woman Marko married!’}
\end{align*}

\begin{align*}
(15) \text{c.} & \text{‘Oženi kakvu ženu Marko!} \\
& \text{‘What a woman Marko married!’}
\end{align*}

Thus, since the \textit{wh}-phrase does all the work, there is no need for Aorist to derive expressivity. Alternatively, one might claim that even in contexts like (15) above Aorist still carries expressivity, but we simply do not see double effects.

Furthermore, since expressive interpretation is obtained due to the \textit{wh-phrases} and not the Aorist, this account also predicts that expressivity will also be obtained with other verb forms that occur with wh-exclamatives. That this prediction is correct is evidenced by (16a) for past and (16b) for future forms.

\begin{align*}
(16) \text{a.} & \text{Oženi neopisivo lepu Marko!} \\
& \text{‘What a woman Marko married!’}
\end{align*}

Thus, the predictive power of the account is confirmed by the data in (16), where expressive interpretation is obtained with other verb forms that occur with wh-exclamatives.
(16) a. Kakvu ženu je oženio Marko!
   what woman is married Marko
   ‘What a woman Marko married!’
b. Kakvu ženu će oženiti Marko!
   what woman will marry-inf. Marko
   ‘What a woman Marko will marry!’

Finally, what the data suggest is that fronted Aorist and wh-exclamatives have in common the expressive and focus meaning component but that at the same time, they are very different with respect to what is in focus and, consequently, what is evaluated to be surprising (or whatever expressive meaning is involved). As we have seen in this section, focusing on a wh-phrase that contains a degree component and therefore creates the high degree effect. By contrast, focusing on an Aorist tensed verb form actually equals focusing on the fact that something happened in the past, so there is no degree whatsoever. From this it follows that the former will be possible with all kinds of verb forms (which stay in situ or in a lower position, because they are not in focus, cf. (16)), whereas the latter will not be, as argued in section 2.2.

3. Conclusion

In this squib, we have argued that the Serbian Aorist is a special tense in that it can front and when this happens, it induces an expressive interpretation. This happens due to the fact that the meaning effect of exclamative sentences with a fronted Aorist is that of a factive: it is presupposed that the the event in question actually happened. Fronting other tenses and non-indicative verb forms does not induce an expressive interpretation, which we explain by the fact that these tense forms invoke worlds different from the actual one and thus non-factivity in the actual world (apart from the periphrastic past specified for perfective aspect). To account for the syntax of fronted Aorist in Serbian, we propose that due to its inherent focus feature, the Aorist raises to the Foc head to satisfy the attract-all-focus instruction. In wh-exclamatives, the wh-phrase also raises to FocP, but focusing on a wh-phrase, which contains a degree component, creates the high degree/surprise effect. This expressive component is therefore observable regardless of the verb form/tense used in a wh-exclamative. By contrast, focusing on an Aorist (i.e. fronting it) involves no degree whatsoever but is limited to verb forms invoking factivity. What remains yet to be seen is why periphrastic past forms specified for perfective aspect are banned from fronting in the way Aorist can front.

References


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