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## **The Syntax and Semantics of Converbs in Modern Slavic Languages**

**Abstract:** The paper investigates the category of converbs in modern Slavic languages, a grammatical category exhibiting ongoing development. Converbs' morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties are examined across various Slavic languages. By comparing their syntax, usage, and semantics, the study aims to identify connections between the current state of converbs and the typological features of each language. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the analysis reveals that modern Slavic languages exhibit significant variation in the syntax and semantics of converbs, highlighting the ongoing evolution of this grammatical category within the Slavic language family.

**Keywords:** converbs, modern Slavic languages, syntax, semantics, comparative linguistics

### **1. Introduction**

Converbs are one of the youngest grammatical categories in the Slavic languages, their origin dating back to the 14th-15th centuries. They have also undergone changes in morphology, syntax, and semantics throughout their history. This paper presents the results of a typological study, in the course of which I will discuss the present state of converbs in Slavic languages and want to point out the differences between languages in their formation, usage, and meaning. We will prioritize a comparative analysis of converbs in modern Slavic languages from a syntactic and semantic perspective, without delving into their formal morphological properties.

The first part of the study is a general introduction to converbs as a grammatical category. Then the syntactic properties of converbs in Slavic languages are examined, and in the third part they are analyzed from a semantic point of view.

### **2. The converb as a grammatical category**

There are several definitions of the converb. Haspelmath's definition is that a converb is a nonfinite verb form whose main function is to express adverbial subordination (HASPELMATH 1995: 3). Nedjalkov's definition is that a converb is a verb form that depends on another verb form but is an adjunct, and not its complement (NEDJALCOV 1990: 36).

The term converb originates with Ramsted, a Finnish linguist working on Altaic languages and was first used in typology by Nedjalkov in 1987 (HASPELMATH 1995: 46).

Converbs can be of different kinds according to their syntactic function in a sentence. A converb can occupy the syntactic positions of (i) an adverb of a simple sentence, (ii) a secondary predicate, or (iii) a predicate of a subordinate clause (NEDJALKOV 1990: 37).

Converbs can also be subdivided according to their semantics: they can be (i) special, (ii) contextual, or (iii) narrative converbs. Special converbs can be further subdivided into temporal and non-temporal converbs, which carry special meanings. Contextual converbs, on the other hand, can carry various meanings, depending on the context. Narrative converbs are used to describe several interrelated events (NEDJALKOV 1990: 42–3). Contextual converbs are the most common kind in Slavic languages, as there are few converbs in these languages (two converbs in most), so their meanings can vary depending on the context. Languages that have a large number of converbs have the most specialized converbs (COUPE 2005: 8).

In dealing with converbs, it is important to look at the coreferentiality of subjects. When examining coreference, what is checked is whether there is agreement between the main predicate and the subject of the converb. I illustrate this with examples from Serbian.

(1) *Dečaci su pitali majku, ušavši u sobu.* “Having gone into the room, the boys asked their mother.”

(2) *Šetajući se na ulici, Ana je primetila jednog psa.* “Walking down the street, Anna noticed a dog.”

The converb is one of the grammatical categories used to express taxis. The predicates of the dependent taxis can be distinguished as the primary or the secondary action, while in the independent taxis there is no hierarchy between the predicates (BONDARKO 1987: 239). In this case, the primary action is expressed by a finite verb, while the secondary action is expressed by the converb:

(3) *Gledajući film zaspao je.* “He fell asleep watching the movie.”

Converbs in Slavic languages have various names: деепричастие in Eastern Slavic languages and Bulgarian, glagolski prilog in Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian, deležje in Slovene, and přechodník in Czech and Slovak. Imiesłowcy przysłówkowe is the term used in Polish. Typologically, these languages belong to the group with contextual converbs. Due to the limited number of converb forms (usually two or less), their meaning depends heavily on the context. Syntactically, Slavic converbs can function as predicates in dependent clauses or act as adverbial modifiers.

### 3. Syntax

The syntactic analysis of converbs includes an overview of whether there are two or fewer converbs in the given Slavic language. The next part is the

examination of the coreference between the subject and the converb, i.e. whether the subject of the converb is the same as that of the predicate or not, and, finally, of how the subject is expressed, implicitly or explicitly.

### **South Slavic languages:**

#### **Serbian and Croatian:**

Serbian and Croatian have both adverbial participles. The subject of the converb is coreferential with the subject of the predicate, except in sentences where there is a general subject, "people in general" (IVIĆ 1983: 157), and when there is a so-called logical subject (PIPER 2005: 463), but semantically both actions are performed by the same agent. The subject can never be in the clause in which the converb is placed but in the clause of the predicate (IVIĆ 1983: 158), making it an implicit subject.

(4) *Ћутао је, склонивши поглед, не знајући шта да каже.* [М. Селимовић] (PIPER 2005: 465). "He was silent, looking away, not knowing what to say."

In example (4), the predicate is expressed in the complex past tense, the subject is implicit (he), and the subject of the converb is coreferential with the subject of the predicate.

#### **Slovenian:**

Slovenian also has both converbs, but the past participial converb is only used in literary texts and considered archaic (Derbyshire 1993: 86). From the examples we can see that the subject is coreferential with the subject of the predicate and that the implicit subject is common.

(5) *To se na fotografiji tudi vidi: gledam torto, komaj čakajoč, da jo bom jedel.* (MIKOLIČ JUŽNIČ 2014: 73). "It is also visible in the photo: I'm looking at the cake, waiting to eat it."

In example (5), the predicate is in the present tense, the subject is implicit (I) and coreferential with the converb.

#### **Bulgarian:**

In Bulgarian there is only one converb, the present tense one. The subjects of the predicate and the converb are coreferential, with the exception of expressions where it expresses some physiological and/or psychological state, and when the subject is expressed by a part of the agent's body (NITSOLOVA 2008: 440). The subject is often implicit (GRADINAROVA 2014: 78).

(6) *Червените и сини линии се преплитаха, образувайки извитата част на някаква машина* [Ем. Станев] (NITSOLOVA 2008: 440). "The red and blue lines merged into each other, forming an arc in some machinery."

The predicate is in the present tense, its subject is coreferential with the subject of the converb, and the subject is in the predicate clause, so it is implicit in the clause of the converb.

### **Macedonian:**

Macedonian, like Bulgarian, also has one converb, the present tense one. The subject of the predicate and that of the converb are the same (KONESKI 2021: 392). The examples show that the subject of the converb is implicit.

(7) *Тренда застапа пред нив како да сакаше да им го препречи патот, **напрегајќи се** да остане мирна, **бришејќи** си ги водените раце со крајче од скутачата* (J. Бошковски) (KONESKI 2021: 392). "Trenda stood in front of them as if she wanted to block their way, trying to remain calm and wiping her wet hands in the corner of the mop."

In this example, the predicate is expressed in the present tense, the subject is in the predicate clause, and the subject of the converb is coreferential with it and implicit.

### **Eastern Slavic languages:**

#### **Russian:**

In Russian, both converbs are present. The subject is coreferential with the subject of the main predicate, with the exception of impersonal clauses, which are also allowed (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL). The subject can never appear in the dependent clause, so it is always implicit, and in Russian the adjuncts of the subject cannot occur in the converbial structure, with the exception of only few (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL).

(8) *Старик шептал, **разговаривая** сам с собой* [Ю. Трифонов. *Дом на набережной* (1976)] (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL). "The old man whispered, speaking to himself."

In example (8), we can see that the subject is in the main clause, and the subject of the converb in the dependent clause, which is implicit, is coreferential with it.

#### **Ukrainian:**

Ukrainian, like Russian, also has two converbs. The subject is coreferential with the subject of the main clause and is implicit (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 77).

(9) *Молодці квапливо бігли по воду, **вимахуючи** мідяними побіленими кухами* (М. Коцюбинський). (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 77). "The young people ran for water in a hurry, waiving white painted copper cups."

In example (9), we can see that the subject is in the main clause and corresponds to the subject of the converb, which is expressed implicitly.

#### **Belarusian:**

In Belarusian, again, both converbs are present. The subjects are coreferential (KRIVITSKIJ 1978: 280), and the subject of the converb is implicit, as can be seen in the examples.

(10) ***Рыхтуючыся** да паступлення ў інститут, я кожны дзень наведваў бібліятеку* (KRIVITSKIJ 1978: 280) "In preparation for entering the institute, I visited the library every day."

In example (10), the main clause follows the dependent clause, the subject is explicit in the main clause, but implicit in the dependent clause and is the same as the subject of the converb.

### **Western Slavic languages:**

#### **Czech:**

Both converbs are found in Czech. The subject of the converb is coreferential with the subject of the predicate, and the converb agrees in number and gender with the subject (Havránek and Jedlička 1998: 166). The examples show that the subject of the converb is implicit.

(11) *Voralka, stojíc u chlěva, dívala se za mužem.* (HAVRÁNEK and JELIČKA 1998: 166) “Voralka, standing by the stables, looked at her [leaving] husband”.

In example (11), we can see that the converb agrees in gender and number with the subject, i.e. it is feminine and singular, it refers to the same subject, and the subject is implicit in the dependent clause.

#### **Slovak:**

In Slovak, the present tense converb is productive, the past tense converb is considered archaic and is only found in literary works (DRENČ 1966: 487–489). Moreover, converbs are rare in the spoken language (Brtková 2004: 25). From the examples it can be seen that the subject is coreferential and implicit.

(12) *Zívajúc a odpľúvajúc, začal si krútiť cigaretu* [J. F.] (BRTKOVÁ 2004: 29). “Yawning and spitting, he started rolling his cigarette.”

#### **Polish:**

In Polish there are two converbs (BOJAŁKOWSKA 2010: 11-12). The subject of the converb is coreferential to the subject of the predicate, and the subject cannot appear in the clause with the converb, i.e. it is implicit (BOJAŁKOWSKA 2010: 106–109, 117).

(13) *Jan ziewa, czytając gazetę.* (BOJAŁKOWSKA 2010: 66) “Jan yawns while reading a newspaper.”

Exceptions to having adverbial converbs are Bulgarian and Macedonian, where only the present tense converb is present. The results of the study support V. Nedjalkov’s claim that if a language which originally had two converbs loses one of them, then it is always the adverbial converb that expresses simultaneity in relation to the predicate that is retained (NEDJALCOV 1998: 437). In the case of Slavic languages, this is the present tense adverbial converb formed from imperfective verbs.

The syntactic analysis shows that there are some basic conditions for the use of the converb which are valid in all Slavic languages. One is the coreferentiality between subjects, to which exceptions are found only in a few extreme cases. The other condition is that the subject cannot be present in the dependent clause with the converb in it. I believe there is a semantic reason for

this, since a converb does not have the properties of a finite verb, so the subject cannot occur in a same clause with it. Table 1 below summarizes the characteristics of the converbs in the above discussed languages.

Table 1. Converbs in Slavic languages

Language	Present tense	Past tense	Coreferentiality	Implicit/explicit subject
<b>Serbian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Croatian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Bulgarian</b>	+	-	yes	implicit
<b>Macedonian</b>	+	-	yes	implicit
<b>Slovenian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Russian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Belarusian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Ukrainian</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Czech</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Slovak</b>	+	+	yes	implicit
<b>Polish</b>	+	+	yes	implicit

#### 4. Semantics

In the semantic analysis, I examine the meanings of converbs. In the introduction it was shown that in Slavic languages we find special and contextual converbs. The meanings of these converbs are dealt with in more detail in this section.

##### South Slavic languages:

##### Serbian and Croatian:

The past participial converb is primarily used with a temporal meaning, expressing the antecedence of the action in relation to the predicate (IVIĆ

1983: 162). It can rarely express both a simultaneous or a subsequent action (PIPER 2005: 468, POPOVIĆ 2011: 147, 154, MILAS 2007: 7–14).

(14) ***Ушаваши** ту, прво је прегледала оба излаза* [М. Crnjanski] (PIPER 2005: 467) “On entering, she checked both exits first.”

Example (14) shows that the past converb is prepositive relative to the main clause and is antecedent.

The present participial converb mostly expresses action simultaneous to the predicate (IVIĆ 1983: 158), but it can also be antecedent or subsequent (POPOVIĆ 2011: 142–4, 154).

(15) ***Стојећу** крај прозора, у очекивању потпуног мрака, младић и конзул су често разговарали.* [И. Андрић] (PIPER 2005: 464) “Standing by the window and waiting for darkness to be complete, the young man and the consul often talked.”

In example (15), the present converb is prepositive in relation to the predicate and expresses a simultaneous action.

In addition to temporal semantics, there are also contextual converbs in Serbian and Croatian, where, depending on the context, they can express cause, manner, consequence, purpose, or permission. (IVIĆ 1983: 174, POPOVIĆ 2011: 154, PIPER 2005: 465–6, 468–9).

### **Slovenian:**

In Slovenian, the past converb expresses a antecedent action, while the present adverb expresses a simultaneous action (DERBYSHIRE 1993: 85–6, MIKOLIČ JUŽNIČ 2014: 72).

(16) “*Zdravo*” je rekla Milica, ***vstupivši*** v hišo. (DERBYSHIRE 1993: 86). “‘Hi’, said Milica on entering the house.”

In example (16), the past tense converb is postpositive in relation to the main clause and is antecedential.

(17) *In on ji je **dobrikaje** poljubljal roko.* (MIKOLIČ JUŽNIČ 2014: 79) “He kissed her hand in flattery.”

In example (17), the converb is postpositive and expresses a simultaneous action.

The present converb can also express a secondary meaning, namely, the manner of action, but this meaning is most typical of the present converb derived with *-e* (MIKOLIČ JUŽNIČ 2014: 72).

### **Bulgarian:**

In Bulgarian, the present converb most often expresses a simultaneous action in relation to the predicate, but it also rarely occurs with antecedential and even more rarely with a subsequential meaning (GRADINAROVA 2014: 65–6).

(18) ***Приближавайки** хотела, Луис съзна как образът ѝ дори в перспективата на юношеските спомени бе избледнял, бе станал карикатурно смешен* [Д. Димов] (GRADINAROVA 2014: 69) “As Luis

approached the hotel, he realized that even in the halo of his youthful memories, his image had faded to cartoonishly funny.”

In example (18), the converb is prepositive, expressing a simultaneous action in relation to the predicate.

The present converb can also be contextual, expressing cause, permission, condition, mode, or consequence (GRADINAROVA 2014: 69).

### **Macedonian:**

In Macedonian, the only converb, the present one, expresses simultaneous action in relation to the predicate (KONESKI 2021: 392).

(19) *Тренда застана пред нив како да сакаше да им го препречи патот, **напрегајќи се** да остане мирна, **бришејќи** си ги водените раце со крајче од скутачата.* [J. Бошковски]. (KONESKI 2021: 393). “Trenda stood before them as if to block their path, struggling to remain calm and wiping her wet hands with the corner of a handkerchief.”

In example (19), the converbs express simultaneous actions in relation to the predicate and are postpositive. Less frequently, in Macedonian, the converb can also express an antecedent action (KONESKI 2021: 393).

### **Eastern Slavic languages:**

#### **Russian:**

The past converb expresses an antecedent action, while the present one a simultaneous action in relation to the predicate. However, the past converb can also have a simultaneous meaning when formed from imperfective verbs, but this is rare. Similarly, the present converb can also have an antecedential meaning, but this is considered archaic, and either converb can express logical subsequentuality in exceptional cases, depending on the context (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL).

In Russian, converbs can also be contextual, i.e. they can have various non-temporal meanings, such as cause, condition, purpose, consequence, permission, or mode (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL).

(20) ***Напившись** чаю и **отдохнувши**, мы поехали дальше.* [В. А. Обручев. *В джунглях Центральной Азии* (1951)] (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL) “After we had tea and rested, we continued our journey.”

In example (20), the past converbs express antecedence and come before the main clause.

(21) *Она громко смеялась, **закидывая** назад маленькую красивую голову.* [В. Шукшин. *Ленька* (1960-1971)] (BIKKULOVA 2011: URL) “She laughed out loud, her beautiful little head thrown back.”

In example (21), the present converb is postpositive in relation to the main clause and expresses action simultaneous with the predicate.



### **Ukrainian:**

In Ukrainian, like in Russian, the past converb expresses antecedence, and the present one expresses simultaneity. In addition, the past converb can also carry a simultaneous meaning (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 77). Converbs can also be contextual, i.e. they can have secondary semantics (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 79)

(22) *Над шанцями світової війни скреготали чавунні зуби смерті і жерли кинуті оселі, а житці їхні з малими дітьми, **склавши** убогі манатки на вози, тяглися битими шляхами на тихий схід.* [О. Слісаренко] (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 78) "Iron teeth gnashed at the prospects of world war, houses were left to die and flooded, and their owners with young children were herded along well-trodden paths to the quiet East, their shabby belongings piled on wagons."

In example (22), the past converb is antecedential relative to the predicate.

(23) ***Водячи** паровоз, Мармура вчив свого помічника підтримувати у котлі потрібний тиск пари* [С. Чорнобривець] (MEDYNSKAJA 2014: 77) "Driving the locomotive, Marmura taught his assistant to maintain the required steam pressure in the boiler."

In example (23), the present converb is simultaneous with the action expressed by the predicate.

### **Belarusian:**

The semantics of converbs is the same as in the other two Eastern Slavic languages, i.e. the past converb has an antecedential meaning, while the present one has a simultaneous meaning relative to the predicate. There can also be contextual converbs with non-temporal meanings (KRIVITSKIJ 1978: 280).

(24) *Не **пасеяўшы**, не пажнеш* [Пословица] (KRIVITSKIJ 1978: 280) "You reap what you sow. [lit.: Not having sowed, you don't reap.]"

In example (24), the past converb is antecedential in relation to the present tense predicate.

(25) ***Вяртаючыся** дадому праз лес, Антоць раптамь адчуў на сабе чыйсьцы позірк* [Адам Русак] (KRIVITSKIJ 1978: 280) "On his way home through the forest, Anton suddenly felt someone's eyes on him."

In example (25), the present converb expresses an action simultaneous with the predicate.

### **Western Slavic languages:**

#### **Czech:**

In Czech, the past converb expresses an antecedent action, while the present one expresses a simultaneous action, but when the present converb is formed from a perfective verb, it expresses a future antecedence. However, the use of this semantics is not typical in modern Czech and is considered archaic (HAVRÁNEK and JEDLIČKA 1998: 111-112, NÁDVORNIKOVÁ 2020: 57–

58). In a suitable context, converbs can also acquire secondary semantics (NÁDVERNÍKOVÁ 2020: 58).

(26) **Přistoupiv** k chodcům, zeptal se na cestu. (HAVRÁNEK and JEDLIČKA 1998: 112) "When approaching the pedestrians, he asked for directions."

In example (26), the past converb has an antecedential meaning in relation to the predicate.

(27) *Chlapci zapírali **zardívající** se.* "The boys denied it, laughing."

In example (27), the action expressed by the present converb is simultaneous with the predicate.

### **Slovak:**

A present converb expresses an action that is simultaneous with the predicate, but if it is formed from a perfective verb, it can also have an antecedential meaning (CORPS 1997: 86).

(28) **Raňajkujúc** som počúval správy. "While having breakfast I listened to the news."

In example (28) the present tense converb expresses simultaneity in relation to the predicate.

### **Polish:**

The past converb expresses an antecedent action, while the present converb expresses an action simultaneous with the predicate (WIESŁAW 1996: 153–4). In addition to temporal semantics, there are also secondary meanings (BOJAŁKOWSKA 2010: 199, 200, and 229).

(29) **Powróciwszy** do Kowna sporządził szczegółowy raport z przeprowadzonych w Moskwie rozmów [Korp IPI PAN] (BOJAŁKOWSKA 2010: 205) "On his return to Kaunas, he prepared a detailed report on the Moscow talks."

In example (29), the past converb expresses a past action in relation to the predicate. (30) *Wychodzę, nie **mówiąc** „do widzenia”* (WESŁAW 1996: 153)

"I'm leaving without saying goodbye."

In example (30), the present converb is simultaneous with the predicate.

The semantic analysis shows that converbs are semantically identical in Slavic languages, i.e. the past converbs express antecedence, while the present one is simultaneous with the predicate. Exceptions are also observed, but they are less frequent. Furthermore, in most Slavic languages, converbs can be contextual, i.e. they acquire secondary meanings. It can be noted that in those languages where the use of converbs is more frequent (e.g. Serbian, Croatian, or Russian), secondary semantics are also more frequent.

Table 2. The semantics of converbs in Slavic languages

Language	Present tense semantics	Past tense semantics	Secondary semantics
<b>Serbian</b>	simultaneity (antecedence, subsequence)	antecedence (simultaneity, subsequence)	yes
<b>Croatian</b>	simultaneity (antecedence, subsequence)	antecedence (simultaneity, subsequence)	yes
<b>Bulgarian</b>	simultaneity (antecedence, subsequence)	/	yes
<b>Macedonian</b>	simultaneity (antecedence)	/	yes
<b>Slovenian</b>	simultaneity	antecedence	yes
<b>Russian</b>	simultaneity, antecedence, subsequence	antecedence, simultaneity, subsequence	yes
<b>Belarusian</b>	simultaneity	antecedence	yes
<b>Ukrainian</b>	simultaneity	antecedence	yes
<b>Czech</b>	simultaneity, subsequence	antecedence	yes
<b>Slovak</b>	simultaneity	antecedence	
<b>Polish</b>	simultaneity	antecedence	yes

## 5. Conclusion

Syntactic and semantic investigations show that converbs in modern Slavic languages are identical in meaning and usage. They can be said to form a typologically unified category in Slavic languages. Exceptions are those languages where the former two converbs now retain only one, but in those Slavic languages where both converbs are used, the past converb is rare and often considered archaic. This is an instance of language change, which suggests that in Slavic languages where there are still two converbs today, there will probably be only one in the future.

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