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A Typological Rarity of Lithuanian:  
The Scalar Prefix *be-* Between Aspect and Modality  
*Tarptautinė baltistikos mokykla*

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# Prefixes on the verb

- In Baltic, as in many other Indo-European languages, verbs may assume prefixes, the original meaning of which is spatial.

*imti* 'take'

*iš-imti* 'take out'

- By introducing boundedness, these prefixes may become relevant to aspect as they may develop into markers of perfectivity. This has happened in both Baltic and Slavic. Though aspect is more strongly grammaticalized in Slavic, the perfectivizing function of prefixes is clearly present in Baltic as well:

*kartoti* 'repeat' (ipfv)

*pa-kartoti* 'repeat' (pfv)

# Particle-like prefixes

- In addition to these spatial-aspectual prefixes, Lithuanian also has prefixes that are not (originally) spatial but express meanings that, in other languages, are typically expressed by 'particles' – separate words (usually classified with adverbs in English but recognized as a distinct class in other languages) marking the position of a sentence in discourse or qualifying the validity or scope of the claim made in the sentence:

*Arklys keturias kojas **te**-turi.*

*Arklys turi **tik** keturias kojas.*

*'A horse has only four legs.'*

- Because of their functional similarity to particles, the Lithuanian Academy Grammar calls them 'particle-like prefixes' (*dalelytiniai priešdėliai*).
- Such particle-like prefixes are typologically not widespread. Among geographically and genealogically close languages, Latvian does not have them, nor does neighbouring Slavic.

# The Lithuanian particle-like prefixes

- The functions of the particle-like prefixes are partly straightforward but partly more complex.
  - *te-* may be restrictive (*te-turi keturias kojas* 'has only four legs') but may also have imperatival function (*te-ateina* 'let him/her/them come'); the link between these meanings is not obvious;
  - *be-* is more difficult and it will be the subject of my talk.
- The meanings that will appear in my talk are **scopal** and **scalar**.
  - *All the friends were invited but **only** Mary and John came.* (a scope particle – it specifies the scope of the assertion made)
  - *He had hoped to get a bicycle for his birthday but he **only** got a t-shirt.* (a scalar particle – it locates the bicycle and the t-shirt in a pragmatic scale)

# The aspectual function

- The prefix *be-* has an aspectual (progressive) function in converbial constructions:

*Jam **be-kalbant**, gatvėje pasigirdo didžiulis triukšmas, ...*

‘While he was talking a loud noise was heard in the street’

- Related to this progressive meaning is that of an event not carried to completion:

*Skubiai užsimetė rūbą ir **buvo be-išeinanti**, tačiau prisiminė, ko čia atėjusi.*

‘She hastily wrapped herself in her coat and was about to leave but then remembered why she had come.’ (Saulius Tomas Kondrotas, CCLL)

- And *be-* may also appear in mirative constructions (constructions expressing surprise):

*Žiūriu – ant kelmo **be-sėdįs** Otonas.*

‘I look – there is Otto sitting on a tree-trunk.’ (Gasparas Aleksa, 2001, CCLL)

# The continuative function

- This progressive function is probably not the original one. In order to establish a connection with other uses of *be-*, we must regard the continuative meaning ('still') as the original one.
- One finds it as late as the 19th century:

K. Mertikaitis, 1825

*Aß Swiete dar juk **be-kruttu**,  
ir griëßna Kuna dar neßoju.*

'I am still walking this Earth, and carrying about my sinful body.'

- Nowadays we would have *tebe-* instead of *be-*:

*O juodu, ko gero, dar **tebe-kruta** savo sodybëlëse.*

'And the two of them are apparently still bustling about on their farmsteads.'

- What the function of *te-* could have been here is not clear.

# The continuative function

- While *be-* was replaced with *tebe-*, its negated variety *ne-be-* 'no longer' was not affected, so we have

*jie ten ne-be-gyvena* 'they don't live there any more'

not \**ne-tebe-gyvena*

- And *be-* is also retained in negative polarity contexts.

# Negative polarity

- Negative polarity contexts are contexts in which negative polarity items (like English *any*) can be used. Apart from negative contexts, this includes interrogative and conditional contexts.

*Reikia nubėgti į miestą, pasižvalgyti, ar **b-ėra** rusų kareivių.*

‘Somebody should run to the town and look around if there are any Russian soldiers left there.’ (interrogative)

*Nemanau, kad jie **be-turi** televizorių.*

‘I don’t think they still have a television set.’ (negative)

- As for conditionals, I will discuss universal conditional-concessive clauses further on.
- In all these contexts, *tebe-* could also be used; its is neutral with respect to polarity.

# Beyond negative polarity contexts

- But some uses of *be-* have survived beyond negative polarity contexts. These are the ones I want to talk about.
- The following example has *be-* though the sentence is affirmative:

CCLL, *Mokslas ir gyvenimas* 1996

*Dabar tik 30 karaimų **be-gyvena** Panevėžyje,*

*'Nowadays a mere 30 Karaims are still living in Panevėžys.'*

- This sentence presupposes that the number of Karaim inhabitants used to be greater.
- How do we arrive at this use, and why could *be-* survive here without the negative-polarity context?

# Implicatures

- In order to understand this we must look at the implicatures triggered by continuative markers.
- Cf. German

*Es gibt noch drei Äpfel.*  
it gives still three apples ('there are still three apples')

Strictly (based on the meaning of *noch*) this should mean that there were three apples at some earlier time and there still are as many now.

However, such sentences may trigger an implicature to the effect that the number of apples is shrinking and three apples are left from a greater number. (This reading can be avoided by using *immer noch*).



# From continuative to scalar

- Continuative meanings give rise to scalar meanings:

*Poezija [...] kasdieniškeja, pereina į paribį, kur nebeaišku, ar ji **tebėra** poezija, ar jau kas kita.*

‘Poetry [...] becomes more mundane, it enters a border zone where it’s no longer clear whether it is still poetry or already something else.’ (Vytautas Martinkus, CCLL)

- This is the ‘marginal’ use of ‘still’: it singles out a marginal member of a category in an area bordering on some other category.
- Here ‘still’ evokes motion down a scale: at one moment one is still in category A but at the next moment that will no longer be the case.

# Scalar *be-*

- In the scalar domain, *be-* is subject to the same restrictions as in the temporal domain, that is, it may occur in negative polarity contexts (alongside *tebe-*):

*Ar priesaika **bèra** priesaika, kai ji tampa vienašalė?*

'Is an oath still an oath when it becomes unilateral?' (CCLL, Petras Dirgėla, 2008)

- There is, however, a number of scalar uses of *be-* which do not have equivalent uses of *tebe-*.
- This suggests that *be-* has, in certain constructions, gone its own way. It has developed specific constructional uses sufficiently distinct from the basic scalar use for *be-* to escape replacement with *tebe-*.

# With comparatives

- One of these uses is noted with comparatives. Note that some languages use markers of the type 'still' with comparatives while English, for one, do not:

German	<i>noch besser</i>
Dutch	<i>nog beter</i>
Polish	<i>jeszcze lepiej</i>
Ukrainian	<i>šče krašče</i>
English	<i>even better (*still better)</i>

- The link to marginal 'still' seems to consist in that the standard of comparison is already very high on a pragmatic scale, so that higher values are necessarily marginal.
- Lithuanian can use *dar* in this context, but not *tebe*:

*galima **dar** geriau* 'it is possible to do even better'

\****tebe**-galima geriau*

# With comparatives

- However, with negation one can use *nebe-*  
[...] *jei kurią dieną pasakysiu, kad jau geriau ne-be-galima, nupirkit man karstą.*  
'and if one day I tell you it is impossible to do even better, you may buy a coffin for me.'  
(but it is impossible to say \**tebegalima geriau*; instead, we have *galima dar geriau*)
- And, as we could expect, *be-* is also possible here in negative polarity contexts:  
*Na, nežinau, ar be-galima nukeliauti dar toliau nuo Lietuvos, na, nebent į kosmosą.*  
'Well, I don't know if it is at all possible to travel even further from Lithuania, unless it be into cosmos.'  
(CCLL, *Kauno diena*, 1996)
- What is strange is that the scalar marker is raised to occur with the modal verb although it is its complement that is evaluated in a pragmatic scale. This, as well as the restriction to negative contexts, still has to be explained.

# Preference constructions

- Lithuanian has one verb that is always used with the prefix *be-*: *bevelyti* 'prefer':

***Be-velyčiau*** vadintis ne rašytoju, o, sakysim, raštvedžiu.

'I would prefer not be called a writer but, say, a clerk.'

CCLL, Juozas Keliuotis, 1997

- The use of this verb is not recommended due to its Slavic origin (from Old Belarusian *veliti* according to Skardžius), but it remains an interesting fact of language.
- The prefix *be-* was generalized a long time ago: In Daukša (late 16th c.), *velyti* is already used overwhelmingly with *be-* (46 instances with *be-* as against 6 without it).
- What could have motivated the consistent use of the prefix *be-*? We can only speculate, but...

# Lesser-evil constructions?

- An interesting fact emerges when one looks at the continuative marker 'still' in preference constructions:

*Pauls Vorschlag ist immer noch besser als Peters.* (German)

P.GEN suggestion is always still better than P.GEN

'Paul's suggestion is still better than Peter's'

- This means that Paul's suggestion is the least awful of the two alternatives, neither of which would be acceptable by normal standards.
- The same is observed in other languages, so this might be a common effect of the use of the scalar marker 'still' in preference constructions.
- It is conceivable that *velyti* was often used in 'lesser evil' contexts, which led to a high frequency of uses with *be-*,
- This process must be old and it probably predated the substitution of *tebe-* for *be-*; the specialisation of meaning must have blocked the substitution here.

# Reduced margin of reasoning or action

- This formulation refers to cases like:

*Taip nedarys nė svetimas žmogus, ką be-kalbėti apie giminę.*

'Even a stranger won't do such a thing, let alone a relative.'

(lit. 'what could one even say about a relative')

CCLL, Raimundas Kašauskas, 1995

- What is said here is that it is pointless to advance a certain (weaker) claim in view of the adequacy of another (stronger) claim that settles the dispute.
- The context is a rhetorical direction question (why even talk?).
- The interpretation of *be-* could be temporal: a satisfying (stronger) claim having been made, there is no longer any need to raise the weaker claim; in scalar terms: the stronger claim having been made, there is no justification for anything that is still in the domain of weaker claims.

# From scalar to modal?

- Such 'reduced margin of reasoning of action' contexts seem to open up a pathway to modality. In scalar contexts, a course of action B is rejected in view of the fact that a better course of action A is available. An example from Old Lithuanian:

*Jeygu tada negalite (padarÿt) mazausio daykta, ko be-sirupinate ape kitus dayktus?*

Chylinski's New Testament, Luke 12.26

'If ye then be not able to do that thing which is least, why take ye thought for the rest?'

- But the scalar context can be dropped (no stronger claim available), and what remains is then just negative (deontic) necessity :

*Ko be-gundziat mane, weydamaynieÿ?*

'Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?' (Chylinski's New Testament, Matthew 22.19)

(This use is no longer available in the modern language)

# Universal conditional-concessive clauses

- Universal conditional-concessive clauses are clauses of the type

*Wherever you go...*

*Whatever you do...*

- In Lithuanian there are several ways to encode them, but one is with the prefix *be-* added to the verb (which is here in the conditional mood, but the indicative is also possible):

*Kur be-būtum, be-eitum, visur matysi ne tik gamtos ramybę, bet [...]*

‘Wherever you are, wherever you go, you will see not only nature’s tranquility but also [...]’

CCLL, *Mūsų gamta*, 1995

(also possible: *kur be-esi, be-eini*)

# Why does the scalar marker appear here?

- The use of 'marginal' scalar markers like *still* in concessive contexts is well attested, but usually they occur in the main clause, not in the concessive clause:

*This may not be their greatest record, but it is still a fine one.*

- Are there parallels for their use in the concessive clause, more specifically in universal concessive clauses?
- Well, yes: Dutch seems to have this:

*Al werk je nog zo hard, je komt er niet.*  
though work you still so hard you come there not  
'However hard you may work, you won't succeed.'

# An English parallel

- An English parallel can be found in constructions with *it remains true, that*:

*Though it remains true that this Parliament never liked the fact that the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) was provisionally applied before we could deliver our verdict, this situation has given us the opportunity to observe the TCA in action.*

- There being a contradiction between the claims raised in the subordinate clause and the main clause, one might expect the claim expressed in the main clause to be raised after refutation of the claim raised in the protasis. The concessive meaning arises from the claim expressed in the protasis still being recognized as (marginally) valid.
- The speaker concedes the marginal relevance of the claim contained in the subordinate clause to the validity of claim in the main clause.
- Presumably a similar mechanism must be involved in the Lithuanian universal conditional-concessive clauses, but the details still have to be established.

# In conclusion

- The scalar marker *be-* still stands in need of more detailed research, including diachronic research. So do hundreds of other topics in Lithuanian grammar.
- In spite of a certain bias in favour of diachronic research in Lithuanian linguistics, too little work is also being done on the history of Lithuanian grammatical constructions. There is no Lithuanian historical corpus, and the development of Lithuanian in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries is a black hole...
- There is a lot of work to do, and lots of interesting discoveries to make. Perhaps you will all join in? In the meantime,

thanks for listening!