

# SOME NOTES ON ANTERIORITY IN ITALIAN AND IN ENGLISH

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The system of tenses in English has some features in common with what we find in Italian; nevertheless it is necessary to remember that we are dealing with two different structures. We cannot compare similar verb forms in these languages without bearing in mind this basic fact and what we know about the general characteristics of the English verb; V. Mathesius and J. Vachek<sup>1</sup> refer, for example, to its neutrality and the consequent part played by the context.

The present notes try to show it by examining the function of such finite forms that put the action into the time sphere which, from the point of view of the speaker or writer, precedes, representing what is called the past. We want to see what can be said about the function in this sphere of the finite verb forms usually called *passato remoto* (*scrisse*), *imperfetto* (*scriveva*), *trapassato prossimo* (*aveva scritto*) and *trapassato remoto* (*ebbe scritto*). No attempt will be made to examine the difference between the *passato prossimo* (*ha scritto*) and the *passato remoto* (*scrisse*), but we shall try to specify the function of the *trapassato prossimo* and the *trapassato remoto* in order to find the right place for these forms in the Italian tense system as compared to that of the English past perfect.

Our main attention, therefore, will be focused on the ways in which the idea of precedence is shown by the forms called past perfect. As we have said, there are two forms in Italian for the English past perfect, so that *had written* corresponds, theoretically, to two forms: *aveva scritto* and *ebbe scritto*. But only theoretically, because in spite of the place that the *trapassato remoto* occupies in Italian grammars (side by side with the *trapassato prossimo* in verb form paradigms), its use is very limited. Here is an example where we can find both the forms in one sentence: *Quando la famiglia si fu messa in carrozza (la guazza aveva reso umidi i cuscini), don Fabrizio disse che sarebbe tornato a casa a piedi* (G. Tomasi di Lampedusa). 'When the family had settled into its carriage (the dew had made the cushions damp) Don Fabrizio said that he would walk home.' 'Když se rodina usadila do vozu (rosou provlhly polštáře), don Fabrizio řekl, že se vrátí domů pěšky.'

Most grammars and text-books agree in saying that the *trapassato remoto* (*tpr.*) denotes a past action preceding another action expressed by the *passato remoto*. Some add that its chief use is in temporal clauses introduced by *appena* (as soon as), *dopo che* (after), *subito che* (immediately after), *quando* (when), others admit that it may sometimes be used in main clauses, but all of them point out its rather bookish and literary character which almost excludes it from conversation. An attempt to explain the nature of the *tpr.* is found, for instance, in J. Jiráček's<sup>2</sup> statement that this tense 'expresses a past action which happened before another past action coming quickly after it': 'Dopo che ebbe finito di scrivere, lasciò il tavolino.' J. Bukáček,<sup>3</sup> who

accepts G. Devoto's<sup>4</sup> view, defines it as 'a past action ended before another past action with which it has no temporal contact': 'Solo quando ebbe raggiunto la meta, si riposò.'

There is only one 'before-past' tense in English, so the difference between the two Italian past perfect tenses either gets lost or it must be seen from another angle, namely as a difference between the simple past and the past perfect. It is not difficult to find instances where the Italian tpr. becomes a simple past in the English translation or the other way round, for example: *Arrivato che fu sull'aia dinanzi alla casa, lo scaraventò in terra* (C. Collodi). *When he reached the yard in front of the house he threw him roughly on the ground.* "Are you all right?" her father asked abruptly when she closed the piano (P. S. Buck). "Stai proprio bene?" le domandò suo padre quando ebbe chiuso il pianoforte.'

Now let us consider the following sentence: *Till Elizabeth entered the drawing-room at Netherfield and looked in vain for Mr. Wickham among the cluster of red coats there assembled, a doubt of his being present had never occurred to her* (J. Austin). The Italian translation reads: 'Finchè Elisabetta non fu entrata nella sala di Netherfield e non ebbe cercato, invano, il signor Wickham nel gruppo delle giubbe rosse che vi eran riunite, mai un dubbio circa la sua presenza le aveva attraversato la mente.' Here the tpr. indicates a point of time that concludes a period of time covered by the trapassato prossimo (tpp.) *aveva attraversato*: up to that time a doubt of his being present had never occurred to her.

Using the words point and period together with circumstance (for action that describes the situation) and event (for action that pushes the narrative forward), we get these combinations:

- past-point circumstance = what was in progress at a certain point of time (*was writing, wrote — scriveva*);
- past-point event = what happened at a certain point of time (*wrote—scrisse*);
- past-period circumstance = the past state of things as a result of preceding action (*had written—aveva scritto*);
- past-period event = a past event preceding another past event (*had written, wrote—ebbe scritto*).

The peculiarity of the tpr. seems to lie in the possibility of expressing an event from the past point of view. Generally speaking, a past event is seen as a point in the past, which together with other past points makes up the narrative line in question. The past perfect, which functions as a sort of background tense, represents the state of things (= the circumstance) at a certain point of time as a result of past action. The second past perfect in Italian expresses an event that preceded another event on the same narrative line. It can be replaced by the English past tense if we want to stress the idea of a past event, or by the past perfect if it is enough to refer to the circumstances. It should also be mentioned that the difference between the two Italian past perfects is found in the indicative but not in the subjunctive where there is only one form (*avesse scritto—had written*).

To sum it up in other words, we may say that it is impossible for English to imitate the use of two past perfects in Italian; the choice between the past perfect and the simple past is made according to whether the emphasis lies on the activity (simple past) or on the resulting situation (past perfect). So the English past perfect describes

the situation as a result of past action, the Italian tpr. represents the action (activity) itself.

We have said that the narrative line consists of events (points). What is so special and characteristic about the tpr. is the fact that it can indicate an anterior event on the narrative line. It could be substituted for by the *passato remoto* but then, of course, the event might sometimes be regarded as contemporary with another event. The other substitution is the tpp., which changes the event into a circumstance. A typical narrative line is formed by a sequence of past tenses in this sentence: *L'attimo durò cinque minuti; poi la porta si aprì ed entrò Angelica. La prima impressione fu di abbagliata sorpresa. I Salina rimasero col fiato in gola; Tancredi si sentì addirittura come gli pulsassero le vene delle tempie* (G. Tomasi di Lampedusa). 'The second lasted five minutes; then the door opened and in came Angelica. The first impression was of dazed surprise. The Salina family all stood there with breath taken away; Tancredi could even feel the veins pulsing in his temples.' 'Okamžiček trval pět minut; pak se otevřely dveře a vstoupila Angelica. První dojem bylo oslnivé překvapení. Salinové zůstali stát se zatajeným dechem, Tancredi přímo cítil, jak mu buší krev ve spáncích.'

The next example shows different approaches to the same narrative line. Where the Czech version uses finite verbs and the English translation uses gerunds, the Italian original has a tpr. and perfect infinitives: *O Tancredim mižeme bohužel říci pramálo: Požádal dona Calogera, aby ho představil, zamaněvroval majákem svého modrého oka, stěžl odolat touze políbit Angelice ruku — a pak se vrátil tlachat s paní Rotolovou a nechápal nic z toho, co slyšel* (G. Tomasi di Lampedusa). 'About Tancredi there seems little to be said; after being introduced by Don Calogero, after manoeuvring the search-light of his blue eyes, after just managing to resist implanting a kiss on Angelica's hand, he had resumed his chat with the Signora Rotolo without taking in a word that the good lady said.' 'Rincesce di poter dir poco di Tancredi: dopo che si fu fatto presentare da don Calogero, dopo aver manovrato il faro del suo occhio azzurro, dopo aver a stento resistito il desiderio di baciare la mano di Angelica, era ritornato a chiacchierare con la signora Rotolo, e non capiva niente di quanto udiva.'

And here we are again at the first example. When did Don Fabrizio say that he would walk home? The answer is: *Quando la famiglia si fu messa in carrozza* ('When the family had settled into its carriage'). We could say: *quando si mise*, but that might be interpreted as a contemporary event, that is while he said those words. Another possibility would be: *quando si era messa*, but that would express the result of a past action, a circumstance, and such is the meaning of: *la guazza aveva reso umidi i cuscini* ('the dew had made the cushions damp').

We are fully aware of the fact that the terms event and circumstance are not strictly, grammatical, but they have been used by several authors (V. Smolák<sup>5</sup>, Z. Hampejz<sup>6</sup>, and especially O. Růžička<sup>7</sup>) in dealing with past tenses in French, Portuguese and Italian respectively, for these words make it possible to avoid the term aspect, that is an expression which is mainly referred to verbs in the Slavonic languages and which might lead to undesirable associations.

Let us imagine the opening scene of A. Moravia's novel *Gli indifferenti* [The Time of Indifference]: *Entrò Carla; aveva indossato un vestitino di lana marrone. 'Carla came into the room. She was wearing a brown woolen frock.'* 'Vošla Karla; oblečené mala šaty z tmavomodrej vlnenej látky.' What we could call an event is expressed by the verb *to come*: 'entrò', 'came', 'vošla'. This event (that is what happened at a certain point of time in the past) is preceded by another event (she had put on a brown wool-

en frock), presented as a circumstance resulting from a previous action and connected with her coming into the room. We can see that from the English and Slovak translations, where the Italian past perfect (*aveva indossato*) corresponds to an action in progress (*was wearing*) and to a past state (*mala oblečené*). The tpr. is out of question here: there is no temporal clause and it cannot express a circumstance. The form of its auxiliary excludes this tense also from presenting a repeated action, as in this example taken from the same book: *E quand'era stata dal parrucchiere, essa pranzava sempre al suo circolo*. 'She always lunched at her club after a hair appointment.'

So the decisive feature of the tpr. stands out as the time correlation between two events, that is two point actions coming immediately one after the other on the same line. The anteriority of the tpr. in such a sequence is sometimes close to contemporaneity. The sentence: *Her face became a mask directly she saw me*, could be rearranged like this: *She saw me and her face became a mask*. The Italian original says: *Non appena mi ebbe vista il suo volto fu una maschera* (A. Moravia). The Italian verb *fu* does not express a circumstance (a different version might be: *Quando mi vide il suo volto era una maschera*. 'When she saw me her face was a mask'), but what happened, and the English translator has achieved the same effect by choosing the verb *became*. The anteriority of one event (*mi ebbe vista*) is so small that the two events may be looked upon as almost contemporary. We can therefore understand why it is possible here to use the simple past (*she saw me*) instead of the past perfect (*she had seen me*). The latter is found in two different functions in the following sentences: *Finally after lunch, with the excuse of going for a walk, he had left the house. The real reason for his going out became clear to him the moment he was out of doors and had looked up at the sky* (A. Moravia). The first sentence ends a paragraph describing the situation, the state of affairs, the circumstances that result from what precedes the action referred to by the verb *became*. In Italian: *Finalmente, dopo pranzo, col pretesto di una passeggiata era uscito*. That is to say, he went out, but this event is presented as a past circumstance deriving from it (he was out of doors now). The main narrative line begins with the verb *became* (*apparve*): *La vera ragione di questa sua uscita gli apparve subito appena fu fuori ed ebbe rivolto gli occhi al cielo*. This is a series of three events, one of which is anterior also in form (*had looked, ebbe rivolto*). But whereas in English we have the same tense for both the circumstance resulting from a previous action (*had left*) and a preceding event (*had looked*), the Italian language is able in such cases to distinguish between the two possibilities by recurring to a special verb form which only emphasizes what the English past perfect expresses with the help of the context.

We may conclude our notes by saying that the basic difference between the two Italian past tenses (the imperfetto and the passato remoto) is felt to some extent in the auxiliaries of the two past perfect tenses. This determines their uses and also their greater communicative value in comparison with that of one past perfect tense in English.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> V. Mathesius, *Obsahový rozbor současné angličtiny na základě obecně lingvistickém* 219 (Prague, 1961).
- <sup>2</sup> J. Jiráček, *Učebnice vlastiny* 2. 93 (Brno, 1923).
- <sup>3</sup> J. Bukáček, *Poznejte italsčinu* 73 (Prague, 1947).
- <sup>4</sup> G. Devoto, *Introduzione alla grammatica* <sup>3</sup>147 (Firenze, 1946).

- <sup>5</sup> V. Smolák, *Francouzsky od A do Z* 105 (Prague, 1947).  
<sup>6</sup> Z. Hampejz—J. Holbík, *Učebnice portugalštiny* 96 (Prague, 1959).  
<sup>7</sup> O. Růžička, *Italsky od A do Z* 205 (Prague, 1946).

## RESUMÉ

Několik poznámek k vyjadřování předčasnosti v italštině a v angličtině

Poznámky si všimají základního rozdílu mezi dvěma předminulými časy v italštině a jejich větší sdělné hodnoty ve srovnání s jedním předminulým časem anglickým, jehož význam není tak určitý a závisí proto více na větné souvislosti.

