The concept of Completivity (Perfectivity) in Croatian verbal tenses: Perfect vs. Non–Perfect Tenses

In Croatian language all the perfect tenses are formed with the preterit participle and the auxiliary biti »be«. The term preterit participle, as it is mentioned in »Hrvatska gramatika«, is not the adequate one for the participle be-
cause of the functions it has in the formation of the verbal tenses. The participle shows the perfective nature of an action, which has nothing to do with any tense, present, past or future. It can show the present perfect, past perfect or future perfect in combination with auxiliary biti, which, as a matter of fact, expresses proper verbal tense, not the participle. Musić\(^3\), while justifying the inadequacy of the term, says that the verbal adjective with the endings –b (o) –la –lo itself does not mean anything past, therefore, it is not preterit participle. The term, which is used in lots of grammar books\(^4\), is *active verbal adjective*. The correctness of the term *active verbal adjective* lies in the fact that unlike *preterit participle* it does not express any tense, it is a neutral expression towards any tense. Another term *active\(^5\)* perfect participle is also very accurate because of the same reasons mentioned above and it gives an additional semantic explanation about the perfective nature of the participle. This is the term that will be used mostly in the article without the adjective *active*.

The perfective nature of the Croatian perfect participle can be illustrated very well in comparison with English perfect participle\(^6\). As in case of English perfect participle the verbal tenses denoting perfect tenses are formed with the help of auxiliary *have* and the perfect participle; same is the case with Croatian, where the auxiliary is *biti*. The semantic role of the perfect participle and the role of the tenses formed with the perfect participle are the same in both languages. The only difference is the diathesis of the participles i. e. the Croatian perfect participle is active and the English participle is passive by nature. That is the reason why the auxiliaries are different in English (*have*) and Croatian (*biti*, *be*).

The English perfect participle *written* and the Croatian perfect participle *napisao* / *la* / *lo* have the same function in formation of the tenses. Both of them, in combination with the corresponding auxiliaries, form the perfect tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Auxiliary</th>
<th>Perfect Participle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td><em>have</em></td>
<td><em>written</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian</td>
<td><em>biti</em></td>
<td><em>napisao</em>(^7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Present Perfect tense:**
- He has written.
- On je napisao.

**Past Perfect tense:**
- He had written.
- On je bio napisao.

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2 Aktivni particip preterita II, Hrvatska gramatika, Barić, Lončarić and others. Školska knjiga, Zagreb, pp. 634.
3 Musić, August pp. 30.
5 It is important to say that here the article deals only with the active perfect participle. The Croatian language has passive perfect participle too. But in this article mostly the term *perfect participle* will be used, without mentioning the activness of the participle.
6 The formal term in English is *past participle*, which is not correct, *perfect participle* would be the better choice.
The *perfekt* in Croatian is considered to be one of the past tenses by almost all the grammar books. Such an assertion is not exactly correct. The main semantic function of the *perfekt* is to express present perfect action not a past one. The *perfekt* is formed with the perfect participle and auxiliary *biti*, which is in present. As it is explained earlier, the perfect participle is not capable of denoting any tense, present, past or future, only the auxiliary has the ability to make the action present, past or future. In case of the *perfekt* the participle expresses perfective action and the auxiliary makes the tense present, therefore the action denoted by the *perfekt* is not the past one, rather the present perfect tense.

To explain the whole situation in graphics, three points of time are important: speech time (ST), event time (ET) and reference time (RT). The speech time is the moment when the sentence has been spoken, it is usually the present time. The event time is when the event takes place. The reference time is where the result of a prior action or event stays. The event time is the point when the action takes place and the reference time is the point to which the action is related. The reference time makes the tense perfect or non–perfect. It is the point of time with which the event stays in live contact in perfect tenses. The perfect tenses can be described as a results left or a state formed by some prior action. The perfectivity and non–perfectivity of a tense depend on the mutual relationship between the event time and the reference time.

The *perfekt* is represented in the following diagram:

```
    ●           ●
  ET           ST, RT
```

–*Gledaj onoga koji je sjeo pokraj predsjednika.*
–*Look at him, who is sitting (lit. has sat) near the president.*

The verbal tense in Croatian is the *perfekt*, which shows the present state. The event time is somewhere in the past. The speech time is the present moment and, most importantly, the reference time lies on the same point of time with speech time, which is present. The reference time makes the tense present.

**Music** explains the semantics of the *perfekt*, affirms that the verb *perfekt* expresses past. The meaning of the combination (the perfect participle and the auxiliary *biti* in present) as a past tense is not the primary function, but the secondary one. He further says, the *perfekt* (vladao sam and oblađao sam) hardly differs from the *prezent* (vladam and obladam).

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**Notes:**

7 Masculine singular

8 These are the Reichenbach’s terms, H Elements of Symbolic Logic, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969. These Reichenbach’s terms have been taken from Cochrane, Nancy, pp. 142–164.
tidić also observes the relation of the perfekt with the present tense and calls them past–present events (prošlosadašnji događaji). He further differentiates the perfekt from the aorist and the imperfekt, expressing the incapability of the past tenses (aorist and imperfekt) to replace the perfekt in past–present events. Katičić explains the function of the perfekt is to express present perfect tense (gotova sadašnjost). In a similar way like Maretić, he explains the function of the perfekt. He says, »the perfekt differs from the imperfekt and the aorist in its specific tense meaning, which is to express a past event in a live contact with the present.«

The meaning of the perfekt in terms of present tense is evident to all the linguists. They have taken the meaning as secondary and used different terms for it. For example, Florschütz used the term present perfect or logical perfect (perfekt prezentski or logički). In another grammar book for high schools (Brabec, Hraste and Živković) the term present perfect or past–present tense (prezentni perfekt or prošlo–sadašnje vrijeme) has been used.

The non–perfect present in Croatian is expressed by the prezent. Graphically, the prezent is represented as follows.

\[
\text{–Gledaj onoga koji sjedi pokraj predsjednika.}
\]

–Look at him, who is sitting near the president.

The event, speech and reference time all fall in the same moment, which is present. There is basically no difference between the sentence with the perfekt and the sentence with the prezent. Both of them show the same present state, but the prezent shows simply the present state. On the other hand the perfekt shows the same present state as the result of a past event.

The prezent belongs to the category of the verbal tenses, which are not marked by the perfectivity. The unmarked category contains all non–perfect tenses, because in the Croatian verbal system the perfect is the only marked category, unlike in English, where along with the perfect, the continuous is also a marked category.

9 Musić, August pp. 31.
10 Maretić, Tomo; pp. 628.
11 Katičić, Radoslav pp. 50.
12 Katičić uses the term gotova sadašnjost in Croatian, the literal translation of it into English would be perfected or perfectivised present, semantically it means present perfect.
13 Katičić, Radoslav; pp. 208
14 Florschütz, Josip; pp. 225.
15 Brabec, Ivan; Hraste, Mate; Živković, Sreten; pp. 189.
The non–perfect past tenses are expressed by the *imperfekt* and the *aorist*, depending on the verbal aspect of the verb, imperfective and perfective,

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

respectively. The main function of the *imperfekt* and the *aorist* is to denote un-marked past events.

- Do|oh, vidjeh, pobijedih.

- I came, I saw, I conquered.

It is a classical example of past tense expressed by the *aorist*. The action is past and it has nothing to do with present. The speech time is the present moment. The event time is the past moment and the reference time stays in the past with the event time, which makes the tense past.

In their secondary functions the *imperfekt* and the *aorist* can express present as well as future, but such usage is highly embellished by stylish nature of writing. Most of the grammar books are not very concrete in defining the *imperfekt* and the *aorist*, but they all do agree with the fact that the main function of the *imperfekt* and the *aorist* is to express a past action or event. The real nature of the events or the actions expressed by the *imperfekt* and the *aorist* can be understood only in relation with the perfect tense, since it expresses non–perfect tense (unmarked) in past.

In the contemporary Croatian the use of the *imperfekt* and the *aorist* has become restrained only to the literary texts. Their use has been almost completely diminished in everyday oral communication, except in some phrases like *odoh, rekoh* etc. The *imperfekt* and the *aorist* in everyday communication are being replaced by the *perfekt* with corresponding verbal aspect in its secondary function – the *imperfekt* by the imperfective and the *aorist* by the perfective verbal aspect.

Apart of the main function, that is to express the present perfect tense, the *perfekt* has a secondary function too, that is to express the past tense, precisely the function of the preterit tenses. Unlike in the main function, where the *perfekt* cannot be replaced by any of the past tenses, the *aorist* or the *imperfekt* or by the historical present, the *perfekt* in the secondary function can be replaced by all of the above mentioned non–perfect tenses.

The semantics of the *perfekt* in its secondary function appears only when the *perfekt* loses its perfectivity. In such case, morphologically, the *perfekt* remains the present perfect tense, but semantically it becomes a past tense.

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16 Here the terms *imperfective* and *perfective* have nothing in common with imperfect and perfect tenses. These are the widely accepted English translations for two verbal aspects typical of Slavic languages. The Slavic terms for the imperfective and perfective aspect are *nesvršeni* and *svršeni vid*.
When the perfectivity of the *perfekt* gets neutralised, it loses its live contact with the present and only the event remains, which occurred in the past. Therefore the verbal tense also becomes the past as the event itself is past. In such case it can be replaced by the *imperfekt* and the *aorist*. That's why graphically the *perfekt* with neutralised perfectivity does not differ from the *imperfekt* or *aorist*.

The same above mentioned *aorist* sentence could be expressed with the *perfekt* (with neutralised perfectivity) without changing any semantics of the sentence:

–Došao sam, vidio sam, pobijedio sam.

The stylistic value of the sentence has been erased by the *perfekt*.

The past perfect tense in Croatian is expressed by the *pluskvamperfekt* (*plusperfect*). The *pluskvamperfekt* is formed with the perfect participle and the auxiliary *biti* and again perfect participle has nothing to do with the formation of the tense; it is the auxiliary that defines the tense, which is past in this case. The auxiliary *biti* in the past tense takes the form either of the *imperfekt* or the *perfekt*. One must keep in mind the fact that the *perfekt* in the role of auxiliary is neutralised in its perfectivity, hence shows the past tense, as does the *imperfekt*, so they can replace each other.

The event or action expressed by the *pluskvamperfekt* in the meaning of past perfect is parallel or equal to the event or action expressed by the *perfekt* in the meaning of present perfect. The only difference is that the *pluskvamperfekt* tense takes place in past and the *perfekt* tense in present. The *pluskvamperfekt* expresses the event occurred or the action took place prior to the past and keeps the live contact with the past. To define this situation, another parameter can be added, which helps in understanding the temporal value of the *pluskvamperfekt* – second event time (**ET**²). The second event helps in explaining the *pluskvamperfekt*, because in relation to the second event the main event becomes past or perfect. The graphic model is as follows:

–Jučer sam šetao po šumi, tamo su bila pala neka drva.
–Yesterday I was walking in the woods, some trees had fallen there.

The speech time as usual is present and the event time is in past. The reference time is also in past, but the reference time coincides with the time of
the second event (ET²), which is later than the main event time (ET), which makes the pluskvamperfekt a perfect tense in past.

The perfectivity of the pluskvamperfekt can also be neutralised, as it happens with the perfekt. When the perfectivity of the pluskvamperfekt gets neutralised, it loses its live contact with the past (ET²) and only the event stays that also occurred in the past (ET¹), but it is not the same past. It is prior to the other past action.

- Taj dan sam ga bio sreo prvi put u životu.
- The other day for the first time in my life I had met him.

Here, unlike the above situation, the reference time stays with the main event time (ET¹) because of neutralised perfectivity. The main event becomes the past event, but not the same as in case of the imperfekt and the aorist. It is past to another past event (ET²).

That is the reason why the pluskvamperfekt is not an independent tense, it always needs a past event or action, according to which it is perfect tense (marked) or tense denoting an action prior to past event (unmarked).

In Croatian the pluskvamperfekt denoting past perfect tense is formed mainly with perfective verbal aspect, but rarely it is formed with the imperfective aspect too. On the other hand, the pluskvamperfekt, denoting event which occurred before another past event (non perfect past tense; pluperfect), is formed only with the verbs of perfective aspect.

The non–perfect future tense in Croatian is expressed with the futur I, a member of unmarked category. With non–perfect future there can be two possibilities: first, when the reference time and the event time are at one point somewhere in the future after the speech time.

- Ja ću sutra ići.
- I shall go tomorrow.

In the second case, when the reference time remains at present moment with the speech time and event time is somewhere in the future.
The future perfect tenses in Croatian are expressed with the futur II and the futur III\textsuperscript{17}.

The futur II is formed with the perfect participle and the auxiliary biti in perfective present tense. It denotes a perfect future action or event, which is past or prior to another future event (E\textsuperscript{2}). It can be called pre–future perfect tense. Maretić\textsuperscript{18} has observed clearly the perfectivity of the futur II and for such event and action used the term II perfekt. The futur II is not an independent tense as well. The event depends on another future event, which occurs after the main event. The main event is in live contact with the second event. The results of the main event lie at the time of the second event. As in the pluskvamperfekt, the reference time lies at the same point of time where the second event falls. But, unlike in the pluskvamperfekt, this whole situation happens in future, which is shown by the position of the speech time before the event and reference time. The situation in graphics is as follows:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ccc}
ST & RT & ET \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\begin{quote}
–Ja ću sada ći.
–I shall go now.
\end{quote}

The futur III is formed with the perfect participle and the auxiliary biti in the futur I. It denotes the future perfect action or event. Maretić\textsuperscript{19} uses the term preterit–perfekt (preteritoperfekt) for such events. Later on in the third edition of the same book the term has been changed into preterit–future (preteritofutur). His observation of the perfectivity of the futur III is evident in his choice of the term preteritoperfekt, later on the perfekt is replaced by futur just to make sure the term represents the future tense.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ccc}
ST & ET & RT, ET\textsuperscript{2} \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\begin{quote}
–Kada budeš došao, ći ćemo u kino.
–When you have come, we will go to a movie.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} The Future III is usually excluded from the grammar books, but its place in the verbal tense system is very important. Its role will be explained later in the article.

\textsuperscript{18} Maretić, Tomo. Pp. 631.

\textsuperscript{19} Maretić, Tomo, Gramatika i stilistika hrvatskoga ili srpskoga književnog jezika, Naklada jugoslavenskog nakladnog D. D., »Obnova«, Zagreb 1931 (original 1899), pp. 554
Basically the graphic explanation of the futur III does not differ from futur II, but the futur II is an event which took place before the second event and these two events are in live contact, which makes it dependent and pre-future perfect tense. On the other hand, the futur III is an independent tense. It does need a context to make it perfect, but the context does not make it pre-future perfect tense, but simply the future perfect tense.

The futur III is very rare in Croatian and excluded from the school textbooks. It is used in the texts decorated with highly stylish nature of writing. The future perfect tense is expressed usually by the present perfect. The way how the non-perfect present is used to express the non-perfect future tense, i.e. the prezent replaces the futur I: Sljedeći mjesec idem u Indiju, in place of Sljedeći mjesec ću ići u Indiju, same way the present perfect is used to replace the future perfect, i.e. the perfekt replaces the futur III npr. Ako ne stigne plaća sljedeći tjedan, nastradao sam in place of ako ne stigne plaća sljedeći tjedan, bit ću nastradao.

The futur III is commonly replaced by the futur I as well, but more precise way of expressing futur III is by paraphrasing it. Nancy Cochrane\(^\text{20}\) says about the problems of translation of English future perfect (her exemple: when he comes, I will have done it.) into Croatian:

»Finding translational equivalents to the future perfect is somewhat more of a problem. Some speakers accept the following equivalent of the future perfect in the sentence:

–Kad on dođe, ja ću već učiniti/završiti.

However, other speakers claim that is only marginally acceptable and very difficult to process. For them, the temporal relationship indicated by the English future perfect can only be rendered by paraphrases such as:

a) Kad on dođe, to ćemo već biti gotovo.
b) Kad on dođe, to ćemo već biti završeno.«

It is interesting to see that in the first proposed translation the perfectivity is completely lost, and an attempt to compensate it with an additional adverb već (already) has been made. In the second proposed translation (a and b), especially in (b), the sentence has been paraphrased into passive and the passive perfect participle has been used. In Croatian language the passive perfect participle very rarely loses its perfectivity. This way the perfectivity has been kept intact. Only the futur III is capable of keeping the perfectivity without changing the voice; that is making it passive.

–Kad on dođe, ja ću biti učinio.

\(^{20}\) Cochrane, Nancy pp. 155.
The perfect tenses are those where the event time is always prior to reference time and the non–perfect tenses are those where the event time and the reference time are at the same point, or reference time is before event time.

The whole structure of the Croatian verbal system with perfectivity as a factor for defining the system can be put into the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non–perfect tense</th>
<th>Perfect tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Prezent</td>
<td>Perfekt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Imperfekt / Aorist / Perfekt*</td>
<td>Pluskvamperfekt*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Futur I</td>
<td>Futur II, Futur III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Perfekt and Pluskvamperfekt with neutralised perfectivity

The arrows show the shift of the semantics by the neutralisation of perfectivity.

The concept of perfectivity is nothing new in Croatian language. Almost all the linguists have observed it, especially its presence in the perfekt. The grammatical category of tenses becomes complete only if the perfectivity is included in defining the verbal tenses. For better understanding of verbal tenses and their relation with each other the perfectivity is imperative. The perfectivity is not limited to the category of tenses, it also has its place in all the grammatical moods: conditional, optative and imperative.

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Pojam gotovosti u glagolskim vremenima hrvatskog jezika: gotova i negotova vremena

Pojam gotovosti veoma je važan u određivanju glagolskih vremena u hrvatskome. Uvođenje gotovosti u temporalni sustav pomaže u strukturiranju glagolsko-vremenskog sustava i u boljem razumijevanju glagolskih paradigma pojedinačno i u međusobnim odnosima. Gotovost ili negotovost neke radnje određuju se međusobnim odnosom dviju točaka na vremenskoj crti: vremena zbivanja i vremena odnošenja. Ako je vrijeme zbivanja prije vremena odnošenja, radi se o gotovom vremenu, a ako su vrijeme zbivanja i vrijeme odnošenja u istoj točki vremena ili je ponekad vrijeme odnošenja prije vremena radnje, riječ je o negotovom vremenu. Pojam gotovosti nije novost za hrvatske lingviste, Musić, Katić i drugi u svojim radovima bavili su se tim problemom.

Key words: completivity (linguistics), verbal tenses, Croatian

Ključne riječi: gotovost (lingvistika), glagolska vremena, hrvatski jezik