

An Easily Performed Advance through Difficult Conditions – One More View on the Slovenian *lahkó*

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Abstract

*Among a bunch of striking peculiarities of modern Slovenian standard language, the typologically unusual use of the modal adverb *lahkó* (“easily”) as modal particle replacing the original modal verb **môči* (“to can”) in almost all affirmative contexts deserves its place on the list – and any comparative linguist’s attention. In a recent analysis of this phenomenon by Marušič & Žaucer (2016, to appear), based on a detailed historical documentation, a convincing proposal is given of how it could – and obviously must – have arisen – from a primarily combined construction of the older modal verb and the preceding adverb *lahkó* (“easily”). Whereas the historical evidence yields an almost complete picture of the gradual development from an originally verbal to the completely adverbial expression of possibility in affirmative constructions, yet a technical problem remains unsolved – that of the loss of the infinitive. A proposal of how this “jump” could happen, and some additional evidence for a rather independent development in Slovenian, is given here, by considering probable influence from other verbless constructions..*

The use of the modal particle *lahkó*, derived from the adverb meaning “easily”, is complementary in Slovenian, in that it only covers affirmative situations, whereas the verb is still fully used in negated (and a few other) contexts – and thus not extinct at all. (1)

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|-----|--|-----|-------------------------|------------|------|---------|--------|--------------------------|
| (1) | Vsega | ne | morem | (storiti), | to | pa | lahkó | (storim). |
| | All (Gen) | neg | can, 1 st Sg | (do, Inf.) | that | advers. | easily | (do, 1 st Sg) |
| | I can’t (do) all, but that I can (do). | | | | | | | |

In contrary to the verb, *lahkó* additionally allows negative constructions as well (Dvořák, Marušič & Žaucer). As shown and analysed by a convincing historical comparison of older text sources by Marušič & Žaucer (2016), the replacement of an original modal verb, which, in the modern Slovenian, only occurs in negated sentences and a few phrasal, mainly exclamatory contexts, can be well explained by a gradual loss of the modal from a preceding regular occurrence of the finite modal verb combined with both the infinitive full verb and the particle *lahkó*, an obviously older stage occurring in medieval texts and being replaced step by step in older modern texts – but still found as fossilized construction in some modern Slovenian dialects isolated from the Slovenian mainland, as eg. in the modern Resian dialect (Žaucer 2016, p.c.). Though this development is quite evident and the gradual replacement can be well demonstrated by historical change, the concrete reason for the sudden „jump“ from a particle + finite modal verb + infinitive full verb to a pure particle + finite full verb construction still seems to remain a puzzle; the seemingly unsolvable problem is presented by the fact that an infinitive construction is too different from a non-infinitive one as to be easily changed into it. Thus, after the direction of change has been made evident and clearly demonstrated in the course of language development, the question arises of how this grammatical distance could have been bridged.

Two different concepts can be considered as possible explanations for the bridge over this seemingly unclosable gap. First, a further construction with the latter particle *lahkó* – as adverb meaning „easily“ (and gradually developing to a modal use) and the finite verb form – could have existed parallelly – and, by an increasing frequency of use, semantically influenced the combined three-element-construction; those constructions are well known and common in modern Slovenian (2) as well as in some of its modern neighbour languages, as eg. German (3), Croatian (4) and Italian (5) – and can be supposed to have also frequently occurred in older stages of these languages.

(2) Kàj lahkó se zgodi, da se boš spet izgubil v gozdu.
It can quite easily happen that you get lost in the wood again.

(3) Er regt sich leicht auf.
He gets easily excited.

(4) Svake nedelje lako dođete kod nas.
Every sunday you (can) easily come to us.

(5) Questa specie di farfalla si trova facilmente nell' ambiente urbano.
This kind of butterfly is easily found in urban area.

However, these simple constructions, in spite of their common occurrence, can only yield an apparently clear explanation of the obvious development shown in Marušič & Žaucer 2016 – in the presence of the formerly usual co occurrence of the modal *moči* with the particle *lahkó* in medieval Slovenian, which is still alive and well documented by them in the Resian dialect.

Marušič & Žaucer convincingly claim that this functional extension of *lahkó* rather presents a special, independent development than an external influence from another language. This does not mean a contrary to the fact that an adverb meaning “easily” or a similar meaning is often found in modal contexts of quite some neighbouring and other languages, an observation demonstrated by them on the etymology of the German word “vielleicht” (maybe). However, no one of those languages shows a similar general semantic development characteristic for Slovenian. In contrary, some influence from German can be noticed – with a rather dialectal or stylistic impact –, as the infinitival constructions “more biti” (may be) and “zna biti” (can be) demonstrate (Dvořák 2009). Additionally, the avoidance of the infinitive may still present a puzzle even for Slovenian – unless we consider other Slovenian verbless constructions. (10) and (11)

In Dvořák (2007 and 2009), the construction with *lahkó* is considered parallelly to some other verbless predicative constructions, such as excessive verb-like use of clitic pronouns in genitive, dative and accusative (6), (7), (8). It is even claimed that *lahkó* and the predicated clitic pronouns can play a hand-in-hand role in replacing the verb and making it “unnecessary” – since the cooccurrence of two such elements, mutually influenced by each other, obviously affects a verb-like feeling in the speakers (9).

(6) A: A ga še videvate?
Interr. him still see, 2nd Pl, imperf.
Do you still meet him?

B: Jaz GA, Peter ga NE, Maja ga pa samo tu pa tam.
I HIM, P. him NOT, M. him advers. only from time to time.
I do, Peter does not, and Maja only does occasionally.

(7) A: A me razumeš?
Interr. me understand, 2nd Sg
Do you understand me?

B: Vas.
Cl.Pron. 2nd Pl (polite form)
I do.

(8) A: A se mu prizna diplomo?
Interr. refl.acc him.dat recognize, 3rd Sg diploma acc
Do they recognize him the diploma?

B: Se mu jo, se mu jo.
Refl. him it, refl. him it.
They do, they do.

(9) A: A mu lahkó pomagáš?
Interr. him easily help, 2nd Sg
Can you help him?

B: Lahkó mu. / Lahkó MU. / Mu. Lahkó.
Easily him easily HIM Him. Easily.
I can. That I can. I do. I can.

B': Mislim, de mu lahkó.
 Think, 1st Sg that him dat easily
 I guess I can.

In contexts like (1) *lahkó* represents one of several grammatically verbless, but functionally verb-like elements of Slovenian, which are commonly used as monomorph (not inflexed or varied) predicates for all persons, numbers and tenses. As with clitic pronouns in (6), but unlike in (7), it can be used – and is understood by speakers – as a definite full verb form, replacing the whole paradigm as an apparently conjugated verb, which is also the case with the conditional particle *bi* and the optative particle *naj* in Slovenian.

(10) A: A ga lahkó more prepoznati?
 Interr. him easily modal aux, 3rd Sg Inf., recognize
 Can he (easily) recognize him?

B: Lahkó. / Mislim, de ga lahkó. / Mislim, de lahkó. / Mislim, de ga lahko more.
 Easily think, 1st that him easily ... that easily ... that him easily can
 He can. I think he can. I think he can. I think he can.

(11) A: A ga lahkó prepozná?
 Interr. him easily 3rd Sg, recognize
 Can he recognize him?

B: Lahkó. / Mislim, de ga lahkó. / Mislim, de lahkó.
 Easily think, 1st that him easily I think that easily
 He can. I think he can. I think he can.

Sources

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