

Avertives in the languages of Europe
University of Helsinki, 22–23 May 2025

Tracing the avertive through semantic space: Evidence from Lithuanian

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Roadmap

- Avertive and related domains
- Grammaticalisation of avertives
- The Lithuanian avertive: synchrony
- The Lithuanian avertive: diachrony
- Conclusions

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Avertive and related domains

- Kuteva (1998, 2001: Ch. 4):

Avertive is a cross-linguistic gram type expressing an event that was “potentially imminent but did not get realized”.

French (Proust, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1ère partie)

(1) *J'avais tellement l'habitude de dire Madame de Crécy, j'ai encore **failli de me tromper**.*

‘I was so used to saying ‘Madame de Crécy’ [instead of ‘Madame Swann’], I **almost made a mistake** again.’

Alexandrova 2016, 2019, in prep., Caudal 2023

Cf. also Vincent 2013 on the related domain of “conative”

Avertive and related domains

- Kuteva (2009):
Avertive is a “semantically elaborate” gram combining meanings from three different domains:
 - temporal (pastness),
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- Kuteva et al. (2019: 852):

Avertive belongs to a broader domain of “non-realisation”, which also includes

- *apprehensional*: non-realisation of an undesirable situation;
- *frustrated initiation*: non-realisation of initial stage of past situation;
- *frustrated completion*: non-realisation of the final stage of past situation;
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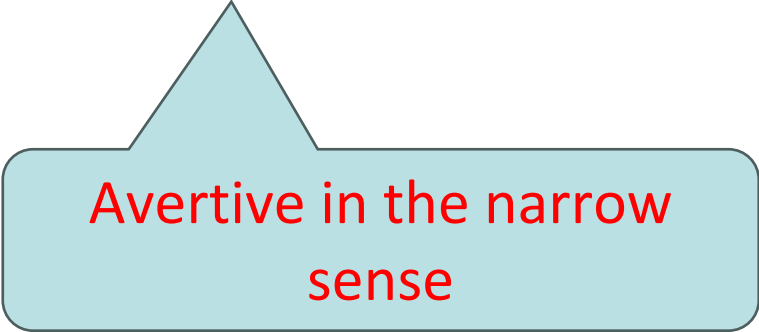
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viewed as a whole.

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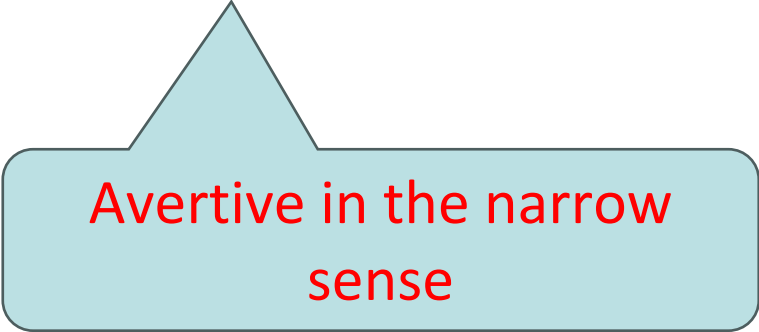
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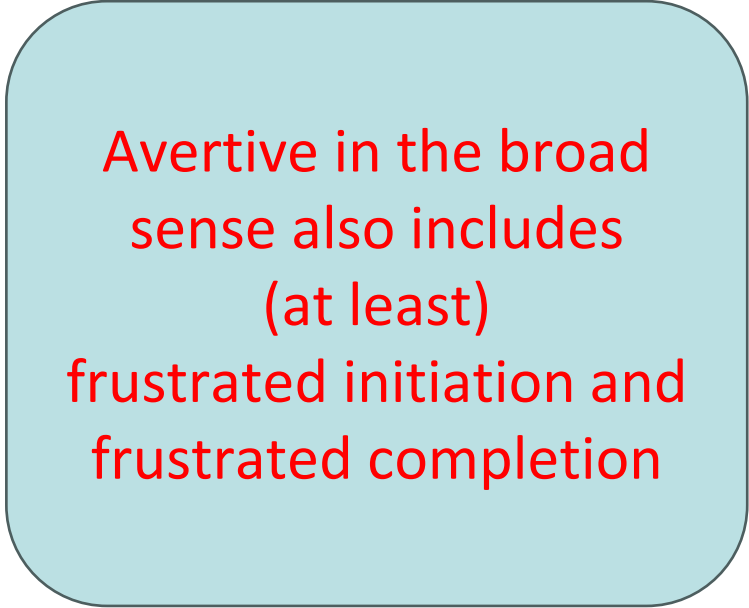
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Avertive in the narrow
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Avertive in the broad
sense also includes
(at least)
frustrated initiation and
frustrated completion

Avertive and related domains

- Avertive vs. frustrated initiation primarily differ in event types they apply to (cf. Caudal 2023: 114-116):
 - avertive ~ punctual events without internal phases;
 - frustrated initiation ~ durative events
- Frustrated completion can be distinguished from the avertive only with durative events
- Different patterns of coexpression of these three functions are attested in languages.

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English (Sadock 1981; Ziegeler 2000):

- (2) a. John *almost fell*. avertive
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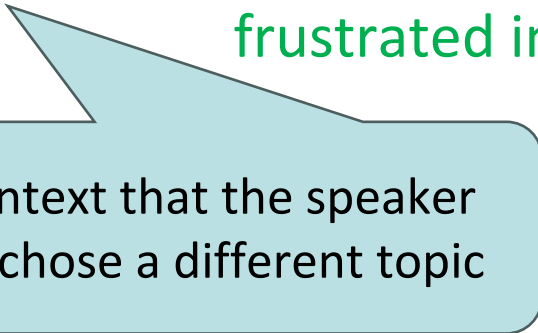
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It is clear from the context that the speaker gave up this plan and chose a different topic

Avertive and related domains

Pirahã (isolate, Brazil; Everett 1986: 300):

- (3) a. *hi xí koho-áo-b-ábagaí*
3 thing eat-TELIC-PFV-FRINIT
'He almost began to eat it.' frustrated initiation
- b. *hi baitigiísi is ib-áo-b-ábai*
3 species.of.fish animal arrow-TELIC-PFV-FRCMPL
'He almost arrowed the fish, frustrated completion
i.e. shot the arrow but missed the fish.'
- c. *tiobáhai bigí kaob-ábai*
child ground fall-FRCMPL
'The child almost fell.' avertive

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Kabardian, Kuban dialect (Northwest Caucasian, Russia; own fieldwork data, 2016):

- (4) a. *zurjet tje-x^we pe-t-a*
Zurjet LOC:on-fall LOC:front-stand-PST
'Zurjet almost fell.'
- b. *zurjet haž'əbe-ḱ^weda-m haləb^w*
Zurjet flour-rotten-OBL bread
x-jə-ṣə-č' pe-t-a
LOC:mass-3SG.ERG-make-out LOC:front-stand-PST
'Zurjet almost started making bread from rotten flour.'
- c. *#asker pjəs'mo jə-tx pe-t-a*
Asker letter 3SG.ERG-write LOC:front-stand-PST
'Asker almost started/*finished writing a letter.'

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Avertive and related domains

- Coexpression patterns:

frustrated initiation	avertive	frustrated completion	language
A	A	A	English, Lithuanian
A	A	B	Kabardian
A	B	B	Pirahã
A	B	C	??
A	B	A	??

Avertive and related domains

- A construction expressing both frustrated initiation and frustrated completion to the exclusion of the avertive proper appears to be highly improbable.
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 - full event structure avertive reading;
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the “core” of the
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Avertive and related domains

- The **inconsequential** (result state avertive) function:
 - is expressed in the same way as the avertive in some languages (Overall 2017: 488-490)

Ashéninka Perené (Arawakan, Peru; Mihas 2015: 457, 249):

- (5) a. *kam-a-vi-t-ak-a-mi*
die-EP-FRUS-EP-PFV-REAL-2S
'You nearly died.' avertive
- b. *o-ja-t-ashi-ve-t-a-ri*
3F.A-go-EP-APPL-FRUS-EP-REAL-3M.O
'She came to see him in vain.' inconsequential

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A – agent, APPL – applicative, EP – epenthetic, F – feminine, FRUS – frustrative, M – masculine, O – object, PFV – perfective, REAL – realis, S – subject

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- The **inconsequential** (result state avertive) function:
 - however, many avertive grams do not seem to express it;
 - rather belongs to the related, but separate domain of the frustrative.

Adaskina 2005, Overall 2017

Cf. also Plungian 2001 on “antiresultative”

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Avertive vs. proximative

- Kuteva (1998: 127; 2009), Alexandrova (2016):
 - avertive should be distinguished from **proximative** or **prospective**.
- Heine (1994: 36)
 - proximative expresses “a temporal phase located close to the initial boundary of the situation described by the main verb”, i.e. mere imminence of a situation.

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	avertive	proximative
imminence	yes	yes
pastness	yes	no
counterfactuality	yes	no

Avertive vs. proximative

- Avertive and proximative are often not coexpressed

Koasati (Muskogean, USA; Kimball 1991: 196, 183)

- (6) a. *ca-támm-á:pi-t* avertive
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AVR – avertive, DUBIT – dubitative, INTENT – intentional, P – patient

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- Proximative is not restricted to the past:

Gyeli (Atlantic-Congo > Bantu, Cameroun; Grimm 2021: 412):

(7) *mè múà wè nà nzà*
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COM – comitative, PROX - proximative

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- Proximative does not imply non-realisation of the event:

English (BNC)

(8) *I looked at the paper, and realised that a new comedy show **was about to start** on Channel 4. [and it did start]*

- However, in past tense contexts proximatives often give rise to an implicature of non-occurrence (Ziegeler 2000):

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More on this later

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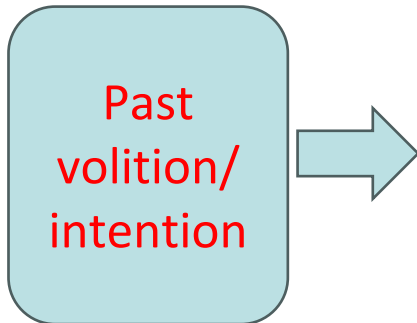
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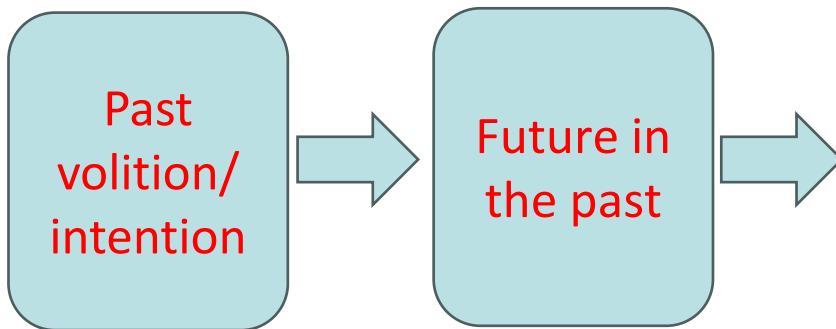


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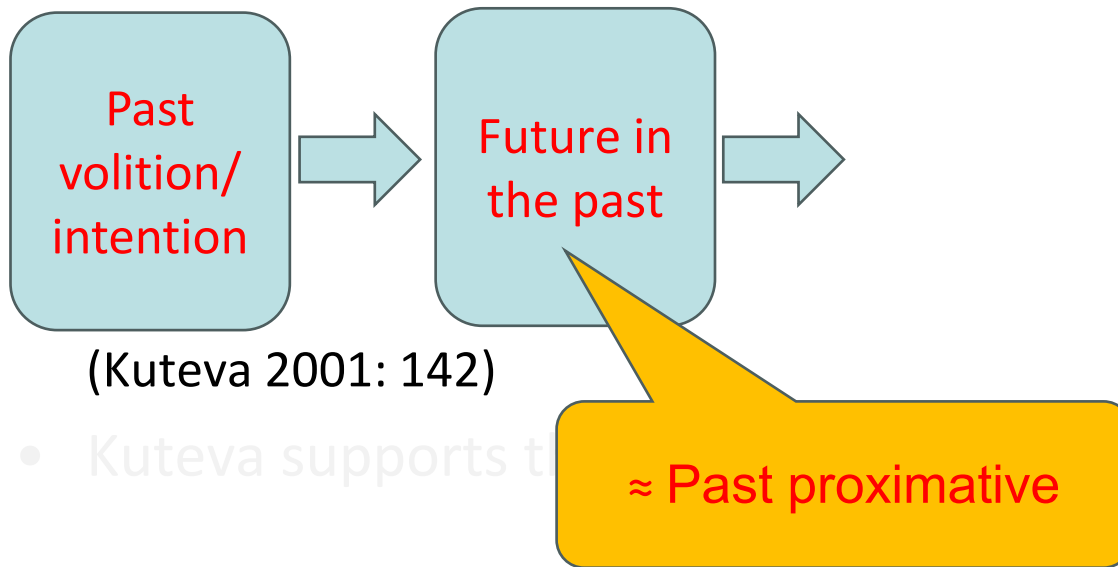


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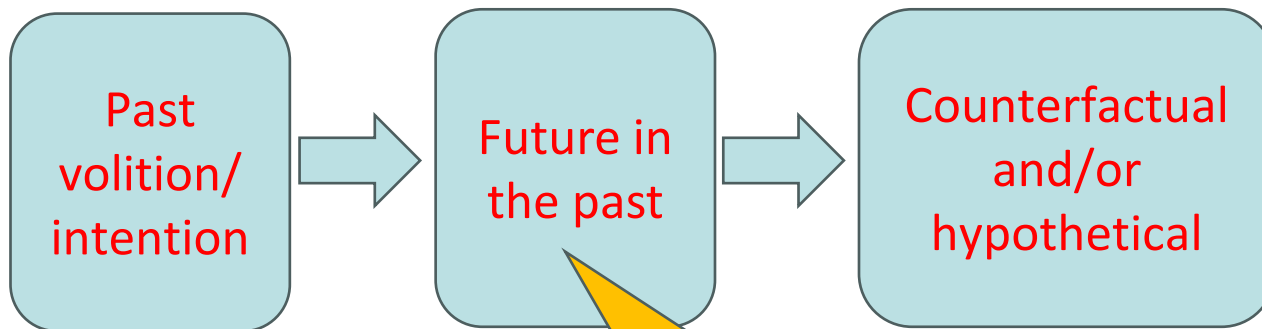
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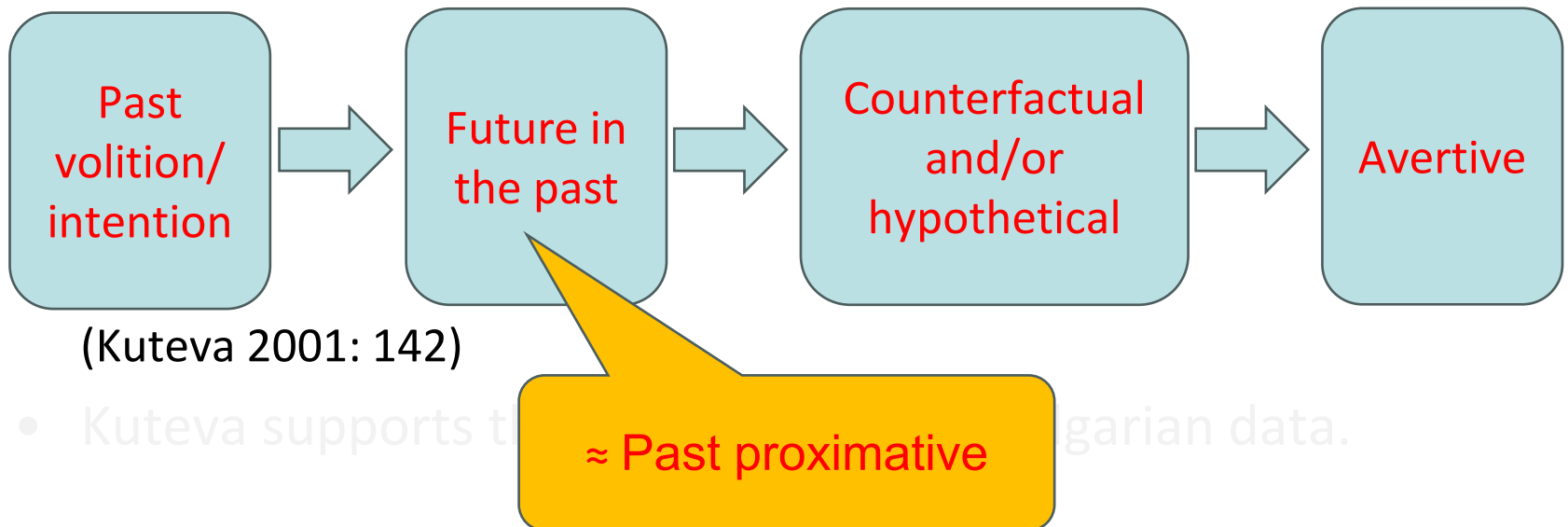
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≈ Past proximative

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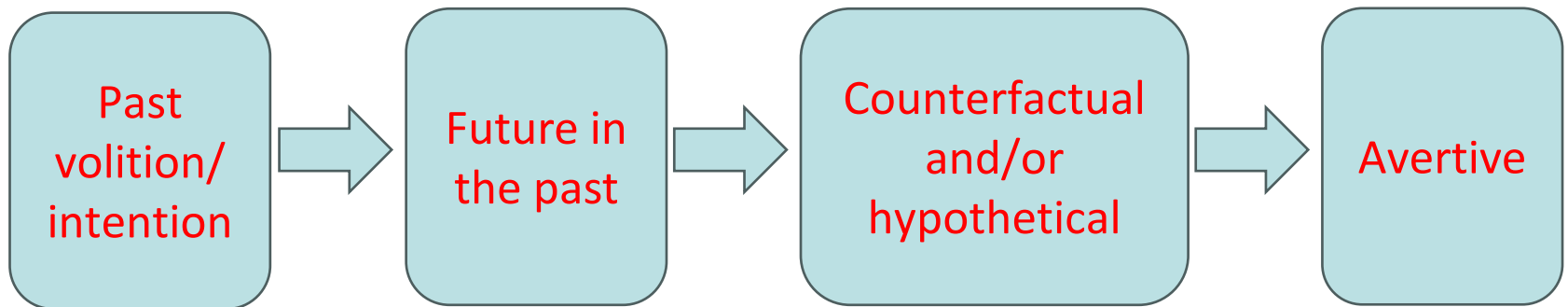
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Grammaticalisation of avertives

Bulgarian (Kuteva 2001: 149)

- (10) *Navăn be mnogo xľazgavo,*
outside be.AOR.3SG very slippery
šťjax da padna
want.IPF.1SG SBJ.PTCL fall.PRS.1SG
'It was very slippery outside, I almost fell.'

AOR – aorist, IPF – imperfect, PRS – present, PTCL – particle, SBJ – subjunctive

Grammaticalisation of avertives

- The Modern Bulgarian avertive construction *štjax da V* goes back to the construction with the verb *xotěti* ‘want’ with the infinitive whose primary meaning in Old Bulgarian (Old Church Slavonic) was volition and intention (see, however, Kozlov 2014).

Grammaticalisation of avertives

- In fact, the Modern Bulgarian construction has all four main meanings distinguished by Kuteva:
 - past volition;
 - past proximative;
 - counterfactual;
 - avertive.

Grammaticalisation of avertives

Bulgarian (Kuteva 2001: 147):

(11) *Tja ne šteše da izleze s nego*
she NEG want.IPF.3SG SBJ.PTCL go.out.PRS.3SG with him
'She did not want to go out with him.' past volition

(12) *I togava započna strašna burja, kojato po-kāsno*
šteše da gi pogub-i.
want.IPF.3SG SBJ.PTCL 3PL.OBJ destroy-PRS.3SG
'And then there began a terrible storm which would later
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Grammaticalisation of avertives

Bulgarian (Kuteva 2001: 148-149):

(13) *Toj šteše da otid-e*
he want.IPF.2SG SBJ.PTCL go-PRS.3SG
na roždenija ì den, no tja ne go pokani.

‘He would gone to her birthday party but she didn’t invite him.’
counterfactual

(14) (=10) *Navān be mnogo xľāzgavo,*
štjax da padna
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Grammaticalisation of avertives

- Kozlov (2014: 140) criticises Kuteva's diachronic scenario on the basis of an in-depth study of Old Church Slavonic data and proposes the following paths of development of the *xotěti + Infinitive*:
 - (i) volition > intention > proximative
 - (ii) past proximative > avertive > counterfactual
- instead of Kuteva's
- past proximative > counterfactual > avertive

Grammaticalisation of avertives

- I concur with Kozlov (2014) and present synchronic and diachronic evidence from **Lithuanian** (Indo-European > Baltic) showing that:
 - avertive can develop from past proximative via conventionalisation of the non-realisation implicature, without an intermediate counterfactual stage;
 - moreover, this grammaticalisation path does not necessarily belong to modality, but is instead tightly linked to an aspectual semantic domain, i.e. progressive.

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(Arkadiev 2011, 2019, 2020)

Roadmap

- Avertive and related domains
- Grammaticalisation of avertives
- The Lithuanian avertive: synchrony
- The Lithuanian avertive: diachrony
- Conclusions

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- The Lithuanian avertive: diachrony
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Introducing the Lithuanian avertive

- A periphrastic construction consisting of two components:
 - auxiliary *būti* ‘be’ in the past tense (agrees with the subject in person and number);
 - present active participle of the lexical verb with the continuative prefix *be-* (agrees with the subject in gender and number + nominative case)

On the various uses of *be-* see Arkadiev 2011, Holvoet 2024, Holvoet & Kavaliūnaitė 2021

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Introducing the Lithuanian avertive

- (15) *Buv-au* *be-nu-krent-a-nt-i*
be-PST.1SG CNT-PVB-fall-PRS-PA-NOM.SG.F
'I almost fell.'

CNT – continuative, F – feminine, NOM – nominative, PA – active participle,
PRS – present tense, PST – past tense, PVB – preverb

Introducing the Lithuanian avertive

- The so-called “inceptive” or “continuative” compound tense of traditional grammar (Sližienė 1961, 1995; Ambrazas ed. 2006: 250-251, 321-323).
- In my early work (Arkadiev 2011, 2012), I argued that the construction is an instance of avertive.
- In fact, this was not entirely correct (Alexandrova 2016, Arkadiev 2019).

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Semantics

- The construction has the following meanings:
 - narrow avertive (15);
 - frustrated initiation;
 - frustrated completion;
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 - past proximative;
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Semantics

- Frustrated initiation (internet, Arkadiev 2011: 51):

(16) *Buv-au be-raš-qs komentar-q*
be-PST.1SG CNT-write-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M comment-ACC.SG
bet perskaitęs jūsų mintis supratau kad geriau nepasakysiu...
'I **was going to write** a comment, but having read your
thoughts I understood that I couldn't say it better...'

ACC – accusative, CNT – continuative, F – feminine, NOM – nominative,
PA – active participle, PRS – present tense, PST – past tense

Semantics

- Frustrated completion (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 85):

(17) *Jau* *buv-o* *be-lip-qs*

already *be-PST.3* *CNT-climb-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M*

ant žemės, bet užkliuvo už akmenis ir pliumptelėjo į ledinį vandenį.

‘He **was** already **climbing** ashore, but stumbled over a stone and plopped back into ice-cold water.’

CNT – continuative, M – masculine, NOM – nominative, PA – active participle,
PRS – present tense, PST – past tense

Semantics

- Inconsequential (?) (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 87):

(18) *Jau buv-o-me be-pa-tik-j,*

already AUX-PST-1PL CNT-PVB-believe-PRS.PA.NOM.PL.M

kad daugiau neturėsime tokių vyriausybių...

‘We already **started believing** that we would no longer have such governments... [but in vain]’

CNT – continuative, M – masculine, NOM – nominative, PA – active participle,
PRS – present tense, PST – past tense

Semantics

- Past proximative (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 94):

(19) *Jis jsimylějo merginq,*

kur-i

which-NOM.SG.F

buv-o

be-PST.3

be-iš-vyk-sta-nt-i

CNT-PVB-go-PRS-PA.NOM.SG.F

j Amerikq, vedě ir išvažiavo.

‘He fell in love with a girl who **was about to leave** for America, married her and left [with her for America].’

CNT – continuative, F – feminine, NOM – nominative, PA – active participle,
PRS – present tense, PST – past tense, PVB – preverb

Semantics

- Past progressive (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 94):

(20) *O saul-è jau buv-o be-kyl-a-nt-i...*
and sun-NOM.SG already be-PST.3 CNT-rise-PRS-PA-NOM.SG.F
'And the sun **was** already **rising**...'

CNT – continuative, F – feminine, NOM – nominative, PA – active participle,
PRS – present tense, PST – past tense

Semantics

- NB in its progressive and proximative functions, the construction also occurs, even if marginally, with the present tense of the auxiliary:

(21) *galima saky-ti, kad es-am be-prarand-q*
possible say-INF that be-PRS.1SG CNT-lose-PRS.PA.NOM.PL.M
sqmon-ę.
consciousness-ACC.SG
'we can say we **are on our way towards losing** our
consciousness.' (Holvoet & Kavaliūnaitė 2021: 418)

ACC – accusative, CNT – continuative, INF – infinitive, M – masculine,
NOM – nominative, PA – active participle, PRS – present tense, PST – past tense

Semantics

- The interpretation of the construction is partly determined by the type of the event described by the predicate and partly depends on broader context.

Semantics

- The meaning of *frustrated completion* is mainly attested with durative telic (accomplishment) predicates.
- The *avertive* meaning, by contrast, favours punctual and atelic (stative and activity) predicates.
 - However, the distribution is not categorical: some verbs are compatible with both meanings.

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Semantics

- (22) “*Ot kvail-ys!*” — *buv-au be-sak-qs*,
PTCL fool-NOM.SG AUX-PST.1SG CNT-say-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M
bet laiku nutvėriau save už liežuvio.
‘I **was going to say** “What a fool!” but in good time
restrained myself.’ (LtTenTen14) **frustrated initiation**

- (23) *Vos jam ištarus Katerinos vardą, ji sustojo viduryje sakinio,*
kur-j buv-o be-sak-a-nt-i...
which-ACC.SG.M be-PST.3 CNT-say-PRS-PA-NOM.SG.F
‘As soon as he pronounced Katerina’s name, she stopped in
the middle of the sentence that she was saying...’
(LtTenTen14) **frustrated completion**

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‘As soon as he pronounced Katerina’s name, she stopped in
the middle of the sentence that she **was saying...**’
(LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 70) **frustrated completion**

Role of context

- The choice between the counterfactual and the non-counterfactual (proximative and progressive) interpretations largely depends on the context.
- The counterfactual reading of the construction is more often than not triggered by explicit contextual cues:
 - concessive/adversative clauses;
 - temporal clauses expressing events interrupting the situation;
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Role of context

- Concessive clause (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 85):

(24) *J-i* *buv-o* *be-at.si.gau-na-nt-i*,
3-NOM.SG.F be-PST.3 CNT-recover-PRS-PA-NOM.SG.F
tačiau, *su-žinoj-us-i*
however PVB-know-PST.PA-NOM.SG.F
apie galutinį sukilimą pralaimėjimą, atkrito ir *mirė*.
'She **was recovering**, **however** when she learned about the
final defeat of the uprising, she relapsed and died.'

Role of context

- Interrupting temporal clause (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 85):

(25) *jau buv-o be-baigi-qs*
already be-PST.3 CNT-finish-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M
neakivaizdin-ę pedagogin-ę mokykl-q,
extramural-ACC.SG.F pedagogical-ACC.SG.F school-ACC.SG
kai gav-o šaukim-q
when get-PST.3 call-ACC.SG
per dvi dienas išvažiuoti.
'He **was** already **finishing** a correspondence pedagogical
school **when** he got a call to leave in two days.'

Role of context

- Interrupting main clause (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 85):

(26) *Kai* *jau* *buv-o* *be-kiš-qs*
when already be-PST.3 CNT-poke-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M
laišk-q *j* *vok-q*,
letter-ACC.SG in envelope-ACC.SG
kažk-as *pa-beld-ė* *j* *dur-is...*
someone-NOM PVB-knock-PST.3 in door-ACC.PL
'When he was already putting the letter into an envelope,
someone knocked at the door...'

Role of context

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- “Minimal pairs” with the same lexical verb are also attested.

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Role of context

- Avertive (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 95):

(27) *Parduotuvės savininkas jau*

buv-o be-duod-qs j-am grqž-os,
be-PST.3 CNT-give-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M 3-DAT.SG.M change-GEN.SG

kai staiga pa-stebėj-o...
when suddenly PVB-notice-PST.3

‘The shop owner **was** already **going to give** him change **when** he suddenly noticed [that something was wrong with the banknotes].’

Role of context

- Progressive (LtTenTen14, Arkadiev 2019: 95):

(28) *Mane surado žemesniajame aukšte, kur aš*

*jau **buv-au** **be-duod-a-nt-i***

*already **be-PST.1SG** **CNT-give-PRS-PA-NOM.SG.F***

interview vietinės televizijos žinioms...

‘They found me on the ground floor, where I **was** already **giving** an interview to the local TV news...’

Avertive by implicature?

- All this suggests that the avertive interpretation of the Lithuanian construction arises via a counterfactual implicature rather than is part of the encoded meaning.

Cf. Kuteva (2001: 150-166) on “context absorption”

Cf. Caudal (2023: 157, 165-169) on “nonactuality entailments”

Avertive by implicature?

- Past proximatives naturally give rise to counterfactual implicatures (see Ziegeler 2000):

(29) a. *I was about to fall.*
b. *I fell.*

- Hearing (28a) instead of (28b), the addressee infers that (28b) is not true, since otherwise the speaker would have used the stronger statement.

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- The counterfactual implicature associated with the Lithuanian construction is on the way to conventionalisation:
 - when elicited in isolation, the construction is interpreted as avertive by default (Arkadiev 2011);
 - the avertive accounts for ca. 75% of the corpus examples of the construction, while the proximative is clearly marginal with less than 5% (Arkadiev 2019).

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Historical development

- In Old Lithuanian the construction was primarily used as progressive and mainly occurred with stative and activity verbs.

Cf. Holvoet & Kavaliūnaitė (2021: 427)

Historical development

Old Lithuanian (Wolfenbüttel Postil, 1573, 42r:12):

stative verb + progressive

- (30) *Bua* *tew-as* *ir* *matin-a* *ia*
be.PST.3 father-NOM.SG and mother-NOM.SG 3.GEN.SG.M
be-fsi-fteb-i *ant ta.*
CNT-RFL-look-PRS.PA.NOM.PL.M on this.GEN.SG.M
'His father and mother **were looking** on this.'

GEN – genitive, RFL – reflexive

Historical development

Old Lithuanian (Bretke's Bible, 1590, 1Chr 21:20):

activity verb + progressive

(31) *Nefa* *Arnan* *buw-a*
because Ornan.NOM.SG be-PST.3
be-kull-ens *Kwieczy-us.*
CNT-thresh-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M wheat-ACC.PL
'Now Ornan **was threshing** wheat.'

Historical development

- The construction was not restricted to the past tense:

Old Lithuanian (Bretke's *Sacred songs*, 1589, 81:6):

(32) *log eft be-gul-is edzi-ofu Kudik-is*
that be.PRS.3 CNT-lie-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M crib-LOC.PL child-NOM.SG
'That the Child is lying in the crib.'

LOC – locative case

Historical development

- The use of the prefix *be-* itself was not yet obligatory:
Old Lithuanian (Daukša's Postil, 1599, 21:35, quoted after Holvoet & Kavaliūnaitė 2021: 427):

(33) *Szitie dáiktai ftôios Bethanioy v3 lordôno /*

kur lôn-as bū kríkštii-qs.

where John-NOM.SG be.PST.3 baptise-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M

'These things happened in Bethania, across the Jordan,
where John **was baptising.**'

Historical development

- The first uses of the construction with the semantics of imminence are attested in the 17th century:
 - in (34) it is plain proximative;
 - (35) is already an avertive, since the context clearly implies that the imminent situation was not realised.

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Old Lithuanian (Chylinski's Bible, 1660, Gen 40:10): proximative

(34) *Ó and ano wina medies buwo tris fzakos,*

ó buw-o kaypo be-fprog-qs.

and be-PST.3 as CNT-burst-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M

'And in the vine were three branches; it was as though it budded.'

(Klein's *New Books of Songs*, 1666, 248:14): avertive

(35) *Pékl-on' buw-au be-grimft-qs.*

hell-ALL.SG be-PST.1SG CNT-fall-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M

'I nearly fell into Hell [but God saved me].'

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ALL – allative

Historical development

- Note that semantics of interruption can also arise in purely progressive contexts:

Old Lithuanian (Bretke's Bible 1590, Sam. 17:34, quoted after Ambrazas 1990: 181)

(36) *Tawa tarn-as buw-a be-gan-ans*
2SG.GEN servant-NOM.SG be-PST.3 CNT-pasture-PRS.PA.NOM.SG.M
aw-is sawa Tiew-o, ir ateij-a Lėw-as.
sheep-ACC.PL RPOSS father-GEN.SG and come-PST.3 lion-NOM.SG
'Your servant **has been keeping** his father's sheep, **and a lion came...**'

ACC – accusative, RPOSS – reflexive possessive

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Cf. the famous "imperfective paradox" (Dowty 1977, Lascarides 1991 etc.)

Progressive > proximative > avertive

- The development of proximative uses by a progressive construction is quite expected, especially in the context of punctual (achievement) predicates with which progressives naturally denote preliminary stages of the event (Smith 1997: 76-77; Johanson 2000: 153-154; Vafaeian 2018: 109-113).
- The rise of the avertive interpretation in past contexts is pragmatically conditioned and comes “for free”.
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(37) a. *dār-e* *mi-r-e* *be* *samt=e* *daryā*
have.PRS-3SG IPFV-go.PRS-3SG to direction=EZ sea
'She **is walking** towards the sea.' **progressive**

b. *ġatār* *dār-e* *mi-r-e*
train have.PRS-3SG IPFV-leave.PRS-3SG
'The train is about to leave.' proximative

c. *dāšt-am* *siāh* *mi-šod-am*
have.PST-1SG black IPFV-become.PST-1SG
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EZ – ezafe, IPFV – imperfective

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- b. *ǰ'edəw-m* *ʒaβ^we-r* *q-j-e-wəbəd* *pe-t*
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- c. *sə-tje-x^we* *pe-t-a*
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Like in Lithuanian, the present progressive use of the construction appears to be marginal

ABS – absolutive, CSL – cislocative, DYN – dynamic, LOC – locative preverb

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- I propose the following tentative scenario of the development of the Lithuanian construction:
 - (almost full) restriction to the past tense due to low frequency and competition with simple present;
 - development of the (past) proximative meaning in the context of punctual and telic verbs;
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Stage I	progressive	intraterminality
Stage II	proximative	imminence
Stage III	past proximative	imminence + pastness
Stage IV	avertive	imminence + pastness + counterfactuality

Roadmap

- Avertive and related domains
- Grammaticalisation of avertives
- The Lithuanian avertive: synchrony
- The Lithuanian avertive: diachrony
- Conclusions

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Conclusions

- The development observed in Lithuanian is by no means unique, cf. similar phenomena in Persian and Circassian as well as the “(past) imperfective/proximative to avertive” path postulated by Caudal (2023: 156) for many Australian languages.
- This suggests that, at least diachronically, avertive is closely connected to the domain of aspect, all the more so given its intimate and often context-dependent relations with the proximative.

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Thank you for your attention!
Kiitos, kun kuuntelitte!



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