



# THE LATVIAN DEBITIVE: PROBLEMS OF DESCRIPTION IN GRAMMAR

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# Outline of description

1. The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm.
2. Distributional traits of the debitive.
3. Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars (brief overview).
4. To sum up.

# Language material

*Līdzsvarotais mūsdienu latviešu valodas korpuss 2018* [The Balanced Corpus of Modern Latvian 2018], available at:  
<http://www.korpuss.lv/id/LVK2018>

Also fiction, mass media texts etc.

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The debitive mood points to a necessary action (among others, Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Lokmane, Kalnača 2014):

- (1) *Ingum*                      *ir*                      *jā-attopas.*  
Ingus.DAT.M                      be.AUX.PRS.3                      DEB-bethink  
'Ingus needs to bethink himself.' (Ikstena)

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The Latvian debitive mainly expresses **deontic** modality:

(2) *Tēvam*                      *šodien*                      *ir*                      *jā-iet*  
father.DAT.M                      today                      be.AUX.PRS.3                      DEB-go  
*pie* *ārsta.*  
to      doctor.GEN.M

‘Father must (definitely) see a doctor today.’

([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

Epistemic reading is also possible (mainly for stative verbs, e. g., *būt* ‘to be’, *stāvēt* ‘to stand’, *gulēt* ‘to sleep’, *sēdēt* ‘to sit’):

- (3) *Tur kaut kam ir jābūt.*  
there something.DAT be.AUX.PRS.3 DEB-be  
‘There must be something.’ ([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The debitive is formed combining the 3<sup>rd</sup> person present indicative with the prefix *jā-* and the auxiliary *būt* in the finite tense (and mood) form:

- (4) a. *darīt – dara – ir jā-dara* ‘to do – do – must do’  
b. exception: verb *būt* ‘to be’ from infinitive  
*būt – ir jā-būt* ‘to be – must be’



# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

Change in the syntactic structure of the clause (indicative – debitive):

(5) ***Es daru darbu.***  
I.NOM do.PRS.1SG work.ACC.M  
'I do the work.'

as opposed to

(6) ***Man ir jā-dara darbs.***  
I.DAT be.AUX.PRS.3 DEB-do work.NOM.M  
'I must do the work.'

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

In the debitive mood, the object of the obligation is usually in the NOM case except for personal (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person) and reflexive pronouns, which are in the ACC:

(7) *Vienkārši ir jā-atbrīvo mani*  
simply be.AUX.PRS.3 DEB-dismiss I.ACC

*no amata.*

from position.GEN.M

‘I simply must be dismissed from the position.’

([www.db.lv](http://www.db.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

In the present of the debitive mood the auxiliary *ir* ‘is/are’ is often omitted:

(8) *Darbs*                      *[ir]*                      *jā-dara*                      *rūpīgi.*  
work.NOM.M                      [be.AUX.PRS.3]                      DEB-do                      carefully

‘Work must be done with responsibility.’

([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

(9) *Tev*            *bija*                    *jā-raksta*    *vēstule*.  
you.DAT        be.AUX.PST.3            DEB-write    letter.NOM.F  
'You had to write a letter.            (www.korpuss.lv)

(10) *Kaimiņiem*                                    *pēc*    *nedēļas*  
neighbour.DAT.PL.M                    after    week.GEN.F  
*būs*                                    *jā-pļauj*            *mauriņš*.  
be.AUX.FUT.3                    DEB-cut            grass.NOM.M  
'After a week the neighbours will have to cut grass.'  
(www.korpuss.lv)

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The paradigm of the debitive (active voice) (among others, Paegle 2003; Nītiņa & Grigorjevs 2013)

*darīt* ‘to do’

<b>present indefinite</b>	<i>ir jādara</i> ‘have/has to do’
<b>past indefinite</b>	<i>bija jādara</i> ‘had to do’
<b>future indefinite</b>	<i>būs jādara</i> ‘will have to do’
<b>present perfect</b>	<i>ir bijis jādara</i> ‘have/has had to do’
<b>past perfect</b>	<i>bija bijis jādara</i> ‘had had to do’
<b>future perfect</b>	<i>būs bijis jādara</i> ‘will have had to do’

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

## Sub-moods of the debitive

The debitive mood in Latvian differs from other moods in that it can be combined with other moods – the **oblique** and **conditional** (among others, Ahero et al. 1959; Nītiņa & Grigorjevs 2013; Lokmane, Kalnača 2014; Kalnača 2014).

Thus in terms of semantics, one grammatical form subsumes a double modal semantics – **oblique** and **debitive**, or **conditional** and **debitive** meanings.

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The **oblique sub-mood** comprises both the meaning of necessity and of a reported message (e.g., Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača 2014):

(11) *Daktere man piekodināja –*

*esot*                      *jā-nāk*              *pie [bērnu nama]*

be.AUX.OBL.PRS              DEB-come              to

*bērniem*                      *ciemom.*

child.DAT.PL.M              visit.LOC.PL.M

‘The doctor urged me to come and visit the children [in the orphanage].’ (Ieva)

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

<b>present indefinite</b>	<i>esot jādara</i> ‘should be done’
<b>future indefinite</b>	<i>būšot jādara</i> ‘will have to be done’
<b>present perfect</b>	<i>esot bijis jādara</i> ‘should have been done’
<b>future perfect</b>	<i>būšot bijis jādara</i> ‘will have to be done’

The paradigm of the oblique sub-mood of the debitive (active voice) (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača 2014)



# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The combination of the debitive and conditional comprises both the meaning of weakened necessity and points to a desirable action that should occur (e. g., Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača 2014):

- (12) *Tev*                    *tas*                    *būtu*                    *jā-zina*  
you.DAT                this.NOM.M    be.AUX.COND                DEB-know  
*šodien.*  
today  
'You should know this today.' ([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

<b>present indefinite</b>	<i>būtu jādara</i> ‘should be done’
<b>present perfect</b>	<i>būtu bijis jādara</i> ‘should have been done’

The paradigm of the conditional sub-mood of the debitive (active voice)  
(Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača 2014)

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

The debitive, like all other moods in Latvian, has **passive forms** where the auxiliaries *tikt* ‘to get (in the meaning of a process)’ (indefinite forms) and *būt* ‘to be (in the meaning of an achieved result or state)’ (perfect forms) combine with the passive participle which agrees with the name of the patient in gender and number (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2015).

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

(13) *Maniem*                      *darbiem*                      *ir*                      ***jā-tiek***  
my.DAT.PL.M                      work.DAT.PL.M                      be.AUX.PRS.3    DEB-get

***iztulkotiem***    *franciski.*  
translate.PTCP.DAT.PL.M                      French

‘My work must be translated into French.’ ([www.tlig.lv](http://www.tlig.lv))

# The Latvian debitive – meaning, forms & paradigm

(14) <i>Pirkumam</i>	<i>ir</i>	<i>jā-būt</i>
purchase.DAT.M	be.AUX.PRS.3	DEB-be
<i>izdarītam</i>	<i>līdz</i>	<i>reģistrācijas</i>
complete.PTCP.DAT.M	till	registration.GEN.F
<i>brīdim.</i>		
moment. DAT.M		

‘A purchase must be completed prior to registration.’

([www.drogas.lv](http://www.drogas.lv))

# The paradigm of the debitive (passive voice) (Kalnača, Lokmane 2015)

<b>Debitive passive</b>	
<b>Present indefinite</b>	ir jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'has to be done'
<b>Past indefinite</b>	bija jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'had to be done'
<b>Future indefinite</b>	būs jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'will have to be done'
<b>Present perfect</b>	ir jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'has to have been done'
<b>Past perfect</b>	bija jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'had to have been done'
<b>Future perfect</b>	būs jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'will have to have been done'

<b>Debitive passive, oblique sub-mood</b>	
<b>Present indefinite</b>	esot jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'allegedly has to be done'
<b>Future indefinite</b>	būšot jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'allegedly will have to be done'
<b>Present perfect</b>	esot jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'allegedly has to have been done'
<b>Future perfect</b>	būšot jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'allegedly will have to have been done'
<b>Debitive passive, conditional sub-mood</b>	
<b>Present indefinite</b>	būtu jātiek darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'would have to be done'
<b>Future perfect</b>	būtu jābūt darītam, -ai, -iem, -ām 'would have to have been done'

# Distributional traits of the debitive

The syntactic properties of the debitive construction have traditionally been a matter of debate in Latvian linguistics.

Unlike constructions with other moods, one of the arguments of the finite verb is in the **DAT** whereas the second argument is in the **NOM** in the debitive construction.

Personal pronouns or nouns in the dative express the semantic role of the agent and the experiencer.



# Distributional traits of the debitive

The original object – the noun marked as object in the verb’s basic, lexically assigned valency pattern (Holvoet, Grzybowska 2014) – is in the NOM, except for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns and reflexive pronouns which are in the ACC.

(15) *Tev bija jā-raksta vēstule.*  
you.DAT be.AUX.PST.3 DEB-write letter.NOM.F  
‘You had to write a letter.’ (www.korpuss.lv)

(16) *Vienkārši ir jā-atbrīvo mani no amata.*  
simply be.AUX.PRS.3 DEB-dismiss I.ACC  
from position.GEN.M

‘I simply must be dismissed from the position.’ (www.db.lv)

# Distributional traits of the debitive

It has been traditionally assumed by Latvian grammars that the NOM marks the subject while the DAT – the object (e.g., Endzelīns, Mīlenbahs 1907; Ahero et al. 1959; Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013).

Holvoet, Grzybowska (2014) – neither of the arguments in the debitive construction shows clear subject or object properties and argue that construction displays diffuse grammatical relations (see also Fábregas, Urek, Auziņa 2016).

# Distributional traits of the dative

According to a number of subjecthood tests (e.g., in Keenan 1976; Testelec 2001), the DAT must be interpreted as the syntactic subject rather than the object for the following reasons (see also Fennells 1995; Holvoet 2001, 2007):

1. The semantic properties
2. Agreement features
3. Reflexivization control
4. Word order and information structure
5. Passivization test

# Distributional traits of the debitive

1. **The semantic properties** – the DAT denotes the agent (which doubles as experiencer of the modal meaning, i.e., necessity), the NOM denotes the patient:

- (17) *Mums jā-paņem balta papīra lapa*  
we.DAT DEB-take white.NOM.M paper.GEN.M sheet.NOM.F  
‘We have to take a clean sheet of paper’  
([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# Distributional traits of the debitive

2. **Agreement features** – usually there is no agreement control in debitive constructions.

However, the DAT subject controls agreement with a nominal predicate or compound verb form with participle (see also Lokmane 2002, 2007):

- (18) *Man nav jā-būt lasījušam*  
I.DAT not\_be.AUX.PRS.3 DEB-be read.PTCP.PST.DAT.M  
*šo bērnu grāmatu.*  
this.ACC.F child.GEN.PL.M book.ACC.F  
'I do not have to have read this children's book.' (Ir)

# Distributional traits of the debitive

3. **Reflexivization control** – the most often DAT subject controls reflexivization:

(19) *Cilvēkiem*            *jāatrod*            *sevī*  
people.DAT.PL.M    DEB-find            self.LOC

*spēks.*

strength.NOM.M

‘People should find strength within themselves.’

([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# Distributional traits of the debitive

4. **Word order and information structure** – when there is a DAT subject in the sentence it usually occurs in the initial position. Reverse order is also possible, but it is marked, i. e., the DAT subject is stressed:

(20) *Melnais*                      *darbs*                      *jā-dara*                      ***man.***

black.NOM.M                      work.NOM.M                      DEB-do                      I.DAT

'I have to do all the hard work (with stress on the DAT subject *man*).'  
([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# Distributional traits of the debitive

Sentences without DAT subjects:

1.The NOM argument occurs in the initial position, i.e., it is topicalized:

(21) *Darbs*                      *jā-dara*      *ar*      *mīlestību*.

work.NOM.M              DEB-do              with love.INS.F

‘One should do their work with love.’ ([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))



# Distributional traits of the debitive

2. The NOM argument occurs after the debitive form of the verb, i.e., it is detopicalized:

(22) *Jā-dara*      ***darbs,***                      *nevis*                      *jā-streiko.*  
DEB-do              work.NOM.M              not                      DEB-strike  
‘We must work, not go on strike.’ ([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

5. **Passivization test** – when a sentence is passivized, the initial subject is omitted, and the initial object gets the function of the subject:

(13) *Maniem*                      *darbiem*                      *ir*                      ***jā-tiek***  
my.DAT.PL.M                      work.DAT.PL.M                      be.AUX.PRS.3    DEB-get  
***iztulkotiem***    *franciski.*  
translate.PTCP.DAT.PL.M    French  
‘My work must be translated into French.’ ([www.tlig.lv](http://www.tlig.lv))

Therefore *darbi* ‘work’ should be treated as the object, not the subject, of the active debitive clause, which becomes subject in the passive.

# Distributional traits of the debitive

## The choice between the NOM or ACC argument

Currently, what can be observed is a tendency to replace the NOM by the ACC in the debitive construction.

The ACC argument in the debitive is particularly widespread in spoken language (both in formal and colloquial style) (among others, Kalme, Smiltņiece 2001; Paegle 2003; Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013).

Are there any factors influencing the choice between the NOM and the ACC argument?

# Distributional traits of the debitive

Holvoet (2007):

«In the modern (substandard) language there seems to be a tendency to retain nominative marking only when it is topicalized and the whole construction is functionally equivalent to passive, e.g., *krāsa rūpīgi jāmaisā* ‘the paint should be carefully mixed’, whereas it will be replaced with the accusative if there is an agent to occupy the position of topic, e. g., (!) *man vėl jāizmaisā krāsu* ‘I have to mix the paint’.»

See also Holvoet, Grzybowska 2014; Seržant, Taperte 2016

# Distributional traits of the debitive

However, corpus data do not seem to support this assumption. The majority of debitive constructions in the corpus contain a NOM argument which occurs both in topic position and following the verb:

(23) *Valsts jā-kopj tāpat kā dārzs.*  
state.NOM.F DEB-cherish just as garden.NOM.M  
'The state must be looked after like a garden.' (www.korpuss.lv)

(24) *Jā-kopj mūsu kultūra.*  
DEB-cherish our.GEN culture.NOM.F  
'Culture should be cherished.' (www.korpuss.lv)

# Distributional traits of the debitive

In addition, the ACC occurs sentence-initially (i.e., it is topicalized):

- (25) *Prātu jā-iemāca skaistu skatīt*  
mind.ACC.M DEB-teach beautiful.ACC.M see.INF  
*un skaistu dzirdēt.*  
and beautiful.ACC.M hear.INF

‘The mind should be taught to see the beautiful and to hear the beautiful.’ ([www.korpuss.lv](http://www.korpuss.lv))

# Distributional traits of the debitive

There are also examples attested with the ACC argument following the predicate, both with and without the DAT subject; in this position ACC argument is rheme:

- (26) *Viņiem jā-saglabā skaidru prātu.*  
they.DAT DEB-keep clear.ACC.M mind.ACC.M  
'They should keep their minds clear.' (Diena)

# Distributional traits of the debitive

## The debitive and patterns of agreement

There are two types of constructions regarding agreement:

1. The participle of the perfect form of the debitive agrees with the NOM.
2. The participle of the perfect form of the debitive does not agree with the NOM.



# Distributional traits of the debitive

The majority of corpus examples do not show agreement patterns supporting the assumption that the NOM form is not analysed as grammatical subject of the sentence. In these examples the auxiliary is in the unmarked form of 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular.

# Distributional traits of the debitive

- (27) *Šīm* *personām*  
these.DAT.PL.F person.DAT.PL.F  
*ir* *bijis* *jā-norāda*  
be.AUX.PRS be.PTCP.M DEB-show  
*deklarācijā* *naudas* *uzkrājumi.*  
declaration.LOC.F money.GEN.F savings. NOM.PL.M  
‘These people should have at least declared their savings  
in cash.’ (www.diena.lv)

# Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars

Fennell (1981). The first description of the Latvian debitive mood.  
*Lituanus*. Vol. 27, No. 4.:

«It is thus of considerable interest to note that in the very first grammar of Latvian, J. G. Rehehusen's *Manuductio* ... of 1644, the debitive forms of verbs are both clearly perceived and (almost) adequately described, particularly since Rehehusen's grammar is traditionally (and for the most part correctly) regarded as very inadequate indeed and an extremely inauspicious beginning to the development of Latvian grammatical theory.»

# Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars

Veidemane (2002):

*Gerundium* (Rehehusen 1644; Adolphi 1685)

*Modus Neccessitatis* (Stender 1761)

*Gerundium Passivi* (Ulmann 1831)

*Debitiv* (Hesselberg 1841)

*Necessitätspassiv* (Rosenberger 1848)

*Debitiv Passivi* (Bielenstein 1864)

# Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars

## *Debitive mood*

Since Endzelīns & Mīlenbahs 1907

«*Latviešu valodas gramatika*»

«*Latviešu valodas mācība*»

See also, among others, Ahero et al. 1959; Mathiassen 1997; Nītiņa 2001; Kalme & Smiltiece 2001; Paegle 2003; Nītiņa & Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača 2014

# Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars

*Gerund* (Andronovs 1998; Seržant & Taperte 2016)

*Modal passive* (Nau 1998)

*A debitive verb form group* (Holvoet 2001, 2007; Holvoet, Grzybowska 2014)

# Description of the debitive in Latvian grammars

Holvoet, Grzybowska (2014, 100-101):

«The debitive: A modal form with atypical properties»

«..the debitive cannot properly be called a mood, presumably it is an inflectional rather derivational form of the verb.»

«.. here we would be better served with a notion of 'gram' rather than with traditional grammatical categories.»

See also Fábregas, Urek, Auziņa 2016

# To sum up

1. The Latvian debitive is best analysed as a mood because the verbal forms in the debitive have specific grammatical formants and the prevailing meaning is modal for the most part expressing deontic (also epistemic) modality. The combination of modal meanings and evidentiality has also been attested, but this occurs as conditional and oblique sub-moods of the debitive.



# To sum up

2. Likeness of the debitive to the passive is misleading. The debitive paradigm has passive forms thereby confirming the claim that the debitive cannot be analysed as the passive.

# To sum up

3. The dative in deictive constructions is best analysed as the grammatical subject, because it has more morphosyntactic, syntactic and semantic subject features than the nominative argument, while the nominative or accusative is grammatical object.

# To sum up

Another solution would be to revise the system of grammatical relations and propose, e.g., the notion of indirect subject or quasi-subject for the dative argument and “demoted intransitive subject” (Holvoet, Grzybowska 2014) for the nominative argument.

In this case we would be forced to assume that constructions with the nominative and accusative argument are two distinct constructions.

# To sum up

5. From the syntactic point of view, the deictive construction is undergoing both semantic and syntactic changes witnessed, e.g., by replacement of the nominative by the accusative, various agreement and reflexivization control patterns. This makes an adequate grammatical description extremely difficult.

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