

Auxiliary variation in Serbian – a missing link of evolution of the perfect in Slavic

Anastasia Meermann (LMU Munich)

In Slavic and Balkan Slavic, the *l*-forms (*l*-participle plus the present tense auxiliary ‘to be’), which constituted a resultative perfect in Old Common Slavic, developed in two different directions. Originally, the *l*-participle referred to a subsequent state resulting from a past event, while the auxiliary linked the subsequent state to the time of utterance. In the most Slavic languages, the Old Common Slavic perfect developed to a neutral past and thereby replaced the synthetic past tenses, aorist and imperfect. In the course of this development, the auxiliary lost its primary function and was either completely lost or remained as a mere grammatical person marker.

In contrast, Balkan Slavic, i.e. Bulgarian and Macedonian, retained both the synthetic past tenses and the old perfect form, what is commonly seen as linked to the development of an evidential verbal category. In consequence, the perfect was reinterpreted as an indefinite past, which can express non-confirmative evidential meanings and stands in paradigmatic opposition to the confirmative synthetic past tenses. Besides, in Bulgarian the *l*-forms can still function as a perfect. In traditional Bulgarian grammar, the distinction between the perfect and non-confirmative function of the *l*-forms has been linked to the auxiliary variation in the third person. Unauxiliated *l*-forms are supposed to convey non-confirmative meanings as renarration or as unwitnessed by the speaker, whereas *l*-forms with the auxiliary are regarded as a perfect – although the usage of the *l*-forms in spoken and written language undermines this assumption.

The paper argues that the development of the Old Common Slavic perfect and, on the other hand, in Slavic and Balkan Slavic is not as different as it might seem at first glance, but rather displays different stages of the same process, namely the cross-linguistic development of the perfect into a preterit. Moreover, it seems that functional auxiliary variation is a natural part of this diachronic process. At a certain stage, the auxiliary undergoes a shift from a deictic marker of time reference to a subjective marker linking the proposition with the speaker’s domain of experience as reference point. Consequently, the omission of auxiliary detaches the speaker from her own utterance, which in turn may be interpreted as the expression of non-confirmative meaning in discourse. Evidence for this hypothesis can be drawn from the auxiliary variation within the perfect forms in Serbian – a so far hardly investigated phenomenon.

Concerning its past tense system, Serbian resembles the most Slavic languages insofar as the Old Common Slavic perfect functions as a neutral preterit and has replaced the synthetic past tenses in nearly all instances. In addition, a verbal evidential category as in Balkan Slavic has been denied for Serbian. Nevertheless, it displays auxiliary variation similar to Bulgarian. The unauxiliated forms can express non-confirmative meanings as hearsay, inference, surprise or irony, whereas the auxiliated forms function as a neutral preterit. Consequently, it seems that the possibility to express non-confirmative meanings by a verb form is primarily linked to the auxiliary drop rather than to the establishment of a full developed evidential verbal system. It is only after the onward change of the *l*-forms into a neutral preterit – when the auxiliary as well as the auxiliary variation have lost their functions – that the preservation of the synthetic past tenses is crucial for the expression of non-confirmative meanings by the *l*-forms. That is why, in Macedonian, where the function of auxiliary as a subjective marker is lost, the *l*-forms may express both neutral and non-confirmative meanings and are opposed to the synthetic past tenses, which are marked for confirmativity.

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