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WHY DO FIRST- AND SECOND-PERSON RENARRATIVES IN BULGARIAN NEED AN AUXILIARY?

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ЗАЩО ПЪРВОЛИЧНИТЕ И ВТОРОЛИЧНИТЕ ФОРМИ ЗА ПРЕИЗКАЗНОСТ В БЪЛГАРСКИЯ ЕЗИК СЕ НУЖДАЯТ ОТ СПОМАГАТЕЛЕН ГЛАГОЛ?

Abstract: In Bulgarian linguistics, no distinction is made – in most cases and as a general rule also, between the semantics of the set of first-person plus second-person present perfect and renarrative verb forms, on the one hand, and the semantics of third-person verb forms, on the other. The analysis in this paper shows that a clear distinction must be made between these two sets of present perfect and renarrative forms. Otherwise, no sensible understanding of the present perfect and the renarrative can be reached. Apart from that, the reason why first- and second-person renarrative forms in Bulgarian need an auxiliary would remain a mystery. The article puts forward an explanation of the reasons why first- and second-person renarrative forms need an auxiliary.

Keywords: *renarrative, perfect, cancellability (cancellable content) of the perfect*

В българското езикознание не се прави разлика – в повечето случаи и като общо правило, между семантиката на първоличните и второличните глаголни форми за перфект и преизказност, от една страна, и семантиката на третоличните глаголни форми, от друга. Анализът в статията показва, че трябва да се прави ясно разграничение между тези два вида перфектни и преизказни форми. В противен случай не може да се постигне същинско разбиране за същността на перфекта и на ренаратива, а освен това би останала и загадка причината, поради която първоличните и второличните преизказни форми в българския език се нуждаят от спомагателен глагол. Статията предлага обяснение на причините за необходимостта от спомагателен глагол при първоличните и второличните преизказни форми.

Ключови думи: *ренаратив, перфект, отменимо съдържание (канцелируемост) на перфекта*

A well-known formal fact of Bulgarian grammar, recalled recently, is that: “there are no first- and second-person (sg.&pl.) renarratives in Bulgarian” (Kabakčiev 2023: 78). It could be seen as representing a gap in the grammatical system of the Bulgarian language but it also has to do with a serious problem inherent in traditional grammar – not only in Bulgarian grammar but in the traditional grammars of all languages. These grammars never ask certain questions that have otherwise cried out for decades to be asked – like, for example: “Why does this or that language *have* or *not have* the grammatical categories of this or that other language?” Or, to ask another question, simple and concrete: “Why do almost all the Slavic languages – along with many others across the world, have no perfect verb forms, while numerous other languages on the planet feature such forms? An answer recently given to this question by me is: “Slavic languages without perfects can actually be said to have perfects – disguised as preterits” (Kabakčiev 2023: 87).

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This paper deals with a problem in the same domain: the formal absence in Bulgarian of first- and second-person singular and plural renarratives, i.e., the absence of special markers for these forms, given that first- and second-person singular and plural renarratives are considered to coincide with perfect verb forms (grammatical homonymy). As formulated in the largest (but already outdated in many respects) Bulgarian grammar, “in all renarrative tenses in the third person singular and plural the auxiliary is dropped” (GSBKE 1983: 352). Similar descriptions of “dropping” the auxiliary are made in other grammars (Rå Hauge 1999: 118; Kutsarov 2007: 307; Nitsolova 2008: 362–363), with no argumentation about the reasons for the auxiliary to be dropped. Why should it be dropped? If something in a certain slot in a verb paradigm is dropped, in this case the auxiliary *sam* ‘be’ in the renarrative paradigm, this means that **it is not necessary there** – while in another slot the same element might be needed. However, it can also be argued conversely: not that the auxiliary *sam* is superfluous, i.e., unnecessary, in third person singular and plural renarratives, but that its absence there **is necessary** for a better distinction between renarration and cancellability. This paper addresses both aspects of this issue.

The problem is double-faceted: (i) absence of an auxiliary for renarration in third person singular and plural; (ii) obligatory presence of an auxiliary in first- and second-person verb forms. Typical of mainstream grammars and similar traditional descriptions of languages is the inductive approach: it searches for grammemes with their formal features, then lists them and finally tries to explain their semantics. Within such an approach, Aleksova (2017: 142–145) analyzes Bulgarian renarratives and inferentials as two completely different sets of verb forms and maintains that the renarrative has an **invariant** meaning – consisting in transferring third party’s information. Yet, strangely, the author insists that renarratives do not have non-witnessed uses only (Aleksova 2017: 142). Also, according to an anonymous review of this paper, what the reviewer calls the indicative perfect “does not have renarrative semantics”. These are results of an inductive approach to grammatical phenomena, and although they are not wrong in principle they sometimes lead to incorrect results in Bulgarianist studies – as in the case with the exclusion of imperfect participles from perfects, see below. According to my understanding, whatever is called a renarrative is inherently – and hence only and solely – non-witnessed. This is only natural: a verb form cannot be renarrating somebody’s assertion about some occurrence (a state, an act, an event, etc.) and simultaneously be encoding some personal witnessing of the occurrence. Similarly, an “indicative perfect without renarrative semantics” is a product of an inductive approach that takes no account of major semantic values – cross-language or universal ones. The deductive approach works differently. It formulates cross-language and universal values and then searches for their realization in and across languages. Therefore, the present study of the reasons for the presence and absence of an auxiliary for renarration (see it exemplified and explained below) follows a deductive approach (well described in Dimitrova 2021: 52–53). Renarration is regarded in it as a cross-language notion that is systematically encoded in Bulgarian by **two** grammemes: by the renarrative itself and by the perfect too, whereby the perfect “houses” another major semantic value (among others) – cancellability.

According to this deductive approach, what a perfect is in Bulgarian – or in any other language – is not some abstract notion divorced from its formal representation but is a clearly distinguished entity in morphological or periphrastic terms first and foremost. The Bulgarian perfect is a periphrastic complex containing a *sam* ‘be’ auxiliary and a past active *-l* participle, whereby the participle is either aorist-based or imperfect-based. In this domain Bulgarian grammars since the Second World War have fallen into a drastic mistake, divorcing the semantic and other (functional, pragmatic) values of a grammeme from its formal structure by assigning the notion *inferential* (Bulgarian “konkluziv”) to the periphrastic verb form consisting of a *sam* ‘be’ auxiliary plus a past active *-l* imperfect-based participle and by excluding this form from the category of the perfect. A huge majority of Bulgarianists – with only eight “dissidents” found in the course of eight decades, has been insisting that imperfect-based perfects are not perfects at all but only inferentials (for detail, see Kabakčiev 2024), thus illegitimately forcing a defective substructure onto the otherwise extremely complex and intriguing Bulgarian TAM (tense-aspect-modality) architecture.

This issue set aside, Bulgarianist studies in the sphere under investigation can be said to maintain that the paradigm of renarratives in the past domain will contain the following types of verb forms for

the singular (located in the dependent clause of the sentences below), represented here in sentences in reverse order, from third to first person singular. Note that when English translations here and henceforward, e.g., (1b), (1c), begin with *literally* (in brackets), it means that, if these were to be viewed as standard sentences, they would be judged non-grammatical because of violating the SOT rule (hence also the asterisks in brackets):

- (1) a. Maria kaza, che vlakat **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE}
'Maria said that the train arrived'
b. Maria kaza, che ti **si pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE/PERFECT}
(literally) '(*)Maria said that you have arrived'
c. Maria kaza, che az **sam pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE/PERFECT}
(literally) '(*)Maria said that I have arrived'

Sentence (1a) with the verb form for 3rd pers.sg. with no auxiliary in the dependent clause contains a renarrative. Following the assertion maintained in grammars, this form must be without an auxiliary whereas the relevant renarratives for 1st pers.sg. and 2nd pers.sg. must contain an auxiliary – for some reason still unknown. Without an auxiliary, non-grammatical sentences result:

- (2) a. *Maria kaza, che az **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE?} [non-grammatical sentence]
b. *Az **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE?} [non-grammatical sentence]
c. *Maria kaza, che ti **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE?} [non-grammatical sentence]
d. *Ti **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE?} [non-grammatical sentence]

No English translations are provided for the Bulgarian sentences in (2), for the following reasons: (i) the sentences are non-grammatical; (ii) it is practically impossible to explain the formation – hypothetical – of the supposedly renarrative forms in them.

Thus, in comparison with the relevant forms for the perfect, see examples (3) for the same persons, the latter two (3b), (3c) coincide with (1b), (1c):

- (3) a. Maria kaza, che vlakat **e pristignal**_{PERFECT (RENARRATIVE)}
(literally) '(*)Maria said that the train has arrived'
b. Maria kaza, che ti **si pristignal**_{PERFECT (RENARRATIVE)}
(literally) '(*)Maria said that you have arrived'
c. Maria kaza, che az **sam pristignal**_{PERFECT (RENARRATIVE)}
(literally) '(*)Maria said that I have arrived'

The sentence with a true renarrative *pristignal* 'arrived' – (1a), does not coincide with the sentence with the verb form *e pristignal* 'has arrived' in (3a) – which can be interpreted as *either* a perfect *or* a renarrative. But the sentences supposedly containing renarratives homonymous with perfects, (1b) and (1c), coincide with the sentences (3b) and (3c) containing a presupposed perfect. Therefore, it makes sense to argue that the verb forms in (3b) and (3c), as well as in (3a), could, and should, also be called renarratives, as they cover, without any doubt, an assertion made by Maria (i.e., they renarrate Maria's words). Of course, they must primarily be interpreted as perfects – for being cancellable forms (read on about cancellability).

Why are perfects across languages, and in particular in English and Bulgarian, cancellable verb forms? What does this mean? Note the circumstance that in sentences with perfects such as English (4a) and Bulgarian (4b) the proposition is *either true or false*. Or, simply put, in essence the train either arrived or did not arrive – although from a pragmatic (not semantic) point of view sentences of this kind tend to assert that the train ought to have arrived:

- (4) a. The train has arrived_{PERFECT}
 b. Vlakat e pristignal_{PERFECT}
 ‘The train has arrived’

Note also now that this is **not at all** the case with sentences with preterit verb forms – such as (5a) and (5b) below. The notion and the term cancellable employed here (and in Kabakčiev 2018: 238–250; 2020: 126, 137–141; 2022: 393–395; 2023: 82–86) roughly stand for “either true or untrue (false)”. The term is borrowed from Grice (1975/1989) – but it is used there in a broader sense.

In sentences with preterits such as English (5a) and Bulgarian (5b) the verb forms are, conversely, non-cancellable. The proposition is true, the hearer is normally obliged to believe the speaker’s words that the train arrived:

- (5) a. The train arrived_{PRETERIT (PAST SIMPLE)}
 b. Vlakat pristigna_{PRETERIT (AORIST)}
 ‘The train arrived’

However, there is an essential difference between English perfects and preterits, on the one hand, and Bulgarian perfects and preterits, on the other. In Bulgarian, the cancellability of the perfect is a **grammaticalized feature**, along with the accompanying feature non-witnessed (in third-person verb forms). The feature witnessed is widely recognized in Bulgarian grammars and other linguistic writings as found in Bulgarian preterits – aorists and imperfects. As for the feature non-witnessed, there is no consensus on it in Bulgarian linguistics, chaos rules in this domain. Some researchers view non-witnessing as universally present in perfect verb forms, others do not support this view and argue that non-witnessing is a random or optional feature. Apart from that, no distinction is usually made as regards witnessing and non-witnessing between third-person and non-third-person perfect verb forms. I maintain that third-person forms **always** effectuate non-witnessing (Kabakčiev 2023: 83) and that it is precisely this feature that makes non-witnessing a grammaticalized entity.

In English, the features cancellability and witnessing are obviously **not grammaticalized**. However, in my view, they are an integral part of the semantic content of perfects and preterits respectively. The feature “witnessed” of the preterits in the two languages – see *arrived* and *pristigna* in (5a) and (5b), is also rather different. In Bulgarian it is fully grammaticalized while in English the witnessed feature of preterits is only a default value – which means that it can change into the opposite one under the impact of a sentence or context. Or, in plain terms, the sentence *The train arrived* means that by default the speaker witnessed the arrival of the train, in contrast to *The train has arrived*. But in many sentences, as, for example, in *It was announced that the train arrived*, the values “non-witnessed” and “cancellable” are forced onto the preterit *arrived* under the impact of the main clause. Further detail about cancellability and how it relates to the *raison d’être* of the perfect can be found in Kabakčiev (2018: 238–250), also later in Kabakčiev (2020: 126, 137–141; 2022: 393–395; 2023: 79–86).

A question arises about the difference between the sentences (1a) and (3a) – listed here again for easier reference, with a renarrative and a perfect, respectively:

- (1) a. Maria kaza, che vlakat **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE}
 ‘Maria said that the train arrived’
 (3) a. Maria kaza, che vlakat **e pristignal**_{PERFECT}
 (literally) ‘(*)Maria said that the train has arrived’

The difference does not appear big and the general coincidence in the meanings of (1a) and (3a) is normal in so far as the perfect contains – or can contain – renarration in its semantics. The reason is that, according to all or at least most descriptions of the Bulgarian perfect, it either expresses a proposition based on indirect data about a situation that took place in the past (for example, one’s son’s arrival is inferred from his coat hung in the corridor) or a proposition based on an assertion (assertions) by some third party. In other words, the second case is one of renarration.

The difference is that in sentences such as (1a), with a clear renarrative in the dependent clause, Maria is assigned an assertion made by herself about the arrival of a train. Simply phrased, the speaker reports that Maria said there was a train arrival, but whether the train arrival is true or not, i.e., whether it took place or not, remains unknown – this is beyond the semantics of the sentence. Somewhat conversely, sentences such as (3a) with a perfect in the dependent clause (despite the circumstance that the report of the arrival of the train is again assigned to Maria because the perfect also carries renarrative semantics), emphasize the cancellability of the proposition about the arrival of the train; a sentence like this, (3a), does not underscore that it was Maria who reported its arrival. In other words, using sentences such as (1a), the speaker reports that Maria is the source of the assertion about the train arrival; the sentence contains precisely a renarrative and is *not* so much – or is not at all, about whether the train arrived or not. Ergo, the verb form *pristignal* here can be interpreted as *not focused* on cancellability – although, of course, it should be kept in mind that renarratives *also* carry the value cancellability (Kabakčiev 2023: 82ff), just like perfects.

In sentences with a perfect in the dependent clause such as (3a), things are, consequently, both different and special. This sentence contains – albeit in an indirect and covert way – the proposition – encoded by the form *e pristignal*, that the train either arrived or did not arrive – which is cancellable content. By an indirect and covert way of expressing the truth or untruth of the relevant proposition, I mean two things. First, the thesis about the cancellability of the perfect as a major feature of this grammatical entity across languages was launched recently (Kabakčiev 2018: 238–250; 2020: 141; 2022: 393–395) and cannot be found anywhere else – but is starting to attract the interest of investigators of the perfect (Dianti & Tawarniate 2024: 13410–13411). Prior to Kabakčiev (ibid.), the essence of the perfect was frequently found to be unclear and evasive, as in McCoard's (1978) first ever comprehensive account of the perfect and in Moens (1987) dissertation, two relatively old publications whose argumentation is still valid. Not only that, instead of being subjected to careful and in-depth analyses, the perfect has been awarded emotional and irrational labels such as “enigma”, “mystery”, “riddle”, “puzzle” – even in the titles of research articles (Klein 1992; Katz 2003; Pancheva & von Stechow 2004; Higginbotham 2009: 160). Second, leaving aside the novel notion of cancellability (Kabakčiev 2018: 238–250; 2020: 141; 2022: 393–395), it is beyond doubt for any Bulgarian native speaker that a sentence such as (1a) or (1c), the latter with the verb form *sam pristignal* – whether interpreted as a renarrative or a perfect, is used to signify a situation that allegedly took place in the past but its effectuation in the past is actually uncertain, at least to some degree. When the verb component *sam pristignal* in the dependent clause of sentence (3c) is contrasted to a sentence such as *Az pristignah* ‘I arrived’, it becomes crystal-clear that the latter denotes a situation that certainly happened, while *Az sam pristignal* (literally) ‘I have arrived’ explicates (i.e., indirectly denotes) a situation for which it is not certain that it is true, that it took place. To sum up, the formation of sentences such as (6a-d) in Bulgarian is *allowed*:

- (6) a. Maria kaza, che vlakat **e pristignal**_{PERFECT} [grammatical sentence]
 b. Maria kaza, che vlakat **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE} [grammatical sentence]
 c. Vlakat/Toy **pristignal**_{RENARRATIVE} [grammatical sentence]
 d. Maria kaza, che az **sam/ti si pristignal**_{PERFECT} [grammatical sentence]

But the formation of sentences such as (2a-d) above is *not allowed*, these are non-grammatical sentences. Of course, it *must be explained why* the formation of (6a-d) is allowed and why the formation of (2a-d) is *not* allowed. As already mentioned, it is common knowledge that traditional grammar takes no interest in issues involving cross-language comparisons, despite their significant theoretical value in many cases. Also, while many grammars around the world, especially of languages such as English, systematically register and discuss grammaticality versus non-grammaticality, Bulgarian grammars fail to do this – or do it very rarely, due to the general lack of interest of many Bulgarianists in modern theoretical frameworks, especially those in which non-grammaticality plays a significant role.

Especially impressive is the fact that while Bulgarian sentences such as those in (6c) *Vlakat pristignal* ‘The train arrived’ and *Toy pristignal* ‘It arrived’ are correct, the two fairly similar sentences



(2b) and (2d), **Az pristignal* ‘I arrived’ and **Ti pristignal* ‘You arrived’, are non-grammatical. Furthermore, the latter two are perceived as **not simply** non-grammatical, they are momentarily rejected by the native speaker as **drastically non-grammatical!** Let us, for clarification, make a comparison with the non-grammatical sentence (7a):

- (7) a. *Petar kaza, che Maria **pristigna**_{PRETERIT (AORIST)}
 ‘Peter said that Maria arrived’
 b. Petar kaza, che Maria **e pristignala**_{PERFECT}
 (literally) ‘(*)Peter said that Maria has arrived’
 c. Petar kaza, che Maria **pristignala**_{RENARRATIVE}
 ‘Peter said that Maria arrived’

The Bulgarian native speaker judges (7a) – with a witnessed verb form (aorist) in the dependent clause, as non-grammatical and the reason is the phenomenon of speaker ghosting, discovered and explained in detail in Kabakčiev (2018). For sentence (7a) to become grammatical, it needs to be changed either into (7b), with a perfect in the dependent clause, or into (7c), with a renarrative. But why does the non-grammaticality of (7a) appear less disturbing than that of (2b) and (2d)? The reason, in my view, lies in the complexity of (7a). It forces the hearer to think that the speaker probably made a mistake, a technical one, a slip of the tongue, failing to form the sentence with a perfect as in (7b) or with a renarrative as in (7c). On the contrary, in fairly simple sentences such as *Az pristignal* ‘I arrived’ or *Ti pristignal* ‘You arrived’ the probability for a native speaker to commit such a rude technical mistake approaches zero. To sum up, the non-grammaticality of sentences such as **Az pristignal* and **Ti pristignal* is drastic. But neither experienced Bulgarian linguists nor native speakers have offered valid explanations of this exorbitant deviance.

Here is an additional explanation, apart from speaker ghosting given in Kabakčiev (2018). The communication participant who is simultaneously observer and speaker obviously **does not** “hold the key” to the situation in (7a). In other words, s/he does not know exactly how the situation developed. The observer-speaker is therefore forced to either assign cancellability to the expression reporting Maria’s arrival by using a perfect, as in (8a), or to use a renarrative, as in (8b), transferring the responsibility for the truthfulness or untruthfulness of the proposition to a third party, which in this case is either Maria or the speaker:

- (8) a. Maria **e pristignala**_{PERFECT}
 ‘Maria has arrived’
 b. Maria **pristignala**_{RENARRATIVE}
 ‘Maria arrived’

In (6a-d) above, however, the observer-speaker can be said to “hold the key” to the situation. Here the observer-speaker obviously knows how the situation developed, and this does not allow him/her to transfer to another person the assertion – to be realized through the perfect – that there is cancellability (that is, the situation either happened or not).

Or, phrased in even simpler terms, sentences such as **Az pristignal* are perceived not simply as non-grammatical but as drastically non-grammatical for the following reason. The hearer, i.e., the recipient of the sentence **Az pristignal* containing a renarrative form *pristignal*, can ask the speaker: “Why are you assigning to somebody else the assertion that you arrived when you yourself ought to know whether you arrived or not?” The recipient of **Az pristignal* can react in yet another way to respond to the speaker: “You have no right to assign an assertion which is non-conclusive, uncertain as to whether you arrived or not, to somebody else, given that you know whether you arrived or not!” As argued in some recent publications (Kabakčiev 2020; 2022) and as mentioned above, the concept of “uncertain assertion” can be said to reside within the domain of cancellability – a notion that is part of the functional characteristics of both the perfect and the renarrative.



Of course, what was established above about **Az pristignal* is also valid for sentences with second-person verb forms such as **Ti pristignal*. For the speaker, who produces the sentence **Ti pristignal*, it is assumed that s/he knows whether the interlocutor arrived or not. Hence, it is illogical for the speaker to use the form **Ti pristignal*, because it is, first, cancellable and, second, it assigns to a third party and not to the speaker the assertion that the interlocutor arrived. As a side note, there are similar sentences, for example interrogative ones like *Az pristignal?* ‘I arrived?’, which are, however, correct, fully grammatical. This is because they are questions – interpreted as a concise form of grammatically correct sentences such as *Az da sam pristignal?* ‘(literally) I to have arrived?’

The renarrative can be regarded as having limited functionality. It assigns a given assertion to somebody else and does not commit itself too much (so to say) with its cancellability. The form *pristignal* in **Maria kaza, che az pristignal* – that is, if this sentence were correct, would assign to somebody else (Maria) the assertion about the arrival, while cancellability would remain in the background. Conversely, the form *sam pristignal* in *Maria kaza, che az sam pristignal* emphasizes cancellability: the arrival is either true or not true. And the final decision whether the arrival is true or not true is certainly Maria’s prerogative, not the speaker’s. In other words, the renarrative is not focused on clarifying whether the assertion is true or not. Conversely, while the perfect again assigns the relevant assertion to somebody else, a third party, it also firmly assigns to it cancellability: the assertion may be true and may also not be true. And it is for this reason that sentences in the first- and second-person **and a renarrative** (such as **Maria kaza, che az pristignal* and **Maria kaza, che ti pristignal*) are perceived as non-grammatical – because the speaker **knows** whether s/he and/or the hearer arrived or not and, hence, has no right to transfer onto Maria the assessment of truthfulness or untruthfulness. Phrased otherwise, the circumstance whether the speaker or the hearer arrived is in the speaker’s mental domain and, hence, the speaker has no right to pass over his/her responsibility for its truth or untruth onto Maria. Conversely, sentences in the first- and second-person **and a prototypical perfect** (with an auxiliary) such as (6d), *Maria kaza, che az sam pristignal* or *Maria kaza, che ti si pristignal*, are perceived as correct, because in this case the circumstance whether the speaker and the interlocutor arrived or not resides not with the speaker but with Maria.

Acknowledgement. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their reasonable comments and suggestions, and the editorial staff for their kind assistance.

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