On the bifurcation between preterit and evidential: auxiliary drop within the Serbian perfect forms
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The auxiliary drop within the Serbian periphrastic perfect forms is a hardly investigated phenomenon so far. However, the investigation of this phenomenon—a synchronic evidence of a diachronic process—might reveal valuable insights concerning the grammaticalization of the perfect into a generalized past in North Slavic and to an evidential in Balkan Slavic (i.e. Bulgarian and Macedonian). Both developments are closely connected with a complete or partial loss of the auxiliary (cf. North Slavic but also Macedonian) or at least a variation between placing and omitting the auxiliary (cf. Bulgarian and Serbian).

The analysis of the usage patterns of the unauxiliated forms in Serbian colloquial dialogues recorded by Hinrichs & Hinrichs (1995) and Savić & Polovina (1989) has revealed that these forms are utilized to express non-confirmative evidential meanings such as hearsay, uncertainty or surprise but are also used in sequences of past events (cf. Meermann 2015; Meermann and Sonnenhauser forthcoming). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the drop of auxiliary serves as a twofold marker for both preterit and evidential meaning. This paper aims to reveal the connection between these functions with the drop of auxiliary. It argues that the preterit and evidential functions of the unauxiliated forms are based on a common semantic invariant which can be described as ‘the lack of anchoring the utterance with the speaker’ (cf. Sonnenhauser 2012, 2015). This semantic invariant seems to result from the evolution of the interrelationship of form and semantics of the periphrastic construction.

Originally, the periphrastic form consisting of the active past participle (the so called l-participle) and the present tense auxiliary biti ‘to be’ expressed resultative meaning. The l-participle referred to a subsequent state resulting from a past event, and the auxiliary linked the subsequent state to the time of utterance. On the way to a ‘current relevance’-perfect the construction underwent subjectification (Dickey 2013): the participle changed from an adjectival to a verbal form denoting not only the resultant state but also the preceding past event itself. At the same time, the auxiliary turned from a deictic marker connecting the resultant state with the moment of speech into a subjective marker linking the proposition with the speaker’s domain of experience as the reference point. Consequently, the drop of auxiliary detaches the speaker from her own utterance. In this way, the auxiliary drop precludes a perfect reading by focusing on the past event itself rather than on the ‘current relevance’-component and thereby puts forward a preterit reading. At the same time, this lack of anchoring the utterance with the speaker can be reinterpreted on the discourse-pragmatic level as a signal of non-confirmativity as displayed by the usage patterns of the unauxiliated forms in Serbian.

To conclude, the auxiliary drop within the Serbian perfect forms can be seen as the synchronic sign of an ongoing functional broadening of these forms from a perfect to a preterit and then to an evidential by reinterpreting the lack of anchoring with the speaker on the discourse–pragmatic level. This, in turn, suggests that the periphrastic perfect in Serbian is located on the bifurcation between the North Slavic and Balkan Slavic grammaticalization paths. Moreover, the theses introduced in this paper actually speak for exchanging the traditional assumption of a fully grammaticalized evidential category in Balkan Slavic for a more flexible pragmatic approach to the emergence of evidentiality in these languages.
References


