The modal meaning *за припомняне* of the Bulgarian imperfect tense and its counterparts in other Slavic languages

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Amongst Slavic languages, only Bulgarian (and Macedonian) has retained the imperfect, a synthetic past tense inherited from Protoslavic. Apart from its temporal meanings, the Bulgarian imperfect occurs in a variety of modal meanings, which, generally speaking, imply a modification in the epistemic validity of the utterance.

The modal meaning *за припомняне* of the Bulgarian imperfective imperfect is used to ask for previously given but at present forgotten information. Based on previous research work on the subject, the paper aims to investigate whether and to what extent such a meaning can be expressed by verbal morphology in the Slavic languages that have lost the imperfect tense. The languages considered in the paper are: Bulgarian, Serbian (Croatian), Czech, Polish and Russian.

Key words: Bulgarian, imperfect tense, modal meanings, Slavic languages, contrastive analysis

0 Introduction

The imperfect is a synthetic past tense form that Bulgarian and Macedonian have retained, while it has been lost in the other Slavic languages. Besides its temporal meanings, the imperfect displays a wide array of modal usages, one of which is the so-called imperfect *за припомняне*. This modal usage of the imperfect is triggered when the speaker asks for the reactivation of information that was previously obtained but that in the moment of utterance cannot be retrieved, as in sentences (1) and (2):
(1) *Как се казваше?*
(2) *Кога заминаваше влакът ти?*

The aim of this paper is to show how the imperfect *за припомняне* works in Bulgarian and to check whether past tense forms in other Slavic languages are suitable for expressing it. The other Slavic languages that will be taken into consideration are Serbian, Czech, Polish and Russian, where at present only one single analytic past tense form is used. The analysis has been carried out through a questionnaire, in which native speakers have been asked about the acceptability of the modal interpretation *за припомняне* in sentences containing an imperfect

or an imperfective past tense form. The analytical framework applied in this paper is taken from research studies in the Romance languages and reference to them will be consistently made. In Italian and French, for example, the imperfect is a past tense commonly used in its temporal meanings and, despite the differences in frequency, in a wide range of modal usages as well (see for overviews Squartini 2001, Patard 2014 or Trovesi 2018).

Having this in mind, before tackling the main topic, an overview of the functioning of the imperfect will be given, with regard to both its basic temporal meanings, and its secondary modal ones.

1 The imperfect

The vast literature on the imperfect can be divided into two main branches of research, which are highly complementary. The first aims at defining the semantic invariant or the notional configuration of this past tense, in order to explain both the prototypical and the modal usages ("résidence identitaire" Bres 2005:2). The second approach is about setting up the most detailed classification list possible of the uses of the imperfect, mainly of the modal ones.

1.1 Temporal meanings

With regard to its core or temporal usage, the imperfect tense is used in Bulgarian in the following meanings: progressive (3), stative (4) and iterative (5).

(3) *Тя вървеше по улицата и мислеше за бъдещето.*

(4) *В ъгъла стоеше шкаф с книги, върху масата лежаха вестници.*

(5) *Всяка сутрин ставах рано и отивах на лекции.*

1.2 Modal meanings

In addition to its temporal meanings, the imperfect tense displays a rich variety of modal meanings or, in other words, non-temporal meanings, where the time of the event is not necessarily in the past:

> Под "модална употреба" разбираме използуването на имперфектната форма с цел да се изразят вторични модални отсенки, излизащи извън рамките на нормалната изявителна (или преизказна) модалност на формата, в случаите когато имперфектната форма като че ли изгубва специфичното си темпорално значение и изразява действия, които притежават фактически друга "неимперфектна" темпорална ориентация. (Stankov 1966:131)

There are many and detailed classifications of these secondary meanings. See, for example, Nannoni (2004:15–37) for Italian:

a. onirico: *Ho sognato che io avevo fame e tu ti mangiavi tutta la torta.*

b. fantastico: *Peccato che non ci siamo portati via quella bella insegna. Già e poi magari passava un vigile e ci conciava per le feste.*

c. ludico: *(Facciamo che) io ero il re e tu la principessa.*

d. conato o imminenziale: *L'aereo decollava già dalla pista, quando il pilota si accorse che un motore perdeva colpi.*

e. ipotetico: *Se lo sapevo prima, arrivavo in tempo a salutarti.*

f. epistemico e potenziale: *Vincenzo doveva essere qui, non capisco che cosa gli sia successo.*

g. attenuativo o di cortesia: *Cosa desiderava, signora?*

h. ipocoristico: *Aveva fame la mia bambina?*

i. epistemico-doxastico: *Quand'è che partiva il tuo aereo domani?*

j. pianificazione: *Domani andavo in biblioteca.*

De Mulder (2012:102–103) for French:

a. imparfait de politesse ou d'atténuation: *Je voulais vous demander d'intercéder en ma faveur.*

b. imparfait forain: *Qu'est-ce qu'elle voulait la petite dame?*

c. imparfait hypocoristique: *un homme, qui garde les enfants de son amie en son absence, tente de consoler le petit garçon d'un gros chagrin en le prenant dans ses bras et dit : – Ch'est un pauvre bébé cha ... il avait le coeur brijé ...*

d. imparfait préludique: *Moi, j'étais le gendarme et tu avais volé une voiture.*

e. imparfait hypothétique: *Si je gagnais le gros lot, je le partagerais avec vous.*

f. imparfait exprimant un souhait ou un désir: *Ah, si j'avais une fortune!*

g. imparfait contrefactuel: *Elle mit la main sur le loquet ... un pas de plus, elle était dans la rue.*

And for Bulgarian Stankov (1966:131–144; 1994–1995:196–200)

a. politesse: *Исках да ви помоля за една услуга.*

b. rappel: *Вие как се казвахте?*

c. optativ: *Да можех да му помогна!*

d. irréel: *Ако бях по-млад и имах повече пари, бих заминал на работа в чужбина.*

e. éventuel: *И ако някой влезеше, щеше да види, че в стаята няма никой.*

There are various hypotheses about the rise of the modal meanings of the imperfect (see Nannoni 2004 and Patard 2014 for an overview).

It was once thought that at the origin of such modal meanings lay a metaphoric transposition of temporal and aspectual traits of the imperfect: "La lontananza

temporale diventa metaforicamente una lontananza modale" (Bazzanella 1994:103) (in Bulgarian *транспозиция / преносна употреба*).

Moving away from this explanation and towards a more consistent categorial definition of the imperfect, which enables us to explain both its prototypical and its modal meanings, Patard (2014) maintains that any verbal tense has a "schematic meaning" and all other different uses are to be understood as "extensions" of this schematic meaning: "Non past interpretations of past tenses are pragmatic extensions of the schematic meaning" (Patard 2014:73). According to her theory, the semantics of past tenses is able to trigger modal non-past interpretations operating through a kind of "projection" outside the utterance. This happens when the past tense does not refer to the past time of the propositional contents of the utterance, but merely shows when the epistemic validity of the utterance begins. In other words, the reference point of Reichenbach's theoretical framework functions as an evaluation point: $R = E_p$ "from which the epistemic validity (V) of the uttered proposition is considered" (Patard 2014:74). This is particularly evident with the Romance imperfect, which can extend the epistemic validity of the utterance up to the present and even further to the future, as in (6):

(6) [*Mary a dit que*] *John restait demain jusqu'à quatre heures*.

2 The modal meaning *за припомняне*

The imperfect *за припомняне* (Nicolova 2008:285) or *на досещане* (Stankov 1983; "valeur de rappel" Stankov 1994–1995:200)[1] is one of the most common modal meanings of the imperfect, especially in spoken varieties of language. It occurs in questions when the speaker asks to retrieve information given in the past but forgotten at the present time.

Patard lists this function in the group of evidential uses (Patard 2014:79) and terms it an "echo question", as it represents a reply to a statement (albeit ideal) given at an earlier time. Similar views can be found in DeMulder (2012:99) "interprétations épistémiques ou évidentielles", Squartini (2001:309) "the modal semantics of the imperfect in such cases as […] basically involving evidentiality" and Berretta (1992), who has systematically described this usage in Italian, naming it "imperfetto epistemico-doxastico".

The origin of such evidential usage of the imperfect is generally traced at a syntactic level to indirect speech. According to the rules of the *consecutio temporum*, the imperfect is the tense used in place of the present or the future in subordinate clauses introduced by *verba dicendi* (Bazzanella 1990:450–452; Bres

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1   See also Stojanov (1983:332–333), Pašov (1999:145).

2009:13 "Dans ces imparfaits des dires, on a affaire à une subordination énonciative (relayée, en discours indirect, par la subordination syntaxique)" and Patard 2014:75–77; 82–83 "marked interpretations in past reported speech"). This point of view presupposes the elision of the main clause from the underlying structure of the sentence:

(7) *Che cosa c'era al cinema stasera?*
   < *Che cosa* [*hai detto che*] *c'era stasera al cinema?*

In the literature on the imperfect *за припомняне* in Bulgarian there is no direct reference to the evidential nature of the imperfect. This is not surprising, as Bulgarian has a dedicated mood for expressing evidentiality. Nevertheless, Bulgarian grammars consistently report that the imperfect tense can be used instead of the present in subordinate clauses introduced by verbs such as чувам, мисля, казвам generally in the aorist (see Stojanov 1983:329–330; Nicolova 2008:284).

(8) *Той не каза ли как се казваше? > Той* [*не каза ли*] *как се казваше?*
(9) *Той не каза ли как се казва?*

2.1 Bulgarian

Bulgarian grammars already offer good insight into the functioning of this modal meaning of the imperfect. According to them, it occurs with imperfective verbs and most frequently with atelic verbs, as in the following examples quoted from Stojanov (1983:333):[2]

(10) *Как се казваше? Небрежно попита тя.* (Dimov)
(11) *Каква беше поръчката ви? – обърна се тя към Павел без да съзнава точно какво изговаря.* (Bolgar)
(12) *Не живееше ли у вас една учителка? Росица Енева се казва.* (Angelov)

Some examples clearly show that such a meaning can be triggered even when the time of the eventuality follows the time of speech:

(13) *Та в колко часа беше събранието утре?* (Stankov 1966:137)
(14) *Ти утре рано ли заминаваше?* (Pašov 1999:145)

Although the examples reported in Bulgarian grammars are taken mainly from novels, Stankov stresses that the imperfect *за припомняне* is widespread in spoken Bulgarian (Stankov 1966:138). The responses given to the questionnaire by native speakers have proven that this statement holds true:

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2   Occurrences of imperfect за припомняне with modal verbs are not considered in this work. Modal verbs add to this meaning but, at the same time, blur the role played by the imperfect itself in disclosing it.

(15) *Кога беше рожденият ден на Иван?*

(16) *Къде живееше той?*

(17) *Ти къде точно работеше?*

Even sentences with the time of the eventuality in the future are fully acceptable:

(18) *Утре ли беше рожденият ден на Иван?*

With telic verbs the responses of native speakers reveal varying degrees of acceptability:

The sentence (19) is considered correct:

(19) *В колко часа заминаваше влакът ти?*

But when the time of the eventuality is expressly in the future the acceptabilty level decreases:

(20) *?Ти с кого се срещаше довечера?*

(21) **Ти къде го срещаше утре?*

In these cases other verbal forms are preferred, such as the present (22) or the future in the past (23):

(22) *Ти с кого се срещаш довечера / утре?*

(23) *Ти с кого щеше да се срещаш довечера / утре?*

The following sentence is of particular interest:

(24) *?Утре в колко часа заминаваше влакът?*

First, not all native speakers consider (24) acceptable, which suggests that telic verbal semantics could represent some kind of constraint to the use of the imperfect *за припомняне* in Bulgarian.

Second, those speakers who consider (24) acceptable underline that the information to be retrieved exists for sure, that is because there is an official timetable that fixes the time of departure of the train or because it is known that the decision to leave had been taken. That, in turn, suggests that the imperfect *за припомняне* in Bulgarian lacks the epistemic connotations it has, for example, in the Romance languages.[3] The reason for that depends again on the fact that when reporting information in Bulgarian, the renarrated mood has to be used (see (25) and (26) respectively in the past or future in the past):

(25) *Та кога бил рожденият ден на Иван?*

(26) *Кога щял да е рожденият ден на Иван?*

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3   Actually, similar comments were made by native speakers with regard to all the Bulgarian examples.

In general, the imperfect conveys a "по-голяма категоричност" (Rusinov / Georgiev 2000:220), as the comparison with the future in the past (Indicative mood) shows. The latter, as in (27), is more overtly contrafactual:[4]

(27) *Той кога щеше да си мие колата?*

2.2 Serbian

In Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) grammars the synthetic past forms, imperfect and aorist, are actually listed among other normative tenses (see Stevanović 1964:346–348; Stanojčić 2010:175–177). Nevertheless, it is explicitly specified, as for example in Mrazović (2009:149), that the imperfect tense: "praktično je iščezao u savremenom govoru, osim u malom delu narodnih govora, nema ga ni u jeziku štampe, radija i televizije. Potisnut je perfektom, a u pričanju (i pisanju) tzv. 'istorijskim perfektom' ".[5]

In the mid 20th century considerable attention was devoted to the imperfect tense in Serbo-Croatian, presumably because it was acknowledged that it was in severe decline. In the works of the linguists that had worked on the topic (Stojićević 1951; Vuković 1955; Stevanović 1953; Sladoević 1953–54; Stevanović 1959), as well in some earlier ones, reference to the imperfect[6] *за припомняне* can be found, but labeled as "imperfek(a)t za pravu sadašnjost".

> Vrlo je rijedak imperfekt za pravu sadašnjost, i to samo u pitanjima: što *veljaše*? (tj. što veliš? tako se u južnom primorju odzivaju žene i djevojke). V rječn. kod oj čuj, a vi otkle *beste*? (tj. otkle ste?). M. 33, što se ono u planini sjaše? nar. pjes. 1,37. (Maretić 1963(1931):624)
>
> […] označava jedno stanje koje […] nije bilo takvo samo u prošlosti nego je takvo i u vreme govora – stalno. (Stevanović 1953-54:49)

In contemporary Serbian, spoken in Belgrade and Novi Sad, there appears to be no trace left of imperfect tense forms with a temporal meaning. Nevertheless, as surprising as it may sound, the only common imperfect forms still in use are the two relics *beše* (*biti*) and *zvaše se* (*zvati se*) in the meaning *за припомняне*:

(28) *Kako se zvaše onaj lekar?*
(29) *Kada beše Ivanov rođendan?*

where *beše* can occur even with a future time reference:

(30) *Da li sutra beše Ivanov rođendan?*

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4   Similarly Stankov (1966:76) "имперфектинте действия тук не притежават характера на неосъщественост, присъщ на действията в бъдеще в миналото."

5   In fact, nowadays one can still come across the imperfect only in novels or poetry, in some proverbs and sayings, or occasionally in the spoken south-western štokavian dialects (Montenegro).

6   Only imperfective verbs have the imperfect tense.

With other verbs, the imperfect *за припомняне* is not acceptable, not even with atelic verbs (31)–(32) and defenitively not with a future time reference (33):

(31) (*)*Gde življaše ovaj?*

(32) (*)*U koliko sati polažaše tvoj voz?*[7]

(33) **U kojoj sobi ti rađaše sutra?*

However, amazingly Serbian native speakers asked to elicit a response to the use of past tenses with present or future time reference showed that they perceive very clearly what this is about. In order to convey the modal meaning of the imperfect *за припомняне*, which is requesting information already given, they consistently use *beše*, the third person singular of the imperfect of the verb *biti*, followed directly, without any connector, by the conjugated verb. This structure can be used with all verbs, both telic and atelic, as well as with the time of the eventuality in the present or in the future:

(34) *U kojoj sobi ti beše radiš* (*sutra*)?

(35) *U koliko sati beše polazi tvoj voz* (*sutra*)?

(36) *S kime se beše nalaziš* (*sutra*)?

Despite not being acquainted with the theories and studies about the imperfect *за припомняне* in other languages, Kovačević (2008) explicitly states that such a construction is used to refer to previously given information.

2.3 Czech, Polish and Russian

As to the activation of the modal meaning *за припомняне* in the imperfective past tense of other Slavic languages, testing on Czech, Polish and Russian has shown similar outcomes between them. All three languages display only one analytical past tense form and these forms are unable to trigger the *за припомняне* modal meaning. The results obtained from questionnaires given to native speakers demonstrate that the past tense (imperfective) can have merely past time validity and is not compatible with future time expressions:

Czech

(38) *Kdy byly jeho narozeniny?*   PAST

(39) *V kolik hodin odjížděl vlak?*   PAST

(40) **V kolik hodin odjížděl vlak zítra?*

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7   In their temporal meaning (31) and (32) are perceived by native speakers as hypothetically possible: "Samo teoretski, nije u živoj upotrebi u savremenom jeziku. Sem možda u dijalektu."

Polish

(41) *Kiedy były jego urodziny?*   PAST

(42) *O której odjeżdżał pociąg?*   PAST

(43) **O której odjeżdżał pociąg jutro?*

Russian

(44) *Когда у него был день рождения?*   PAST

(45) *Во сколько отправлялся поезд?*   PAST

(46) **Во сколько отправлялся поезд завтра?*

Further confirmation for this has been sought by searching the National language corpora,[8] where three cases have been found where past imperfectives do not refer to past time reference.

1. clauses where the speaker enquires about a previous intention using the modal verbs *mít* and *mieć*:

(47) *Úkolem novináře je pak najít klienty, kteří uvázli v zahraničí či na zaplacený zájezd neodletí. Včera ráno mi hledání takových zoufalých "dovolenkářů" odpadlo. Bohužel. Stalo se to mně samému. Už zítra jsem měl cestovat na dovolenou do Řecka s CK Parkam Holidays. Nepoletím. Včera totiž zkrachovala.* (*Mladá fronta DNES*, 2.7.2011)

(48) *A zresztą zabrakło cementu. Jutro mieliśmy pojechać po materiały. Było po czwartej. Usiadłem pod kasztanem i napawałem się widokiem przemienionego domu.*

(J. Grzegorczyk, *Chaszcze*, 2009)

2. verbs in the past tense but with a present or future reference that explicitly convey a sense of intention and programming, such as 'to want' or 'to have the intention of':

(49) *- А если вот за нее теперь такую сумму...*

- Верная лошадь...

- Да... Вот что... Верная?! Знаешь что, голубчик, ты ко мне хотел завтра, кажется, зайти? Да? Хотел? Да? (A. S. Buchov, *Pervyj opyt*, 1915)

3. past imperfectives are used in Polish and Russian as future in the past forms with a strong focus on the intentionality of the action:

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(50) *W Wejherowie mieszkała ciotka Jakuba, kobieta była w porządku, nie miała nic przeciwko temu, by przenocował u niej z kolegą. Jutro zaś czekała ich Gdynia i dwie fajne panny poznane w wakacje.* (M. Kaszyński, *Skarb w glini-anym naczyniu*, 2008)

Still, there are some rare occurrences of the past imperfective when the time reference span extends to the present and future:

(51) *- Panie Horn, może pan za jakie pół godziny przyjdzie do mnie?*
- Dobrze, panie dyrektorze. Ja nawet miałem interes i w tym celu jutro się wybierałem do pana. (W. S. Reymont, *Ziemia Obiecana*, 1898)

(52) *Звук этой фамилии толкнул генерала, как электрическая искра.*
Он живо протянул приезжему руку и произнес:
- Я вас ждал завтра.[9]
- Я поторопился и приехал ранее.
- Прошу вас в мой кабинет. (N. S. Leskov, *Na nožach*, 1870)

Actually, identical uses are reported for Bulgarian, respectively:

(53) *Кой текст трябваше да подготвите за днес?* (Nicolova 2004:285)

(54) *А ти не искаше ли да отидеш на море следващата седмица?*

(55) *На бай Иван Станоев, управител на ведомоствената почивна станция Сакар Балкан, предстоеше тежка задача. Утре пристигаше първата смяна от почиващите и тая нощ той трябваше да изготви план за разпределение на хората по етажи и стаи.* (Neznakomov, cit. in Stankov 1966:60).

As to (53) and (54), it was already noted above that modal verbs enhance the meaning *за припомняне*, but also shade the role played by the imperfect.

Sentences such as (55) suggest a past intention rather than having an explicit *за припомняне* meaning. Although cognitively very close to them, they should be rather considered expressions of another modal meaning called "предвиждани за реализиране" (Stankov 1966:61).

3 Conclusions

After analysing the modal meaning *за припомняне* in Slavic languages, we can make the following observations.

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9   Petra Stankovska, editor of the present volume, points to the fact that in Czech the verb *čekat* 'to wait' is likely to function in the same manner: *Čekal jsem vás tu až zítra.* (B. Cartland, *Panna v Paříži*, 2006. Překl. Ludmila Havlíková).

1. The Bulgarian imperfect tense is regularly used in the modal meaning *за припомняне*. Nevertheless, compared to the corresponding uses of the imperfect in the Romance languages, its functional range appears restricted to those situations where the eventuality described by the verb is perceived as certain. This is because the wide scope of the *за припомняне* modal usage in the Romance languages and its evidential implicatures are covered in Bulgarian by the future in the past and the renarrated mood.

2. Contemporary Serbian has lost the imperfect tense, but the modal meaning *за припомняне* still survives thanks to the two relic forms (*beše*, *zvaše*) and more productively through the periphrastic structure: *beše* + present tense.

    This structure is likely to have emerged from the notional gap that the relatively recent loss of the imperfect has created. As a substitutive periphrastical instrument it expresses a modal meaning that the analytic imperfective past tense form, which has taken over the temporal meanings of the imperfect, cannot fully convey. *Beše* operates as the element expanding the epistemic validity of the eventuality, which is separated from the propositional content carried by the conjugated verb.

3. The analytic past of the other Slavic languages considered is not suitable to express the modal meaning *за припомняне* in any consistent manner. This probably depends on the notional configuration of the imperfect itself, which is clearly not simply a past imperfective. However, how exactly the notional configuration of the Slavic imperfective analytic past tense constrains the activation of this (and other) modal meaning needs further investigation.

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Povzetek: Modalni pomen *за припомняне* bolgarskega imperfekta nedovršnih glagolov in njegovi ekvivalenti v drugih slovanskih jezikih

Med slovanskimi jeziki je samo bolgarščina (in njej zelo podobna makedonščina) ohranila imperfekt, praslovansko sintetično obliko preteklika. Ta se ob svoji primarni temporalni vlogi uporablja tudi za izražanje različnih modalnih pomenov, ki, na splošno gledano, predvidevajo določeno spremembo v epistemični veljavnosti povedi. Modalni pomen *за припомняне* bolgarskega imperfekta nedovršnih glagolov se aktivira, kadar govorec sprašuje za informacijo, ki jo je že prej dobil, vendar jo je v trenutku govora pozabil. Izhajajoč iz predhodnih raziskav, se pričujoči prispevek osredotoča na vprašanje, ali in kako bi bilo možno isti pomen izraziti s pomočjo glagolske morfologije v tistih slovanskih jezikih, ki so imperfekt izgubili. Med analiziranimi jeziki so: bolgarščina, srbščina (hrvaščina), češčina, poljščina in ruščina.

Ključne besede: bolgarščina, imperfekt, modalnost, slovanski jeziki, kontrastivno jezikoslovje