

Tense-Aspect-Modality Issues in and Across Languages: With Special Emphasis on the Perfect

*By Krasimir Kabakčiev**

Tense, aspect and modality are important issues relevant both in and across languages – in contrastive and typological terms, and for linguists worldwide they have always been major and very special points of interest and research. In July 2024 and July 2025, Special Sessions entitled “TAM In and Across Languages” were organized and took place within Atiner’s 17th and 18th Annual International Conferences on Languages and Linguistics in Athens. They drew the attention of a group of linguists who made presentations on TAM, most of which later turned into research articles published by the Athens Journal of Philology. This article offers a summary of the two Special TAM Sessions within the perspective of current theoretical linguistics and an overview of three of the papers based on the conference presentations, authored by Shinian Wu (USA), Sema Kutsarova (Bulgaria), and Desislava Dimitrova (Bulgaria).

Keywords: *tense, aspect, modality, the Perfect, (non-)cancellability, (non-)witnessing, speaker ghosting, grammaticalization, pragmatic aspects of aspect*

Introduction

Tense-aspect-modality (TAM) is a major structural and grammatical domain of most languages around the world – practically of all of them, although two facts must be taken into account: (1) the world’s languages are more than seven thousand and most of them are poorly described or totally undescribed; (2) many languages, notably Chinese among them, spoken by an enormous number of people, do not have any formal system of tense, though, of course, this does not mean that these languages do not distinguish between situations effectuated in the past, present or future. This special issue of the *Athens Journal of Philology* (AJP) contains four articles dealing with the complex and intricate domain of TAM, beginning with the present paper. The other three were delivered as presentations during the TAM Special Session of the 18th Annual International Conference on Languages and Linguistics of Atiner, 7-10 July 2025, Athens, Greece: (1) “Pragmatic dimensions of aspects in English: theory and practice”, by Shinian Wu, USA; (2) “The phenomenon of speaker ghosting and the cancellability feature of the Turkish *-mİs* forms”, by Sema Kutsarova, Bulgaria; (3) “The Greek present perfect as an exponent of cancellability”, by Desislava Dimitrova, Bulgaria. In contrast to languages such as Chinese without grammaticalized tense systems, other languages, like for example Bulgarian, feature extremely complex TAM systems. The two papers focused on Turkish – Kutsarova’s, and Greek – Dimitrova’s, respectively, also deal with TAM

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features of Bulgarian. The present paper, “Tense, aspect, modality issues in and across languages: with special emphasis on the perfect”, by Krasimir Kabakčiev, offers a recapitulation of the two TAM Special Sessions held in 2024 and 2025 in Athens and an overview of the other three papers from the standpoint of current linguistic theory.

The Two TAM Special Sessions in 2024 and 2025 in Athens

In July 2024 and July 2025, Special Sessions “TAM In and Across Languages” were organized within Atiner’s Annual International Conference on Languages and Linguistics; six presentations were made during the Special Session in July 2024, three during the Special Session in July 2025. Four of the presentations in July 2024 were submitted to AJP and published: “Pragmatics of TAM: its descriptive and observational adequacy”, by Shinian Wu, USA (AJP 11-3, 2024); “The category of determiner in Albanian”, by Hysnie Haxhillari, Albania (AJP 11-4, 2024); “On the gigantic fallacy that there is no Slavic-like aspect in the Romance languages and aspect resides only in the past domain”, by Krasimir Kabakčiev, Greece (AJP 12-1, 2025); “An attempt at outlining the major features of compositional aspect in Modern Turkish”, by Sema Kutsarova, Bulgaria (AJP 12-1, 2025). The three presentations delivered in July 2025 are published now, in this issue, and are discussed below.

An Article on the Pragmatic Aspects of English Aspect

From an aspectological point of view, languages around the world are of two major types: verbal-aspect languages: here belong the Slavic languages, Greek, Georgian, Chinese (among many other) and compositional-aspect languages, major European representatives of which are the Germanic and the Romance languages, Albanian, Finnish (Kabakčiev 2000, 2025). In verbal-aspect languages the major aspectual distinction between perfectivity and imperfectivity is realized in verbs as lexical items, whereby every verb (almost) is perfective or imperfective as a lexical entry and the distinction is grammaticalized.¹ In compositional-aspect languages, the perfective-imperfective distinction is realized in the form of an extremely complex interplay at the level of the sentence mainly between NPs as situation participants (also known as verb arguments) and the verb (Kabakčiev 2000: Chapter 6), according to two aspectual schemata: a perfective and an imperfective one, architected and explained by the finder of compositional aspect Henk Verkuyl (1993, 2022). But the rules of Verkuyl’s two aspectual schemata, despite being rigorous and clear (for linguists with good knowledge of compositional aspect), are sometimes incapable of providing the correct aspectual reading of a given sentence. These cases are usually due to the so-called pragmatic component of language,

¹In Chinese, the situation is somewhat more specific: verbs as lexical items are unmarked for perfectivity-imperfectivity but there is a special particle *-le* systematically used for perfectivization. Also, in verbal-aspect languages (Slavic, Greek, Georgian) there are verbs that are biaspectual, aspectually ambivalent, and these fall out of the large bulk of verbs that are either perfective or imperfective.

different from the semantic and grammatical components, which sometimes interferes with the compositional rules for interpreting the meanings of sentences.

Two examples will be given here to exemplify the clash that sometimes occurs between the rules of compositional aspect explication in English and the pragmatic component interfering with the correct reading of sentences. The clash may be due to different pragmatic factors, including the influence of contexts, but is especially frequently based on people's knowledge of the world, which is a complex structure. Consider these two examples:²

- (1) a. My mother was a tailor / She sewed my new blue jeans
 b. Things have changed

A sentence such as the second one in the sequence (1a), *She [My mother] sewed my blue jeans*, is interpreted through the rules of compositional explication as denoting a one-off act of a mother repairing a single new pair of jeans – which means perfective in grammatical terms. However, in (1a) the second sentence, *She sewed my new blue jeans*, actually refers *not* to a one-off act but to a sequence of acts of repairing jeans one after another – non-bounded in time, without a known beginning and a known end. This second interpretation of the meaning of the sentence, different from the standard one, is due to the impact of the first sentence in the sequence, *My mother was a tailor*, which guides the listener to understand that the second sentence, *She sewed my new blue jeans*, has a specific meaning, covering a habitual activity by the mother. This impact on the aspectual interpretation is pragmatic; it is often a result of the fundamental knowledge of people about how the world is built and functions – and guides them through the meanings of sentences. The pragmatic impact, as can be seen here, may conflict with the normal interpretation of language expressions, sentences and sometimes even whole texts.

The second example, *Things have changed*, also demonstrates a deviation from the rules of compositional explication of aspect in English. It ought to refer to a continuous, non-bounded, ever-lasting change of the status quo in the past leading to the present and ought to be interpreted as imperfective. However, it obviously has a different meaning in this case, describing a one-off and final change of the status quo, firmly established at the present moment. This sentence is assigned perfectivity in conflict with the grammatically non-bounded subject-NP, represented by a bare plural, which standardly triggers imperfectivity. Compare *Children arrived*, an imperfective sentence, vs *The children arrived*, the latter with a bounded subject-NP (through the definite article), hence the latter is a perfective sentence. Phrased otherwise, *Things have changed* ought to be an imperfective sentence just like *Children arrived*. And if it must be perfective according to the formal compositional rules, it ought to be structured in the following way: *The things have changed* – just like *The children arrived*. But it isn't.

In his major works, including his three monographs, Verkuyl (1972, 1993, 2022) did not pay special attention to the pragmatic factors underlying in many cases

²The examples are from two popular songs, *The House of the Rising Sun*, a traditional folk song performed by The Animals, and *Things Have Changed*, written and performed by Bob Dylan.

the aspectual interpretation of sentences in English (as in the examples above) – or in similar languages such as Dutch, his mother tongue. Of course, having made the epochal discovery of compositional aspect, its finder cannot be expected to have also solved all the issues troubling the correct conceptualization of the extremely complex phenomenon of aspect. And here comes Wu’s (2026) paper dealing with the issue, explaining pragmatic factors underlying aspectual interpretation and exemplifying them using sentences such as (2) in Mandarin Chinese.

As explained by Wu, *-le* is a perfective particle in Mandarin Chinese that marks completion of an action in a sentence such as (2a). But its interpretation here conflicts with the compositional aspect rules:

- (2) a. Ta chi-**le** na jikuai binggan, keshi mei chi wan
She eat-le those several cookies, but didn't eat finish
 ‘She ate those cookies, but didn’t finish eating them’
 b. Tya yade tezi nyakolko biskvitki, no ne gi izjade dokray
 ‘She ate those cookies, but didn’t finish eating them’

Sentence (2a) is a good example for prompting serious reasoning in cross-language terms. In English, the translation *She ate those cookies, but didn’t finish eating them* of the Mandarin Chinese sentence sounds somewhat strange – because English *ate those cookies* is perfective according to the compositional rules but the subsequent phrase *didn’t finish eating them* cancels the perfectivity of *ate those cookies* and modifies the previous phrase into what was described long ago (Kabakčiev 2000: 279–307) as an episode Vendlerian situation (after Vendler 1957). An episode itself is what matches the description of the semantics of the Bulgarian grammatical entity known as the imperfective Aorist. As for the Bulgarian sentence (2b), it is a translation of the English translation of the Mandarin sentence (2a), and, by necessity, it contains an imperfective Aorist, *yade* ‘ate [for some time]’, its grammatical meaning covered by the episode situation.

Slavic linguists have been wondering for decades, and even more, what kind of grammeme the Bulgarian imperfective Aorist is, especially because it is absent in the other Slavic languages. An answer provided by Dimitrova & Kabakčiev (2021) is that the imperfective Aorist is a residual phenomenon of the necessity imposed on the Bulgarian language to develop an Imperfect verb form. The Imperfect form serves to eliminate the temporal boundedness of subject- and object-NP referents (Kabakčiev 2000: 279–308), leaving the Aorist with the role of “an odd man out”. After the Imperfect emerged – unfortunately linguistic science cannot tell us when this happened in the history of the language – the remaining member of the Aorist-Imperfect opposition, the Aorist, could not obtain a standard imperfective value, as this value was already occupied by the Imperfect. Therefore, the Aorist, which is a term originating in Ancient Greek grammar and has a perfective value, was forced to develop an additional value in Bulgarian: not perfective but quasi-perfective. Formally, morphologically, it had to be an imperfective Aorist. The imperfective Aorist encodes a fifth Vendlerian class called episode (Kabakčiev 2000: 279–308), see it analysed further in Dimitrova & Kabakčiev (2021: 200–202). Vendler’s (1957)

well-known original situation classes are four: states, activities, accomplishment and achievements. To these four, the episode is added as an additional class.

The episode may seem strange and even superfluous from the point of view of general Slavic grammar – because it is nowhere else to be found in the world of Slavic languages.³ Furthermore, it is absent in both Ancient and Modern Greek grammar – where Aorists are formed from perfective verbs only and imperfects from imperfective verbs only (Dimitrova 2021). But, as can be seen here, the episode actually fills a particular slot in the theoretically or practically possible classes of Vendlerian situations. It is a value which is temporally bounded yet it is not perfective but quasi-perfective. This is a situation with a definite beginning and a definite end of the situation on the time axis but with no telos achieved, whereas perfectivity is a bounded situation with a telos achieved – as a general rule, in almost all cases. Episodes in English perfectly cover the use of atelic verbs with *for*-time adverbials, semantically equalling Bulgarian imperfective Aorists. Wu's example (2a) shows that these Vendlerian situations are found in Mandarin Chinese too, but more research is probably needed for their better description.

The two sentences (2a) and (2b) above demonstrate how a certain phenomenon that appears bizarre in some languages – sometimes forcing linguists to either ignore it or stow it away into pragmatics (as if pragmatics were a wastepaper basket), may surface as a fully-fledged grammatical entity in another language (other languages). The episode identified in Wu's example (2a) is a fully grammaticalized Bulgarian morphological entity: an imperfective Aorist. Below, on material from the other two papers in this issue, it will, first, be shown how aspectual meanings may change beyond the domain of compositional aspect rules and, second, how two semantic values, witnessing and non-witnessing, that could also be thought to be pragmatic, turn out to have emerged in certain languages as grammatical.

Two Articles about the Perfect in Turkish and Greek against Bulgarian and Partly English Data to Further Debunk the Myth that the Perfect is a Mystery

Two articles in this special issue of AJP deal with the so-called cancellability feature – among some other features, of the Greek Perfect and of the Turkish Perfect-like *-miş* verb forms, authored by Kutsarova and Dimitrova, respectively. These papers are notable in that they use Bulgarian, a language with a uniquely complex TAM system, for an identical point of departure for the analysis of both Turkish and Greek. English is also employed as a metalanguage – which adds up to four important languages from the point of view of general linguistic theory. The two papers by Kutsarova and Dimitrova open new vistas in the cross-language study of Perfects in and across languages by explaining that the Perfect in both Turkish and Greek exists for a reason or, rather, reasons – albeit in two formally different instantiations.

The Perfect is not a mystery anymore! It serves some important structural functions, described initially on data from Bulgarian and English (Kabakčiev 2017;

³With certain peripheral exceptions in some Balkan languages: Serbian, Montenegrin.

2018; 2020; 2022b). Firstly, the Bulgarian Perfect eliminates the so-called speaker ghosting effect by grammaticalizing sentences in the ‘*X said that* [content of *that*]’ semantico-syntactic schema, see below. Secondly, it serves as an exponent of non-witnessing and cancellability. Below are the two examples (3a) and (3b) that were used for the first time in the literature to demonstrate the non-grammaticality of these Bulgarian sentences and to explain the reasons for it. The non-grammaticality had been known for quite some time in Bulgarian linguistics but had received no explanation.⁴ In order to become grammatical, Bulgarian sentences such as (3a) and (3b) must be restructured using Perfect verb forms (and some other, not discussed here), cf. (4a), (4b):

- (3) a. *Petar kaza_{AOR}, che pristigna_{AOR}
 ‘Peter said that he arrived’
 ‘Peter said that he arrived’
 b. *Petar kaza_{AOR}, che Maria pristigna_{AOR}
 ‘Peter said that Maria arrived’
 ‘Peter said that Maria arrived’
- (4) a. Petar kaza_{AOR}, che e pristigna_{PERFECT}
 ‘Peter said that he has arrived’
 (literally) ‘Peter said that he has arrived’
 b. Petar kaza_{AOR}, che Maria e pristignala_{PERFECT}
 ‘Peter said that Maria has arrived’
 (literally) ‘Peter said that Maria has arrived’

Soon after the speaker ghosting phenomenon was discovered in Bulgarian, see its initial explanation in Kabakčiev (2018), it was also found and described on Montenegrin data – by Bulatović (2018), using non-grammatical examples similar to the Bulgarian ones above.⁵

The major thesis launched in Kabakčiev (2017; 2018; 2020; 2022b) – mainly on Bulgarian and English data, and adhered to by Kutsarova and Dimitrova in their papers in this issue, is that, actually:

the Bulgarian Perfect has no semantics of its own.

It exercises *structural* functions, and the traditional meanings usually ascribed to it – such as current relevance and resultativity, are a consequence of the natural necessity in linguistic analyses to have a semantic meaning characterizing a grammeme, provided the grammeme is not purely structural. The latter is the case with gender, articles, cases and some similar ones: these are more or less purely structural grammemes.

Suppose the Perfect were a cross-language or universal grammeme that had a clear and easily identifiable semantic meaning of its own. It would have been triggered in the development of the relevant language(s) by some necessity for native speakers

⁴The reason for this is that the explanation is extremely difficult, as shown in Kabakčiev (2018).

⁵Bulgarian and Montenegrin are mutually understandable languages – to a moderate degree.

of these languages to effectuate a notion important for human communication. Notions important for human communication are, for example (among others), time, aspect, number. Being important, they are realized in the structure of language through the grammatical categories tense, aspect and number. A serious question that arises is: what is the notion of the Perfect that is important for human communication? The answer is that the Perfect *simply does not manifest* any such notion. Nevertheless, the refutation of this idea in favor of searching for some specific semantic meaning(s) of the Perfect is being laboriously and systematically carried out to the present day, as in two recent publications: Yao (2024), Kapkan (2025), discussed below.

A long time ago Dahl (1985), Comrie (1985) and Bybee et al. (1994), among others, showed convincingly that many languages around the world feature Perfect verb forms, yet equally many other do not. But these and other similar publications never ventured an explanation why so many languages need to have Perfect verb forms, yet so many other languages function freely without them. They never even asked a question why the Perfect has such features among languages: either present or absent, and when it appears to be present as in some languages like German, Serbian, Montenegrin, etc., it actually functions not as a Perfect but as a preterit. The fact is that innumerable languages around the world have no Perfect verb forms at all but their speakers nonetheless *understand each other perfectly* and do not feel deprived. This fact has only recently (Kabakčiev 2020: 143) been accentuated and analysed at length.

A General Description of the Wrong Conceptualization of the Perfect

The Perfect is unquestionably a major grammatical entity, usually frequent in actual speech in the relevant language, i.e., in the language that features it. It is widely found across languages and is well-known to the global community of linguists. But despite these straightforward characteristics, it has *never* received a convincing treatment, and for this reason it is frequently labelled a “puzzle”, “riddle” or “mystery” (Klein 1992; Pancheva & von Stechow 2004; Higginbotham 2009: 160; Kabakčiev 2020: 127). Four decades ago, some truly devastating criticism was leveled at the failure of the linguistic community to explain the Perfect:

The descriptive accounts of the perfect are vague, they make unprincipled distinctions between different uses of the perfect, without explaining why the perfect should fulfil such an arbitrary looking collection of functions (Moens 1987: 94).

As argued by Kutsarova in the present edition, this criticism is still fully valid today. It has never ever been proved wrong. The truth is that many researchers studying the Perfect today agree that it effectively resists attempts to be assigned a semantic value that would be discoverable in all of its uses, or at least in most of them. One cannot but fully agree with Östen Dahl, who recently wrote:

treatments of perfects often start out with the English perfect [...] but too often English is not only the point of departure of the discussion but also its end. To find

the proper place for perfects, we have to go beyond English to be able to separate what is idiosyncratic from what is generalizable (Dahl 2022: 280).

The present paper, summarizing research on the Perfect, will show that the two publications by Kutsarova and Dimitrova here not only corroborate Dahl's insistence that we "have to go beyond English". The two authors actually do precisely this: by first going to Bulgarian data with its extremely intriguing speaker ghosting effect and then to Turkish and Greek data, respectively, whereby the Turkish data turns out to exactly replicate the regularities discovered in Bulgarian. Meanwhile the authors analyse also English to elucidate the essence of the Perfect there and its true *raison d'être* – not its "semantics", thus following Kabakčiev's (2020: 143) leading thesis to which Kutsarova and Dimitrova subscribe: ***the Perfect does not have own semantics.***

Further Notes on the Inadequate Understanding of the Perfect Prevailing in Linguistic Writings

Contrary to the thesis that the Perfect does not possess any semantics of its own, the assertion generally maintained in linguistic circles today is different, and it is that the Perfect manifests "resultativity" – or another similar value, discussed below. However, it is crystal-clear that this assertion can be valid ***only and solely*** when perfective verbs are used in a sentence – in verbal-aspect languages, or in perfective expressions in compositional-aspect languages – phrases, clauses, sentences.

Consider the English sentence (5a) below, perfective in compositional aspect terms. It can, indeed, be described as "resultative". But why? Is it because it contains a perfect verb form? No. It is because it contains an underlying perfective sentence *The bear entered this park* encoding a bounded situation with a telos achieved. The telos consists in that the bear is in the park after having been outside but with an intention to enter. This meaning arises according to the rules of compositional aspect, and not because the Perfect form itself *has entered* is "resultative". This Perfect verb form ***is not and cannot be "resultative"*** – for a reason that is perfectly clear: it can take part in innumerable other expressions and sentences that are ***not perfective*** but imperfective. Consider again sentence (5a), this time against the English sentences (5b) and (5c) below: (5a) is a perfective sentence and its perfectivity is compositionally realized. Conversely, the two sentences (5b), (5c) are imperfective and their imperfectivity is again compositionally realized, even though they contain exactly the same Perfect verb form – consisting of an auxiliary *have* plus a participle *entered*:

- (5) a. The bear has entered this park
b. Bears have entered this park
c. Bears have entered parks
d. Mechkata e vlyazla v tozi park
'The bear has entered this park'

Compare now Bulgarian (5d). It is a perfective sentence which semantically perfectly matches English (5a) and carries a resultative value. But what is this resultative value due to? Is it due to the Perfect verb form *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’? No. Not at all. It is **solely and only** due to the perfectivity of the verb *vlyaza* ‘to enter’. The widespread and heavily prevailing explanation by Bulgarianists that sentences such as (5d) are perfective and hence resultative because periphrastic Perfect verb forms such as *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’ trigger resultativity is mind-boggling in its extreme inadequacy. The Perfect verb form *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’ is resultative **not because it is a Perfect verb form** but because the initial underlying expression (sentence) *Mechkata vlezhe* ‘The bear entered’ is perfective, the perfectivity arising from the perfectivity of the verb *vlyaza* ‘to enter’.

There is another reason why the widely prevailing explanation of sentence (5d) is inadequate. If sentence (5d) were resultative because of the resultativity of the verb form *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’, this would mean that the resultativity of the perfective verb *vlyaza* ‘to enter’ must be, so to say, erased first, and then the resultativity of the verb form *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’ is to be superimposed onto a, so to say, “de-perfectivized” expression *e vlyazla* ‘has entered’. And, finally, the latter becomes resultative because the Perfect is, allegedly, resultative. To assume that such a complex and bizarre procedure takes place in the human brain and in language in general (language being a product of the human brain) would be sheer absurdity.

The grossly infelicitous assertion that the Perfect has “resultative semantics” is also easily reduced to pieces by analyses of huge numbers of other sentences in many languages featuring Perfect forms and containing participles encoding Vendlerian states or activities – which are inherently non-bounded, hence non-resultative. Sentences of this kind are Bulgarian (6a) and English (6b) below. Contained in (6a) are Perfect verb forms obtained from past participles that are ambivalent, i.e., unmarked for Aorist or Imperfect. However, they obviously effectuate states or activities, which means non-boundedness – carried by the lexical semantics of the participles. Note that Vendlerian states and activities are primarily effectuated by Perfect verb forms obtained from Imperfect participles (abbreviated PERFECT-IMPFV-PART), as in (6c) and (6d):

- (6) a. Sasedat vinagi e obichal/haresval/predpochital/obozhaval bira
‘The neighbor has always loved/liked/preferred/adored beer’
b. The neighbor has always loved/liked/preferred/adored beer
c. Drevnite gartsi sa se bieli^{PERFECT-IMPFV-PART} vav falangova formatsiya
(literally) The Ancient Greeks have fought in a phalanx formation
‘Ancient Greeks fought in a phalanx formation’
d. Protestirashtite sa noseli^{PERFECT-IMPFV-PART} plakati protiv voynata
(literally) The protesters have carried slogans against the war
‘Protesters carried slogans against the war’

In Bulgarian (6a), the imperfective verb *obicham* ‘to love’, encoding a Vendlerian state, is used in the form of a participle (along with the other verbs): *obichal* ‘loved’, unmarked for Aorist or Imperfect. Does it or any of the other verbs in (6a) generate “resultativeness”? Not at all. Not in the least. And does the Vendlerian state in the

English phrases *love beer* and *drink beer* generate “resultativeness”? Not at all. Not in the least. From the very first moment the speaker tasted beer to the very present moment, right now, the speaker loved (preferred, etc.) the foamy drink equally strongly and drank it – in all the relevant moments in the past, during the whole period referred to. There is ***no trace whatsoever*** at the present moment of some “result” of the speaker’s love, preference etc. for beer or of his habit of drinking beer. This is valid for the Bulgarian sentence(s) in (6a) as well as for the English sentence(s) and provides super solid proof for the thesis that ***“resultativeness” cannot be “a meaning”*** – whether central or peripheral – of the Perfect verb form.

The examples (6), which structurally and semantically replicate innumerable other similar English and Bulgarian sentences, demonstrate in a crystal-clear manner the sweeping and absolutely correct generalization that the “semantics” of the Perfect ***can by no means*** depend on grammatical and/or semantic characteristics of particular types of verbs, verb phrases, clauses or sentences accompanying a Perfect verb form. If a grammeme such as the Perfect, or any other for that matter, must have “semantics” in order to fulfil the requirements of grammars or other grammatical descriptions, or of grammarians, ***this semantics must be its own***. It cannot be derivable from the semantics or the grammatical features of the auxiliary or of the main verb in the form of a participle – or from the meaning of some phrases or of the sentence as a whole. This is an obvious truth that the investigators of the Perfect failed to grasp in the course of decades, and the reason for their failure is that they never took the pains to learn what exactly compositional aspect is. See an analysis of the incessant worldwide misconceptualization of compositional aspect in Kabakčiev (2025).

The other major wrong assertion about the Perfect, similar to the previous one, is that it manifests “current relevance” as its “meaning”. This one again completely ***fails to hold water***. In sentences such as (6a) and (6b) above, what is the “current relevance” of the circumstance that the speaker loved (or preferred etc.) or drank beer in the past? Is there any trace whatsoever of “current relevance”? No. A sentence such as (6a) refers to a period from an unknown point in the past to the present moment, and there is neither some “consequence”, nor some “relevance” for the present moment. Indeed, there are sentences with Perfect verb forms that imply relevance for the present moment; (5a) and (5b) above are such sentences. But, again, the “current relevance” here is a result of the semantics of the sentence as a whole, and there is no “current relevance” triggered by some “semantics” of the Perfect verb form itself. Bottom line:

the Perfect does not possess any “semantics” of its own!

It exercises structural functions and what is persistently claimed by some researchers to be the “semantics of the Perfect” is actually some phenomena related to the semantics of words and phrases in the sentence or in the sentence as a whole, or of grammatical meanings of certain expressions – and not of the Perfect verb form itself.

Notes on “The State of the Art”: Two Most Recent Studies on the Perfect

Today there are authors of grammatical writings who, unlike the researchers who defined the perfect as “a puzzle”, “a riddle” or “a mystery”, do not regard the Perfect as mysterious. Two brand-new publications describe the Perfect as having a standard meaning – or meanings. The first one is a book, on English data mainly (Yao 2024) – though otherwise it views the Perfect as a phenomenon with a large cross-language presence. The second one is an article (Kapkan 2025) which purports to describe the Perfect in Lithuanian and Bulgarian. These two publications continue a tradition of viewing the Perfect as an expedient of some “standard semantic meaning” (or meanings), contrary to the theses in the present paper and in the two articles on the Perfect in this issue. In other words, there continues to exist a tradition in linguistics worldwide of fruitless exploration of a thesis that sidesteps the criticism raised by researchers such as Moens and others for whom the Perfect is a puzzle, riddle and mystery. This tradition reflects the inability of many linguists to explain the Perfect. It is worth noting that the researchers who interpret the Perfect as a conglomeration of meanings do not pay *any* attention whatsoever to the argumentation of the other researchers, who view the Perfect as a conundrum.

Yao’s (2024) book attempts to describe what the author calls the “various meanings of the Perfect”, mostly on English data and in as many ways as possible, following the understanding of the author. “Classes of meanings” of the Perfect, scrupulously detailed, are built and re-built; lengthy reasoning on the “semantics of the Perfect” is performed; elaborate statistical methods are figured out and devotedly employed (Yao 2024: Chapter 8). The underlying conviction here is that the validity of a particular meaning of a particular grammeme in a language necessarily depends on its prevalence in real-world use.

In a similar approach, Kapkan (2025) insists that the essence of the Perfect is represented by a “full spectrum of semantic functions”. This paper, that ought to be dealing on an equal footing with the Perfect in two languages, Lithuanian and Bulgarian – related but not very closely, manifests insufficient knowledge of the Bulgarianist linguistic literature and, as a result, of the extremely and notoriously complex grammatical structure of the Bulgarian verb. With minor exceptions, the Bulgarian bibliography is from the previous century, whereby certain theses in the sources are incorrect in their interpretations of the Perfect. The major one concerns a drastically wrong assertion by many Bulgarianists – who even form a majority, that Perfects in Bulgarian are not obtained from Imperfect participles (see, chronologically, Andrejczin 1944; Andrejczin et al. 1977; Maslov 1982; Bulgarian Academy grammar 1983; Georgiev 1991; Marovska 2005; Kutsarov 2007; Nitsolova 2008; Pashov 2013 – inter alia). Note that another group of Bulgarianists, smaller, maintains precisely the opposite: Bulgarian perfects *are* formed from Imperfect participles (again chronologically, see Mladenov 1927; Kostov 1939; Popov 1941; Lindstedt 1985; Penchev 1987; Rå Hauge 1999; Todorova 2010; Kabakčiev 2022a). The latter group listed here represents – in all probability – “all the dissidents”.

It becomes imperative therefore, to check out the author’s position on how exactly the Bulgarian Perfect is formed. Kapkan (2025: 1) states that it is obtained from “the present tense form of the verb meaning ‘to be’ – functioning as an auxiliary

[...] and a past active participle of a lexical verb”. This means that the author does not know that Bulgarian *does not have a single past active participle*, unlike all the other Slavic languages. It features *two participles* – and they differ radically, not only semantically but also overtly, formally, morphologically, in a consistent and fully systematic way: Aorist participles, Imperfect participles.

It is a serious failure if a linguist cannot explain how the Bulgarian Perfect is obtained, given that participles are the major formation device for the Perfect.⁶ Ultimately, this means that this researcher has a wrong idea of what a Bulgarian Perfect is, starting from the very basic point of view, of its formation. Whether the Bulgarian Perfect is obtained from Aorist participles only or also from Imperfect participles, makes *a world of difference* in its general features and semantico-syntactic behavior. In the former case, if obtained from Aorist participles only, the Bulgarian Perfect would be heavily restricted and capable of effectuating only accomplishments, achievements and episodes. In the latter case, with Imperfect participles, the Bulgarian Perfect is already capable of effectuating Vendlerian states and activities – which means *all Vendlerian situations, with no restrictions*.

It is worth emphasizing that, in cases when linguists think that Bulgarian Imperfect participles are not used to form perfects, they unquestionably oblige themselves to explain *why* Imperfect participles are not used to form perfects. But the fact – whether it must be regarded as disastrous or ridiculous – is that the Bulgarian grammars listed above do not at all explain *why* Imperfect participles do not form perfects. *They offer no argumentation* for this based on a semantic analysis of the use of Aorist vs Imperfect participles in Perfect verb forms (see the issue in Kabakčiev 2017: 307–310; 2022a, 2024). Finally, given that there is such a drastically wrong tradition in the majority of Bulgarian grammars and linguistic writings maintaining that Imperfect participles do not form perfects (it occurred also for historical and political reasons, see Kabakčiev 2024), this does not mean that a researcher today is free to sidestep the problem due to ignorance of its existence.

Kapkan’s paper also misses – or has purposefully ignored – the circumstance that within a decade already the Bulgarian Perfect, claimed by the author to be “semantically analysed”, has received an interpretation (Kabakčiev 2017; 2018; 2020; 2022b) that is radically different from publications finding some “universal” or “near-universal” meaning(s) of the Perfect.

The idea that some “meaning” of the Perfect can be found across languages, was recently analysed and subjected to doubt also by Dahl (2022). But, whatever the analyses of the Perfect in certain publications, the two papers in this issue by Kutsarova and Dimitrova propose such an interpretation of the Perfect in Bulgarian in which it is defined as lacking own semantics, on the one hand. And, on the other, its existence is explained, following Kabakčiev (2018, 2020, 2022b), as due to the necessity to serve three extremely significant structural language functions: (i) elimination of the speaker ghosting effect; (ii) provision of a grammatical verb form encoding non-witnessing and cancellability; (iii) grammaticalization of certain types of sentences, particularly in the ‘*X said that* [content of *that*]’ schema and in some

⁶If statistics is employed, it will show that Imperfect participles constitute an enormous lexical (lexico-grammatical) class.

similar semantico-syntactic schemata. Apart from Bulgarian, these three functions are also valid for Turkish, as shown in Kutsarova's paper in this issue, see the following section.

Notes on the “Perfect Issue” on Turkish Data: Cancellability, Witnessing vs Non-witnessing, Speaker ghosting, Grammaticalization of Certain Types of Sentences

The cancellability feature of the Perfect in Bulgarian and some other languages, including English, was revealed and discussed extensively some years ago (Kabakčiev 2018, 2020, 2022b). Soon after its discovery in Bulgarian – along with speaker ghosting, it was also found on Montenegrin data, by Bulatović (2018). In this issue of AJP, Dimitrova for Bulgarian and Kutsarova for both Bulgarian and Turkish confirm that the Perfect must unreservedly be regarded as a device for eliminating speaker ghosting, for grammaticalizing certain types of sentences and for effectuating cancellability; by “Perfect” in Turkish, the *-miş* verb forms are meant. In both Turkish and Bulgarian, the relevant devices are grammaticalized. As for the features cancellability and non-witnessing of the Perfect, they are valid for Greek and English too. But in these two languages, and hence, obviously, in many other, they are *not grammaticalized*.

In her analysis of Turkish, a language she is a native speaker of – not only a specialist in, Kutsarova (2026) does not simply argue, she *definitively proves* that the verb forms of the *-miş* type, widely recognized in Turkology as corresponding to Perfect verb forms in European languages, are devices serving the need for grammaticalization of certain types of sentences exactly in the same way as described for Bulgarian in Kabakčiev (2018: 229–232) and in Dimitrova's paper here. Kutsarova explains that in Turkish the situation in (7a) below is represented through the *-DI* verb form, *temizledi* ‘cleaned’, as *witnessed* by the speaker. Conversely, in (7b) it is represented through the *-miş* form *temizlemiş* ‘has cleaned’ as *not witnessed* by the speaker:

- (7) a. Berna odasını temizledi [grammatically witnessed]
 ‘Berna cleaned her room’
 b. Berna odasını temizlemiş [grammatically non-witnessed]
 ‘Berna has cleaned her room’

This assertion is, of course, not new and is present in most Turkish grammars. But, given that the regularity turns out to be identical in Turkish and Bulgarian, the following can be argued in favor of the existence of a cross-language interdependence. If a certain isolated language manifests a grammatical feature of this kind, it might perhaps be regarded as accidental. But if two genealogically different languages share the same grammatical and semantic feature and the same structural regularity, as in this case Bulgarian and Turkish, such a circumstance cannot be waived as theoretically insignificant or as occurring at random in the two languages separately. Common sense suggests that the emergence of the two types of verb forms, the *-DI* type and the *-miş* type, is nothing else but a product of the human brain – language, which

generates certain grammatical entities that are sometimes very specific (and even rare and exotic, as in this case) for providing the necessary correct balance in the overall grammatical structure of a language.

Now the discussion of the Turkish witnessed *-DI* verb forms vis-à-vis the non-witnessed *-miş* verb forms is to continue with the intriguing regularity termed speaker ghosting (Kabakčiev 2018) and revealed by Kutsarova as existing also in Turkish after its discovery in Bulgarian and later in Montenegrin. Obviously, Turkish sentences of type (7), realizing grammatically the contrast between witnessing and non-witnessing, are innumerable. This, in turn, explains why sentences such as (8a) and (8b) below, again constructed by Kutsarova, are important in terms of the structural regularities and specificities of Turkish. The regularities replicate those in Bulgarian described in Kabakčiev (2018: 229–232) as manifestations of the phenomenon of speaker ghosting – eliminated in the ‘*X said that* [content of *that*]’ schema through the use of Perfect verb forms. The elimination of non-grammaticality is illustrated here by the sentences (8c) and (8d) – Bulgarian translation equivalents of Turkish (8a) and (8b):

- (8) a. *Annem söyledi ki kardeşimi bir inek tekmeledi
‘My mother said that a cow kicked my brother’
b. Annem söyledi ki kardeşimi inek tekmelemiş
(literally) ‘My mother said that a cow has kicked my brother’
c. *Mayka mi kaza_{AOR}, che krava ritna_{AOR} brat mi
‘My mother said that a cow kicked my brother’
d. Mayka mi kaza_{AOR}, che krava e ritnal_{PERFECT} brat mi
(literally) ‘My mother said that a cow has kicked my brother’.

The non-grammatical versions of the sentences – in both Turkish and Bulgarian, manifest the speaker ghosting phenomenon. It consists in the presence of two speakers in a single sentence. These two speakers make two contradictory assertions, described in detail in Kabakčiev (2018). In (8a), the first speaker, producing the phrase *annem söyledi* ‘my mother said’, is contradicted by the second speaker, who produces the phrase *kardeşimi bir inek tekmeledi* ‘a cow kicked my brother’. The contradiction consists in the following. When someone reports somebody’s (a speaker’s) assertion, as in the case of *annem söyledi* ‘my mother said’, this assertion is **either true or untrue** by its very nature. But in (6a) a second speaker appears, who asserts in the dependent clause that s/he personally witnessed that a cow kicked his/her brother – using the witnessed form *tekmeledi* ‘kicked’. The second assertion compromises the requirement that what the mother said must be understood as either true or untrue. Hence, sentence (7a) incorporates not one speaker, but two speakers who, furthermore, contradict each other. One of these speakers is a ghost speaker, i.e., a fake, false speaker, and a sentence containing two speakers contradicting each other is perceived by the native speaker of the language as non-grammatical.⁷ Kutsarova’s discovery of the speaker

⁷But the intriguing thing here is that while native speakers immediately recognize the non-grammaticality of such sentences, they are at the same time totally unable to explain what the non-grammaticality is due to.

ghosting phenomenon in Turkish and of the cancellability of the *-miş* forms represents a finding that ought to be – sooner or later – recorded in Turkish grammars.

Notes on Witnessing and Non-witnessing in Greek

In her article in this volume, Dimitrova – native speaker of Greek and Bulgarian and specialist in both languages, analyses Greek data to reach conclusions that confirm the conjecture in Kabakčiev (2022b: 395): Greek probably belongs to those languages in which the Perfect is employed in such a way that it is non-witnessed and hence cancelable, although in these languages the non-witnessed value is only signalled, and not by default.⁸ Non-witnessing of the Perfect in Greek and in English, although not grammaticalized, is fixed and Perfect verb phrases cannot be read as witnessed, in contrast to languages like Montenegrin, Serbian, German, where this is not only possible but a standard interpretation. The speaker ghosting phenomenon observed in Bulgarian does not exist in Greek, as illustrated by Dimitrova’s sentences (9) below. The Bulgarian sentence (3b) above, equivalent to English *Peter said that Maria arrived*, is non-grammatical. But in Greek it is not, compare the structurally identical correct Greek sentence (9a) – because witnessing and non-witnessing in Greek are not grammaticalized, in contrast to Bulgarian and Turkish:

- (9) a. O Manólis eípe_{AOR} óti i Eiríni égrapse_{AOR} tin istoría
 ‘Manolis said that Irini wrote the story’
 b. O Manólis eípe_{AOR} óti i Eiríni échei grápse_{PERFECT} tin istoría
 (literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini has written the story’

What is explicated by default in Greek is the witnessed value in Aorist and Imperfect verb forms, as manifested in Dimitrova’s examples (10a) and (10b) below: isolated sentences in which the speaker is normally taken to have witnessed the situations. However, in (10c) and (10d), where these two verb forms – Aorist and Imperfect respectively, are placed in the second part of the ‘*X said that* [content of *that*]’ semantico-syntactic schema, what ensues is that they do not render the sentences non-grammatical – as this happens in Bulgarian and Turkish, but are perceived as non-witnessed. This happens because **the non-witnessed value is forced onto them** by the main clause in the ‘*X said that* [content of *that*]’ semantico-syntactic schema – as explained in Kabakčiev (2018) on Bulgarian data:

⁸When a grammatical value is signaled by default, this means that the relevant grammeme features it nominally but can lose it under the impact of neighboring sentences, the general context, etc. For example, English sentences such as (5c) above, *Bears have entered this park*, are imperfective by default due to the non-boundedness of the subject-NP triggering non-bounded iterativity: “bear after bear after bear”. However, this sentence may also refer to a one-off event – of a group of bears entering the park only once. This is a case of perfectivity and the so-called “silent some” – where *Bears have entered this park* actually means ‘Some bears have entered this park’ and not ‘Bear after bear after bear have entered this park’. Compare in the discussion of Shinian’s paper above the clash between compositional aspect rules and possible pragmatic interferences.

- (10) a. Oi kalesménoi éftasan_{AORIST}
 ‘The guests arrived’
 b. Oi kalesménoi éftanan_{IMPERFECT}
 ‘The guests were arriving’
 c. O X eípe_{AOR} óti oi kalesménoi éftasan_{AOR}
 ‘X said that the guests arrived’
 d. O X eípe_{AOR} óti oi kalesménoi éftanan_{IMPERFECT}
 ‘X said that the guests were arriving’

With her examples (9) and (10) and their analyses, Dimitrova confirms the conjecture in Kabakčiev (2022b: 395) that Greek and English share these important features related to witnessing and non-witnessing and that Greek generally replicates English in the use of Perfect and preterit verb forms.

Witnessing and Non-witnessing: A Summary

Witnessing and non-witnessing are semantic values of certain TAM verb forms. The phenomenon does not appear to be frequent across languages, at least among the well-described ones – but more research is certainly needed for the clarification of this issue. In the geographic region analysed in the two papers here, Eastern Europe, it is firmly established for Bulgarian and Turkish, languages in the Balkanssprachbund. It seems to be also present in Georgian, a language in the nearby frontal area of Asia Minor. In the two papers here dealing with witnessing and non-witnessing, the contrast between the two types of forms is defined as grammaticalized in Bulgarian and Turkish and non-grammaticalized in Greek and other languages, including English. Non-witnessing in Turkish is manifested by *-miş* verb forms, witnessing by *-DI* verb forms. In Bulgarian, witnessing is represented by Aorist and Imperfect verb forms; non-witnessing, manifested predominantly by third person forms, is represented mainly by the Perfect and also by renarrative forms. It must be emphasized that the two contrasting types in Bulgarian and Turkish *exist simultaneously, in parallel to one another*: every witnessed form is counterposed to a non-witnessed one, and vice versa, every non-witnessed form is counterposed to a witnessed one. As already established, these two functions, witnessing and non-witnessing, hold for Bulgarian and Turkish but they are also valid for English (Kabakčiev 2020, 2022b). This is confirmed in the present issue for Greek by Dimitrova and for Turkish by Kutsarova, but in two different ways: witnessing and non-witnessing are grammaticalized in Bulgarian and Turkish, non-grammaticalized in Greek and English.⁹

⁹Some of the treatment of non-witnessing in Dimitrova’s paper remains as a task for future research. For example, her assertions that the Perfect is an exponent of cancellability “in some cases” only and that the Plusquamperfect is witnessed do not appear reasonable to me – but the analysis will require some time and effort.

Conclusive Remarks

From the organizational point of view, the two TAM Special Sessions held within the two Annual International Conference on Languages and Linguistics of Atiner in 2024 and 2025 can be hailed as a success in that the presentations explored a specific linguistic topic, “TAM In and Across Languages” – which is as complex and difficult as it is intricate and thought-provoking. From the strictly scientific point of view, the two Special Sessions in 2024 and 2025 can also be considered a success. In 2024 there were two presentations dealing with aspect and tense in two very interesting languages, Portuguese and Arabic, but they, unfortunately, remained unpublished – because manuscripts for publication were not submitted by the authors. Two researchers took part in each of the two Special Sessions (July 2024 and July 2025): Shinian Wu and Sema Kutsarova, who produced four very interesting papers, already published in AJP. Another two researchers, Hysnie Haxhillari and Desislava Dimitrova, delivered presentations in 2024 and 2025, respectively, which turned into articles, also published: Haxhillari’s in AJP 11/4 (Haxhillari 2024), Dimitrova’s in the present volume.

The third “TAM In and Across Languages” Special Session is to be held within the 19th Annual International Conference on Languages & Linguistics, 6-10 July 2026, Athens – and the readers here are kindly asked to consider this announcement as a call for papers.

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