

The Greek Present Perfect as an Exponent of Cancellability

*By Desislava Dimitrova**

This paper offers an analysis of a proposal made in some recent publications according to which the present perfect verb form in several modern Indo-European languages must be regarded as an exponent of cancellability in some cases¹. The proposal is accompanied by a conjecture that while in some languages, viz., Bulgarian, the present perfect features cancellability as a value encoded in strictly grammatical terms, in other languages, particularly Modern Greek and English, cancellability is not encoded but only indirectly signaled, yet it remains an inherent value of the present perfect. The conjecture is analyzed on the basis of data from Modern Greek, Bulgarian and English and is found to correspond to the characteristics of the Greek language in structural and semantic terms.

Keywords: *present perfect; cancellability; witnessedness; Modern Greek; Bulgarian; English*

Methods of Study. Aims of the Investigation

The methodological framework of the study integrates descriptive, comparative, and deductive approaches. The descriptive component accounts for the specific features of the perfect and other verb forms. The comparative component examines primarily Greek and Bulgarian, with occasional reference to English where necessary for the formulation of conclusions. The deductive approach is applied to the analysis of material drawn from Greek.

On the Theoretical Framework employed

The aim of this study is to determine the function of the Present Perfect in Modern Greek, with particular emphasis on its semantic and functional distinction from the Aorist. The analysis is grounded in Kabakčiev's (2019) concept of the 'ghost speaker', which is identified through the examination of Bulgarian sentences fitting the semantic-syntactic schema '*X said that* [content of *that*],' where the subordinate clause may contain verb forms from all nine tenses. In applying this framework, the study integrates Greek temporal forms into the second part of Kabakčiev's schema in order to trace the specific features of Greek verb forms, with special attention to the Present Perfect. According to Kabakčiev (2019), five of the nine Bulgarian verb forms within the semantic-syntactic schema are ungrammatical

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¹The notion of cancellability itself is borrowed from Grice's (1975/1989) seminal essay and is assigned a specific meaning related to the proposition of a sentence: "non-cancellable content represents a state of affairs which is only true", "cancellable content is a state of affairs viewed as either true or not true" (Kabakčiev 2022: 388).

(the Aorist, the Imperfect, the Pluperfect, the Future in the Past, and the Future Perfect in the Past), while four are grammatical (the Present, the Present Perfect, the Future, and the Future Perfect). In the present study, the schema is further refined by including both perfective and imperfective verb forms:

- (1) a. *Manolis kaza, che Irini **napisa/pisa** razkaza (aorist, perfective/imperfective)
 b. *Manolis kaza, che Irini **napisheshe/pisheshe** razkaza (imperfekt,² perfective/imperfective)
 c. *Manolis kaza, che Irini **beshe napisala/beshe pisala** razkaza. (pluskvamperfekt, perfective/imperfective)
 d. *Manolis kaza, che Irini **shteshe da napishe/shteshe da pishe** razkaza. (futurum preteriti, perfective/imperfective)
 e. *Manolis kaza, che Irini **shteshe da e napisala/shteshe da e pisala** razkaza (futurum exaktum preteriti, perfective/imperfective)
 f. Manolis kaza, che Irini **e napisala/ e pisala** razkaza. (perfect, perfective/imperfective)
 g. Manolis kaza, che Irini **shte napishe/shte pishe** razkaza (futurum, perfective/imperfective)
 h. Manolis kaza, che Irini **shte e napisala/shte e pisala** razkaza (futurum ekzaktum, perfective/ imperfective)
 i. Manolis kaza, che Irini **pishe/ *napishe** razkaza. (presens, perfective/imperfective)

I may point to yet another instance of ungrammaticality – specifically, in constructions where a perfective verb appears in the present tense within a *che*-clause (*‘that clause’*). In such cases, grammaticality is determined solely by the aspect of the verb. Cf.:

- (2) a. Petar said that Maria is arriving (*‘Petar kaza, che Maria pristiga’*) (present tense, imperfective)
 b. *Petar said that Maria arrive (*‘Petar kaza, che Maria pristigne’*) (*non-actual present, perfective aspect)

A comparable phenomenon is observed in Greek. Perfective aspect verbs are not used independently in a sentence without particles such as *ας* ‘let’ or *να* ‘to’. This is why forms like *ας γράψω* ‘let me write’ and *να γράψω* ‘to write’ are treated as subjunctive mood forms (*υποτακτική έγκλιση*) rather than present tense forms in traditional Greek grammars.

Analyzed on Bulgarian data, propositions in sentences with present perfects are thus either true or not true and, conversely, propositions in sentences with preterits are read by the hearer as only true, which means that they are non-cancellable. To give an example, a sentence with a perfect like (1f) above

²I use the Latin names of the terms (including spelling) for verb tenses (except for the term aorist). It cannot be replaced by the term preterit, as there are languages in which there is no distinction between aorist and imperfect.

demonstrates cancellable content: Irini may have written the story or, in other words, in principle, it is either written or not written.³ A present perfect verb form such as *e napisala* in (1f) is non-witnessed and cancellable, and the latter means that the proposition is either true or not true. This arises by virtue of its nature – the information is obtained from third parties or is based on an inference, hence its truthfulness is not guaranteed (Kabakčiev 2022). Conversely, sentences such as (1a), (1b) with an aorist or an imperfect demonstrate non-cancellable content: Irini did write the story and the speaker must be believed that Irini has written the story. A witnessed verb form is non-cancellable. Sentences (1a), (1b) demonstrate the use of a witnessed verb form, non-cancellable. The non-grammaticality in sentences of this type had been noted in Bulgarian linguistics (Ivančev 1976: 356, Lindstedt 1985: 90, Nitsolova 2008: 284). However, it was thought to arise solely under the impact of *verba dicendi* (such as *said*) and had remained totally unexplained up to the discovery of the speaker ghosting phenomenon (Kabakčiev 2018).

Speaker ghosting was soon found to be present in Montenegrin too (Bulatović 2018), a closely related language where the dependent clause in the *X said* [content of *that*] semantico-syntactic schema again bans the use of a non-cancellable form (*da stiže* ‘arrived’) and requires a perfect form (*da je stigao* ‘to have arrived’):

- (3) a. Džon reče da je stigao (perfekt)
 (lit.) ‘John said he has arrived’
 b. *Džon reče da stiže (aorist)
 ‘John said he arrived’

According to Kabakčiev, the ungrammaticality in examples with the aorist and imperfect – both witnessed forms – is due to the “ghost speaker” phenomenon. He argues that the ungrammaticality of the *futurum preteriti* and *plusquamperfect* stems from the fact that these verb forms carry non-cancellability content, rather than from their witnessed nature. While I do have certain reservations here, which I will outline further below, I fully agree that, from a semantic perspective, these forms – as well as the aorist and imperfect – convey non-cancellability content. Kabakčiev is notably the first Bulgarian linguist to draw attention to ungrammatical sentences of this kind, and he provides a detailed explanation of their ungrammaticality. My disagreement lies in his classification of these forms as non-witnessed. In a very recent study focused on witnessedness in Bulgarian, V. Stamenov analyzes and describes the paradigm of witnessed verb forms, which includes both the *plusquamperfect* and the *futurum preteriti* (Stamenov 2025).

The meaning of witnessedness in the Bulgarian language is grammaticalized, with the formal marker being the morpheme *-h/-she* (*-x/-ue*), a marker absent only in the aorist forms for the 2nd and 3rd person singular, although V. Stamenov (2025) provides arguments for this phenomenon. In five of the nine indicative tense forms – *pisaH*, *pisa*, *pisa* (aorist), *pisheH*, *pisheSHE* (imperfect), *byaH pisa*, *beSHE pisa* (*pluskvamperfect*), *shtyaH da pisha*, *shteSHE da pishe* (*futurum preteriti*),

³Although in pragmatic terms this sentence is normally interpreted as meaning that Irini has written the story.

shtyaH da sŭm pisal, shteSHE da e pisal (futurum exaktum preteriti). On the other hand, “all grammatical formations that do not contain the marker *-ch/-she-* are part of the unmarked grammeme of non-witnessedness, which forms a privative opposition with the grammeme of witnessedness” (Stamenov 2025: 234).

I do not agree with authors who claim that the morphemes *-ch/-sche* (e.g., Pashov) are markers of the aorist and imperfect tenses. The formal markers of the aorist are the morphemes positioned before *-x/-ue*, and the same applies to the formal markers of the imperfect. Cf.: *chet-O-h* and *chet-YA-h*, *chist-I-h* and *chist-E-h* (Kutsarov 2007). In third-conjugation verbs, the thematic vowel *-a/-ya* is retained across all verb forms (*gled-a-m*, *gled-a-sh*, *gled-a* – present tense; *gled-a-h*, *gled-a* – aorist; *gled-a-h*, *gled-a-she* – imperfect), see Dimitrova (2020).

As for the witnessed forms and their classification not under mood but rather under a category related to the utterance (unlike mood, which reflects the speaker’s attitude toward the action) (Kutsarov 2022; Stamenov 2025), I will discuss this issue in a future study.

My position is that it is precisely the grammaticalized witnessedness in Bulgarian (in the five tense forms – aorist, imperfect, plusquamperfect, futurum preteriti, futurum ekzaktum preteriti), whose verbal forms are characterized by the differential feature of “non-cancellable content,” as established by Kabakčiev, that causes the manifestation of ungrammaticality in sentences of the type *X said that* (the content of the *che*-clause includes one of the five witnessed forms).

Stamenov aptly observes that “when the speaker has not witnessed the reported information, they cannot construct their narrative solely through non-renarrative and non-inferential forms of the aorist-imperfect type” (Stamenov 2025: 233).

Chakarova also rightly notes that Bulgarian “possesses greater possibilities than other (including related) languages in the sphere of narrativity, especially with regard to the realization of accounts of past events” (Chakarova 2008: 147). She identifies four narrative subsystems, with the witnessed forms (aorist, imperfect, pluperfect, future-in-the-past, and future-exact-in-the-past) constituting the so-called memory plane, while the L-forms like *hodil e*, *hodel e*, *hodel* are distributed across the other three narrative planes. In the plane of immediacy falls the perfect, although it is not the main tense form (for examples, see Chakarova 2025: 164). In the plane of constation – the inferential (Bulgarian *konkluziv*), and in the plane of renarration – the renarrative.

The Greek non-witnessed Forms as Exponents of the Feature Cancellability

Grammaticalized witnessedness in Bulgarian can also be demonstrated on an interlinguistic level. In Greek, grammaticalized witnessed forms are absent, which allows all tense forms to be used in constructions of the type “*X said that* [content of the *that*-clause],” with the resulting sentences being grammatically correct. The only exception is the present tense with an aorist (perfective) stem (4k), where ungrammaticality arises due to a different circumstance that we have already mentioned. See the examples:

- (4) a. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **égrapse** tin istoría (aorist, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **wrote** the story’
- b. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **échei grápsei** tin istoría. (perfect, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **has written** the story’
- c. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **eíche grápsei** tin istoría. (pluskvamperfect, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **had written** the story’
- d. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **égrafe** tin istoría (imperfect, imperfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **was writing** the story’
- e. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **tha grápsei** tin istoría (futur, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **will write** the story’
- f. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **tha gráfei** tin istoría (future, imperfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **will write** the story’
- g. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **tha égrafe** tin istoría (futurum preteriti, imperfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **would write** the story’
- h. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **tha échei grápsei** tin istoría (futurum exactum, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **will have written** the story’
- i. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **tha eíche grápsei** tin istoría (futurum exactum preteriti, perfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **would write written** the story’
- j. O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **gráfei** tin istoría (presens, imperfective)
(literally) ‘Manolis said that Irini **writes** the story’
- k. *O Manólis eípe óti i Eiríni **grápsei** tin istoría (presens, perfective)

The last example (4k) is impossible to translate literally due to the lack of verb aspect in English. *Tha grápsei* (futurim, perfective) and *tha gráfei* (futurum, imperfective) are translated literally the same way again due to the lack of verbal aspect, see (4e), (4f). The aspectual difference could be conveyed compositionally.

Concepts of the Present Perfect in English, Bulgarian and Greek Grammar

Let us see how researchers interpret the perfect forms. The semantics that Comrie attributes to the English Present Perfect can, in general terms, be summarized as “the perfect indicates the continuing significance of a previous situation” (Comrie 1985: 52). Analyzing the Present Perfect and the Preterit in Old English, researchers point out that the Present Perfect, formed with *be* or *have*, “is regarded more specifically as a perfective.” They then add, however, that “in Old English the perfective aspect can just as well be expressed by simple preterit forms” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 79; cited in Elsness 1985: 245).

In English, the Present Perfect is usually associated with the following uses:

- Perfect of result (also called static perfect);
- Experiential (or existential) perfect;
- Perfect of persistent situation;
- Perfect of recent past (also called “hot news” perfect) (Dahl 1985: 132).

It is worth noting that the designation of these meanings as “types of perfect” refers to overlapping levels of use, in which semantic and functional categories are not strictly distinguished but rather intersect. Dahl emphasizes that these are in fact types of uses of the perfect (Dahl 1985: 133). According to McCoard (1976), the meanings associated with perfect forms (*have + Ved*) fall into four categories:

- a) current relevance (CR)
- b) indefinite past (ID)
- c) extended now (XN)
- d) emended past (EB) (McCoard 1976: 5).

Although they use the terms anterior/perfect (meaning “previous”) to denote perfect semantics, the authors of *The Evolution of Grammar* arrive at a similar definition: “a past action that is relevant to the situation” (Bybee et al. 1994: 62). As the basic semantics of the perfect, Fenn highlights the common feature present in all definitions of the Present Perfect, namely, its relevance to the present moment (Fenn 1987: 214).

Aikhenvald points out that in Georgian the traditional name for the perfect is “first evidential.” Its forms are used when the speaker reports a past action not directly witnessed but inferred on the basis of some present result, or when the action is conveyed in the words of another informant (Aikhenvald 2004: 112).

A large majority of Bulgarian linguists consider the perfect tense to be characterized by resultativeness (Pashov 1976, Gerdzhikov 1973, Kutsarov 2007). According to Marovska, however, the Bulgarian perfect expresses qualitative rather than resultative semantics (Marovska 2003: 53). She also allows for a modal interpretation of the perfect in a broad sense, namely, that the speaker expresses his or her assessment “of the verbal subject as a doer” (ibid.). Marovska points out that for the Bulgarian language it is of essential importance that “the mechanism formally connected with the perfect tense for transforming witnessed taxis forms into distant ones (cf.: for example *beshe chel* > *bil e chel* ‘he had read’ > ‘he is said to have read’; *shteshe da chete* > *shtyal e da chete* ‘he would read’ > ‘he is said to have been about to read’, etc.). As a result of this, the distant and renarrative paradigms are formed” (Marovska 2013: 270). It should be clarified that within the distant paradigm the author includes inferential forms such as *hodel e* (‘he is said to have been going’), as well as forms such as *hodil e* (‘he is said to have been’, called “distant aorist”), which formally coincide with the indicative perfect. She adds that, unlike the indicative perfect, the distant aorist forms denote an action from a past situation “in which the speaker did not consciously participate and therefore refers to it in a distant way” (Marovska 2013: 271). Let us see what is meant by this, using examples:

- (5) a. Predi tri godini, prez septemvri, Ivan **hodi** (aorist) v Atina na izlozhba
‘Three years ago, in September, Ivan **went** (aorist in Bulgarian sentence)
to Athens to an exhibition’

From the witnessed form the transition to the distant one can be observed in the following example:

- (5) b. Petar kaza, che predi tri godini, prez septemvri, Ivan **e hodil** (distanten aorist) v Atina na izlozhba
‘Petar said that three years ago, in September, Ivan **had been** (distant aorist in Bulgarian sentence) to Athens to an exhibition’
c. Ivan **e hodil** v Atina na ekskurziya. (*hodil e* in its genuine perfect function, expresses qualitative)
‘Ivan **has been** to Athens on a trip’
d. Az **sam hodil** v Atina (this is a fact)
‘I **have been** to Athens’

From the examples (5c), (5d) it is clear that the Bulgarian perfect cannot, in all of its uses, be regarded as expressing cancellability. The meaning is conveyed by the perfect forms mainly in cases where there is a subordinate clause attached to a main clause (of the type *X kaza, che...*, *Spored X...*, etc.), in which the speaker positions themselves as a non-witness of the reported event. For this reason, I consider it more precise to interpret cancellability as a semantics of the perfect that manifests itself only in certain contexts, i.e. as a type of usage of the perfect. In structures of the type *X kaza, che...* in the subordinate clause the aorist and imperfect forms are inapplicable in Bulgarian, on the other hand, because they explicitly express the meaning of witnessedness, which, as already shown above, is grammaticalized. Here we fully agree that the two witnessed forms cannot combine within the main and subordinate clause because of the phenomenon of speaker ghosting (Kabakčiev 2018).

Let us see how the researchers interpret the perfect forms in Greek grammars. Some authors (Triandafilidi, Tsolaki) place the perfect among the present tenses. According to Triandafilidi and Tsolaki, forms like *echo grápsei* (‘I have written’) express an action that is completed (*αποτελειωμένο*) (Triantaphyllidēs 1982: 146, Tsolakis 1983: 202). Mackridge states that the perfect tense expresses an action completed in the past but significant in the present. Additionally he notes that in colloquial speech the aorist is often preferred, even in contexts where in English or German the perfect would be used:

- (6) a. To ékana ídi
‘I already did it.’

Instead of

- (6) b. To écho káneí ídi
‘I have already done it’

It is pointed out that the use of *παρακείμενος* is more common in written language (6b) and more “polite” or typical of formal registers (Mackridge 1985: 170).

In one of the most comprehensive works in traditional Greek linguistics, authored by Bampiniōtēs & Klerris (2005), *Grammar of Modern Greek* it is notable that the perfect tenses – *παρακείμενος* (perfect), *υπερσυντέλικος* (pluperfect), and *συντελεσμένος μέλλοντας* (future perfect) – are not included among the so-called “characteristic” tense forms of Greek. Instead, they are treated in a special chapter. The authors conceptualize the perfect forms as a third verbal aspect.

Another researcher highlights “two main oppositions that characterize the system [of the verb]: 1. Resultativeness (perfect) – non-resultativeness (present, aorist) 2. Completeness (perfective) (aorist) – incompleteness (imperfective) (present)”, see Georgia (2008: 196).

Let us consider the following examples to determine whether the Greek perfect possesses the value “cancellable content:”

- (7) a. O X είπε ότι to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘X kaza, che vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘X said that the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 b. Katalavaίno/akouóo ότι to tréno **έχει ftάσει/ έftase**
 ‘Razbiram/chuvam, che vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘I understand/hear that the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 c. O X den xérei an to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘X ne znae dali vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘X doesn’t know if the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 d. O X den pistévei ότι to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘X ne vyarva, che vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘X doesn’t believe that the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 e. O X den éinai sígouros ότι to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘X ne e siguren, che vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘X is not sure that the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 f. O X den tha symfonísei ότι to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘X nyama da povyarva, che vlakat **e pristignal/*pristigna**’
 (literally) ‘X will not agree that the train **has arrived/arrived**’
 g. Símfona me/ópos anaférei/ópos dílose o X, to tréno **έχει ftάσει/έftase**
 ‘Spored/kakto saobshtava X/kakto zayavi X, vlakat e pristignal/*pristigna’
 (literally) ‘According to/as reported by/as stated by X, the train **has arrived/arrived**’

It becomes clear that whereas in Bulgarian the use of the perfect is not only possible but obligatory – otherwise ungrammaticality arises due to the phenomenon of the “illegitimate speaker” – in Greek the use of the perfect form is possible but largely not necessary.

This is because the perfect forms in subordinate clauses are part of a semantic-syntactic structure whose first part requires every subordinate clause to possess the

feature of cancellability. This shows that in languages such as English and Greek, where the preterite (past tense in English; aorist and imperfect in Greek) is not possessed non-cancellability, it can be used in the subordinate clause - because it can be coerced into cancellability by the main clause (e.g., “I understand/hear that...”) or by the first part of the sentence, expressed through adverbs (such as “probably,” “according to reports,” etc.) which require cancellability from the dependent clause.

Conclusion

This paper confirms Kabakčiev’s hypothesis (2022: 399): while non-witnessedness and cancellability are typical by perfect forms (PP) in Bulgarian, in Greek and some other languages they are only signaled, but not by default, rather internally/essentially. Since the narrative system in Bulgarian includes other L-forms in addition to the perfect, namely the renarrative and the conclusive, it should be noted that these forms are also characterized by non-witnessedness and cancellable content. Cf.: *X kaza, che vlakat e pristignal* ‘X said that the train has arrived’ (indicative perfect), *X kaza, che vlakat pristignal* ‘X said that the train arrived’ (renarrative), *X kaza, che vlakat mozhe bi e pristignal* ‘X said that the train may have arrived’ (inferential aorist). For this reason, cancellability cannot be interpreted as an invariant meaning only of the perfect, but rather as a contextual use, applicable to the perfect as well as to the renarrative and the conclusive.

Regarding the values of witnessedness and non-cancellability, the Greek preterite – represented by both the aorist and imperfect – does not grammatically mark these two values (unlike Bulgarian), but they are implied by default. Thus, when forms of the aorist or imperfect occur in simple sentences, they inherently convey witnessedness, as in ‘*Oi kalesménoi éftasan*’ (‘The guests arrived’) and ‘*Oi kalesménoi éftanan*’ (‘The guests were arriving’), where the speaker presents the events as directly observed. The same default interpretation of witnessedness is preserved even in reported contexts, for example in ‘*I María eípe óti éftasan oi kalesménoi*’ (‘Maria said that the guests arrived’), where the embedded aorist still implies that the original event is treated as witnessed. By contrast, when a perfect form is used in simple sentences, non-witnessedness is inherently implied, as illustrated by ‘*Oi kalesménoi échoun ftásei*’ (‘The guests have arrived’), where the perfect signals that the speaker infers or learns of the event indirectly rather than having witnessed it.

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