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MORPHOLOGICAL MARKERS OF EVIDENTIALITY IN BULGARIAN AND SLOVENIAN

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a comparative analysis of evidentiality in Bulgarian and Slovenian, focusing on its interaction with epistemic modality. Bulgarian is shown to possess a grammaticalized evidential system integrated into the verbal paradigm, encoding distinctions between direct and indirect information and degrees of speaker commitment. Slovenian, by contrast, lacks a dedicated evidential category and expresses evidential meanings through modal particles and constructions such as *naj* + *conditional*, whose interpretation is largely context-dependent. The comparison highlights different grammatical strategies for encoding information source and epistemic stance in closely related languages.

Keywords: *Evidentiality, Modality, Epistemic Modality, Bulgarian*

Introduction

This study presents a comparative analysis of morphological markers of evidentiality in Bulgarian and Slovenian, two closely related South Slavic languages that differ significantly in the degree of grammaticalization of evidential meanings. The article examines how evidential markers in each language interact with epistemic modality and what this contrast reveals about the relationship between grammatical structure and speaker commitment.

1. Evidentiality as a Grammatical Category and Its Relation to Epistemic Modality

Evidentiality is most commonly defined as a grammatical category encoding the source of information on which a proposition is based. In its strict sense, evidentiality specifies whether the speaker has direct access to the information (e.g. visual, auditory), or indirect access (e.g. inference, report), independently of the speaker's degree of commitment to the

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truth of the proposition. This definition has become standard in typological research, largely following the work of Aikhenvald, who emphasizes that evidentiality is concerned with *information source*, not with certainty or probability as such (Aikhenvald, 2007, p. 211).

A crucial distinction in the literature is that between grammatical evidentiality and evidential strategies. While all languages possess means to refer to information sources (for instance through lexical verbs such as *see*, *hear*, or reportative expressions like *it is said*), only some languages grammaticalize these meanings into obligatory or semi-obligatory morphological categories. Evidential strategies therefore do not in themselves constitute evidentiality as a grammatical category (Ibid., 213). This distinction is essential for comparative studies, particularly in languages where evidential meanings arise through tense-aspect or modal forms.

The relationship between evidentiality and modality, especially epistemic modality, has been the subject of long-standing debate. Epistemic modality is generally understood as expressing the speaker's assessment of the likelihood or certainty of a proposition, that is, the degree of epistemic support for its truth. Evidentiality, by contrast, specifies the type of epistemic justification on which the proposition rests (Peterson, 2010, p. 11). Despite this conceptual distinction, the two domains frequently interact both synchronically and diachronically.

One influential position treats evidentiality as a subdomain of epistemic modality, arguing that marking information source inevitably implies a stance toward the reliability of the proposition. This view is particularly motivated by inferential and reportative evidentials, which often correlate with reduced speaker commitment and thus resemble epistemic modal meanings (Boland, 2006, p. 72). From this perspective, evidential markers are seen as part of a broader epistemic system encoding knowledge states and assessments.

An opposing position argues for a principled separation between evidentiality and epistemic modality. Proponents of this view maintain that evidentiality encodes *how* information was obtained, whereas epistemic modality encodes *how strongly* the speaker believes the proposition to be true. Although evidential meanings may give rise to pragmatic inferences about certainty, these inferences are not part of the core semantics of evidential markers (de Haan, 2010, p. 114). This distinction is especially compelling in languages with fully grammaticalized evidential systems, where evidential marking is obligatory regardless of the speaker's subjective confidence.

A third, increasingly influential approach seeks to reconcile these positions by treating evidentiality and epistemic modality as distinct but systematically related dimensions within the broader domain of epistemicity (Boye, 2010, p. 17). Under this model, the two categories are semantically independent but frequently overlap in use and may converge through grammaticalization paths. This approach accounts for both the frequent empirical overlap between evidential and modal meanings and the clear structural distinctions attested in many languages.

Finally, it is important to distinguish evidentiality from related categories such as mirativity, which encodes surprise or unexpectedness rather than information source. Although mirative effects often arise pragmatically from evidential constructions –

especially inferential ones, mirativity does not constitute a core component of evidential meaning (Aikhenvald, 2014, p. 32). Maintaining this distinction is essential for precise analysis, particularly in languages where evidential interpretations emerge from tense-aspect or modal morphology.

In sum, contemporary research converges on the view that evidentiality is best defined as a grammatical category encoding information source, closely related to epistemic modality. This theoretical framework provides a necessary basis for analyzing languages such as Bulgarian and Slovenian, where evidential meanings are expressed through complex interactions between morphology, tense-aspect systems, and modal semantics.

2. Methodological Framework

In the present study evidentiality is treated as encoding information source and thus as analytically distinct from epistemic modality; however, the two domains are systematically intertwined because information-source marking is commonly interpreted as a cue to reliability and speaker commitment. In this sense, “evidentiality marking is believed to comply with the need of being precise about one’s source of information or reliability of knowledge” (Masia, 2020, p. 131). Source claims (e.g., first-hand vs. reportative) affect statement believability by modulating perceived speaker commitment and accountability.

The analysis focuses on grammatical markers that contribute evidential meaning in Bulgarian and Slovenian, regardless of whether evidentiality is their primary or historically original function. Particular attention is paid to forms that originate in tense-aspect morphology or auxiliary constructions but have developed stable evidential interpretations. In this respect, the study does not presuppose the existence of fully grammaticalized evidential systems in both languages, but instead examines the degree to which evidential meanings are structurally encoded and semantically constrained.

3. Evidentiality in Bulgarian

The speaker’s ability to express explicitly whether the information conveyed has been acquired directly or indirectly, as well as their attitude toward its reliability, constitutes a linguistic universal. This universal finds expression through various grammatical, lexical, and intonational means, used either independently or in combination. Bulgarian stands out among the Slavic, and more broadly, the Indo-European languages in that it has developed special, based on the indicative perfect, verbal forms, unified within the morphological verbal category of evidentiality.

Regarding Bulgarian, the present study adopts the view that “evidentiality is a modality of knowledge in which an utterance is evaluated with respect to its relation to the source of information, and the degree of reliability of that information is determined by the speaking subject”¹ (Кирова, 2011). Within this perspective, the information source is relevant insofar as it is connected to the speaker’s assessment of the credibility of the utterance. In

¹ Translations from Bulgarian to English are mine – M. M.

light of this understanding, and drawing on the traditional definition in Bulgarian grammar according to which verbal mood “expresses the speaker’s attitude toward the verbal action being stated” (Пашов, 1999, p. 174), evidentiality should be situated within the domain of the morphological category of verbal mood. In Bulgarian, the morphological category of evidentiality is understood as part of the linguistic system for expressing epistemic modality, insofar as different evidential forms encode distinctions in the speaker’s degree of commitment to the information presented in the utterance (Алексова, 2013, p. 102).

The emergence of Bulgarian renarrative forms is closely connected with the temporal orientation of the perfect tense. The perfect encodes an event that took place prior to the reference interval, while its result remains relevant and available at the speech time. As a result, the event itself is not localized within a clearly delimited past interval but is construed as a fact that has occurred at an unspecified time in the past, without necessarily implying direct perception of the situation on the part of the speaker.

This structural property of the perfect – namely, the inclusion of speech time within the reference interval when a result is present, creates favorable conditions for its reinterpretation as a marker of non-witnessed events. In contrast, past tenses with a clearly defined reference interval in the past, such as the aorist and imperfect, progressively undergo semantic narrowing and come to encode predominantly witnessed events, i.e. situations presented as directly known or experienced by the speaker.

As a consequence of this diachronic development, the perfect becomes the morphological basis for the formation of the three Bulgarian evidential forms associated with indirect information: the conclusive, the renarrative, and the dubitative. At the same time, the aorist, imperfect, and other past tense forms, as well as future tense forms, stabilize as markers of *witnessedness*, expressing situations whose occurrence within a given reference interval is presented as directly known, planned, or anticipated by the speaker (Ницолова, 2008, p. 333).

Building on this development, evidential distinctions in Bulgarian extend across the entire temporal system of the language. All major tense subcategories have developed forms capable of expressing evidentiality, allowing speakers to encode indirect access to information. In doing so, evidential marking not only differentiates witnessed and non-witnessed interpretations, but also signals the speaker’s degree of commitment to the reliability of the proposition. Evidentiality thus functions as a cross-cutting, morphologically productive category that overlays the tense system.

The *indicative* constitutes the basic and most frequently used evidential form in Bulgarian. In this form, the speaker presents the proposition p as representing a real situation P , whereby the speaker’s knowledge of reality may be acquired either through direct witnessing or be based on shared or general experience (Ницолова, 2008, стр. 351).

The *conclusive*, as a component of the evidential category in Bulgarian, exhibits a dual semantic value. Through its forms, the speaker conveys information presented as their own, which links the conclusive to the indicative (Ibid., 334). At the same time, this information is mediated, in that it is acquired from a non-witnessed position. In one type of use, the conclusive expresses an opinion based on inference (inferential meaning), while in another

it conveys knowledge not obtained through direct personal perception (non-inferential meaning) (Ibid., 354).

The *renarrative* in Bulgarian is closely related to the dubitative, insofar as in both subcategories the speaker signals that the author of the reported utterance presents the proposition contained therein as true. The difference lies in the speaker's evaluation of the source's assessment of the information: whereas the dubitative expresses skepticism toward the reliability of the reported content, the renarrative does not challenge this assessment. Instead, it merely emphasizes that the evaluation of truth belongs to the author of the underlying utterance, rather than to the current speaker (Ibid., 360).

The *dubitative*, expressed through grammaticalized verbal forms, represents a subcategory of evidentiality in which evidential features – most notably reference to reported speech or third-party assertions, are closely intertwined with modal features, namely the speaker's evaluation of the truth value of the reported information. The dubitative encodes “doubt or distrust on the part of the speaker regarding the reliability of the conveyed information whose source is a third party” (Ibid., 370).

Against this background, the following section turns to Slovenian, a closely related Slavic language which, unlike Bulgarian, has not developed a fully grammaticalized evidential category, but nonetheless employs systematic morphological and periphrastic means to encode information source and speaker commitment.

4. Grammaticalized Evidentiality Markers in Slovenian

From a typological point of view, Slovenian has been analyzed as a language without a grammaticalized (paradigmatic) category of evidentiality: meanings related to information source are conveyed primarily through non-dedicated linguistic means (modal particles, lexical and discourse means), rather than through an obligatory verbal category comparable to Bulgarian.

In typological research, grammatical evidentiality is defined as a system in which “marking a limited selection of information sources is a must” – a property that characterizes evidentiality as a genuine grammatical category (Aikhenvald, 2007, p. 210). In contrast, evidential strategies are explicitly distinguished from grammatical evidential methods, since none of them form a paradigm of any kind, whereas grammatical evidential methods do (Ibid., p. 221). On this basis, Slovenian aligns with European languages in which information source is typically expressed through non-paradigmatic strategies rather than through obligatory morphological verb forms.

In Slovenian, evidential interpretations are closely linked to epistemic stance and are most commonly realized through modal particles, such as *baje* and *menda*, in the role of evidential markers (Pihler Ciglič, 2017, p. 88).

The particles *baje* and *menda*, which are listed in the Synonym Dictionary of Slovenian Language (SSSJ) as synonymous particles expressing assumption. In the academic dictionary of Slovenian literary language (SSKJ) *baje* is classified as an adverb that

“expresses uncertainty of the assertion”, while *menda* is likewise described as an adverb whose function is to “expresses assumption”.

In his *Slovenian grammar* Jože Toporišič analyzes particles such as *baje* and *menda* by systematically distinguishing particles from adverbs and proposing a semantic classification of particles. According to this model, *baje* belongs to the group of evaluative particles (*vrednotenjski členki*), within the broader class of modal particles (*naklonski členki*), and more specifically to the subgroup of certainty particles (*gotovostni členki*). Within this framework, the meaning of *baje* can be characterized by a complex epistemic configuration, which may be paraphrased as follows: *it is not certain whether someone else knows whether the propositional content is reliable* (Toporišič, 2004, p. 446)².

The etymology of the two particles is closely related. According to Slovenian Etymological Dictionary (SES), *baje* (with the archaic variant *bojda*) derives from the third person singular present tense form **bajetb* of the verb **bajati*, with the meaning *baja, da ...* (*'says, tells that ...'*). The particle *menda*, in turn, is a reduced form originating from *meni, da...* (*'thinks that...*'). In the entry for *baje* in Slovenian Orthography (SP), *menda* is explicitly listed as a synonym, accompanied by the explanatory gloss *tako pravijo* (*'so they say'*). In another study, *menda* is described as a non-facultative modal particle of the first level of obligatoriness, functioning as a device for weakening epistemic modality. In this analysis, the particle encodes the speaker's stance toward the reliability of the utterance, more specifically expressing doubt regarding its truth value (Smolej, 2004, p. 148). This description highlights the fact that the particles does not simply mark uncertainty, but rather encodes a layered epistemic stance, involving both indirect access to information and a reduced degree of speaker commitment.³

In sum, *baje* and *menda* in Slovenian function as modal particles expressing varying degrees of the speaker's doubt regarding the reliability of the information conveyed, which is presented as having been acquired indirectly. The omission of these particles from an utterance would disrupt the internal coherence and pragmatic logic of the text, as they play a crucial role in signaling both epistemic evaluation and information source. Consequently, in translation, it is essential to identify functionally appropriate equivalents that, on the one hand, adequately reflect the speaker's subjective assessment of the proposition, and, on the other, indicate that the speaker was not a direct witness to the reported event or state.

Beyond modal particles such as *baje* and *menda*, Slovenian also employs specific grammatical constructions that contribute to the expression of evidential meaning while simultaneously signaling the speaker's epistemic evaluation. These forms do not constitute a grammatical evidential category in the strict sense, yet they function as recurrent and structurally constrained markers of indirect information and speaker stance.

This construction represents a transposition of the Slovenian conditional, combined with the modal particle *naj*, which otherwise carries imperative and optative meanings, and which in this configuration contributes to the expression of reportedness and speaker's stance.

² The particle *menda* is not explicitly mentioned, we assume that it also belongs here as a synonym.

³ For more details on the particles *baje* and *menda* in comparison with Bulgarian, see Малаков, 2020.

The Slovenian construction *naj + conditional* functions as a multifunctional marker of reported information, whose epistemic value is determined contextually. It signals that the speaker is not the original source of the proposition, but reproduces it as a reported statement, belief, or interpretation, thereby fulfilling a clear evidential (reportative) function. At the same time, the construction operates within the domain of epistemic modality: in some contexts it yields a dubitative reading, expressing speaker's distance from the reliability of the information, while in others, quantitatively predominant, the speaker remains epistemically neutral and shifts responsibility for truth evaluation to the primary source. Because these readings are formally identical, their interpretation relies heavily on context and may be further guided by grammaticalized, lexical, or extra-linguistic cues.

From a broader typological perspective, particles such as *baje*, *menda*, and the construction *naj + conditional* exemplify how Slovenian expresses meanings that give rise to evidential interpretations without grammaticalizing evidentiality as a verbal category. Their core function lies in epistemic evaluation, yet their use frequently implies indirectness of knowledge and distancing from propositional responsibility, situating them at the interface between epistemic modality and evidential meaning.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the expression of evidentiality in Bulgarian and Slovenian from a comparative perspective, focusing on the interaction between information source and epistemic modality. The analysis has shown that Bulgarian and Slovenian represent two distinct typological patterns. Bulgarian exhibits a grammaticalized evidential system, in which evidential distinctions are morphologically encoded and integrated into the verbal paradigm. Originating from the perfect tense, Bulgarian evidential forms extend across the entire temporal system and encode a systematic opposition between witnessed and non-witnessed interpretations, while simultaneously signaling the speaker's degree of commitment to the reliability of the proposition.

Slovenian, by contrast, lacks a grammaticalized evidential category and relies instead on non-dedicated strategies such as grammaticalized modal particles (*baje*, *menda*) and the construction *naj + conditional*. These forms function as recurrent markers of reported or inferred information, whose epistemic value is determined contextually. The comparison demonstrates that evidentiality and epistemic modality are best understood as distinct but closely related dimensions, whose degree of grammaticalization may vary even within closely related languages, offering different structural solutions to the same communicative needs.

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