

# The Expression of Past Events in South Slavic: A View from Torlak

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**Abstract** This paper investigates how past events are expressed in Torlak, a non-standardized variety spoken in southern Serbia, as opposed to the standard BCMS (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian). Past events in Torlak are conveyed mainly through the use of the analytic perfect and the synthetic aorist and imperfect, just as in BCMS. However, unlike in BCMS where the perfect is argued to be the default marker of anteriority in lieu of the aorist, in Torlak the aorist is somewhat more productive, changing the overall distribution. Descriptively, we identify semantic and morphosyntactic differences between the aorist, the imperfect and the perfect in Torlak compared to standard BCMS. We examine the distribution and usage patterns within the Torlak paradigm, with a focus on the aorist/perfect divide. We also show how the expression of past tense in Torlak is related to the broader framework of ‘Balkan’ evidentiality. Overall, this paper contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms underlying tense expression in South Slavic varieties.

**Keywords** Torlak. BCMS. Perfect. Aorist. Imperfect. Evidentiality.

**Index** 1 Introduction. – 2 Ways to Talk About the Past. – 3 The Expression of Past Events from Old Church Slavonic to BCMS. – 4 Bcms as Compared to Torlak: The Empirical Description. – 5 Past Tense and Evidentiality. – 6 Concluding Remarks.



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## 1 Introduction

This paper offers a preliminary investigation into the expression of past events in Torlak [fig. 1], a non-standard South Slavic variety spoken in southern Serbia and in the bordering areas of Northern Macedonian, Bulgaria and Kosovo, with a comparative perspective on Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS).<sup>1</sup> Our focus lies on the interplay between analytic and synthetic strategies in marking past tense: the perfect (analytic), aorist (synthetic), and imperfect (synthetic). While BCMS exhibits a preference for the analytic perfect as the unmarked marker of anteriority (cf. Pušić 2013), independently of possible diastatic and diamesic microvariation, Torlak employs synthetic forms such as the aorist more productively in everyday speech.

In this study, we provide a descriptive account of the morphosyntactic and semantic characteristics of past-referring verb forms in Torlak, especially focusing on the use and functional distinctions between the aorist, imperfect and perfect, as compared to BCMS. A particular point of interest is the role of the aorist in Torlak, which, unlike in standard BCMS, is not obsolete or stylistically marked, but appears in a range of contexts, including colloquial narratives. We examine how this distribution may reflect deeper typological alignments of Torlak with Balkan Sprachbund features, including evidentiality-related meanings (cf. Friedman 1986; 2003; Izvorski 1997; Karagjosova 2021).

Torlak has long occupied a transitional position both linguistically and geographically, bridging Slavic and Balkan typological profiles (cf. Friedman, Joseph 2025, a.o.). In its southernmost varieties, spoken in and around Vranje and Trgovište, one finds numerous features commonly associated with the Balkan linguistic area. These include pervasive clitic doubling (attested across much of the Torlak area),<sup>2</sup> the presence of postposed definite articles (e.g., *knjiga-ta* ‘the book’; cf. Vuković, Samardžić 2018; Azzolina et al. 2021), loss of the infinitive, and analytic future and evidential constructions. Taken together, these features support the view of Torlak as a tendentially Balkan variety, aligning it typologically with core Balkan languages (e.g., Bulgarian, Macedonian, Albanian, Romanian).

This contribution should be regarded as a first step in a broader research agenda. While we primarily focus on the distribution and functional load of past tenses here, especially the aorist and

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1 As Reviewer 1 pointed out, the comparative perspective provided in this article only focuses on Torlak vs. Neo-Štokavian BCMS. No Kajkavian or Čakavian varieties are included here. For simplicity, we will only refer to this variety as BCMS.

2 See Runić 2014; Milosavljević 2017; 2018; Escher 2021a; Milosavljević, Živojinović, forthcoming; Živojinović 2021; forthcoming, a.o.

its interaction with the perfect in Torlak, we plan to extend this work by conducting a systematic, in-depth and crosslinguistic analysis of the perfect across contexts in future research. Given the theoretical complexity and diachronic instability of the perfect<sup>3</sup> such an investigation will be essential for a fuller understanding of the grammaticalization and semantic restructuring processes shaping tense in South Slavic.

The structure of this article is as follows. In Section 2 we provide a general overview of the expressions of the past. In Section 3, we review previous work on the past tense system in South Slavic, with particular attention to the analytic-synthetic opposition. Section 4 outlines the distribution of aorist, imperfect, and perfect forms in BCMS and Torlak. In Section 5, we focus specifically on the aorist-perfect divide in Torlak, interpreting our findings within the broader domain of evidentiality and tense in the Balkans. Section 6 concludes the paper and outlines directions for future research.



**Figure 1**  
The overall geographical distribution of Torlak. The delimited area represents an approximation of the maximal geographical expansion of Torlak. It includes what is traditionally labeled as the Prizren-Timok dialect group, as well as the Kosovo-Resava variety. For the purpose of this study, however, the focus is exclusively on the area between Vranje and Trgovište. Base map publicly available; annotations by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> See Comrie 1976; Lindstedt 2000; Iatridou et al. 2001; Plungian 2017, a.o.

## 2 Ways to Talk About the Past

When comparing the imperfect, the aorist, and the perfect, distinctions arise both in their structure and interpretation. Here we review, in a very concise manner, how these three forms have been defined in linguistic studies, mostly from the perspective of English, but also, in the case of the imperfect, with a reference to other languages.

The imperfect refers to a finite verb form, present in the paradigm of some languages, which expresses both past tense and imperfective aspect. Simplifying somehow, we can say that, with the imperfect, we refer to events that were ongoing or habitual in the past (e.g., Spanish *cantaban*, translated to English as ‘They were singing’ or ‘They used to sing’, depending on the context).

The aorist or simple past is a synthetic, finite verb form, that expresses past tense and perfective aspect, referring to concluded events in the past (e.g., *I ate*).

In contrast to both imperfect and aorist, perfect often takes the form of an analytic construction, involving auxiliary verbs alongside participles, (e.g., *I have eaten*). Semantically, the perfect conveys not only the reference to a past action, like in the case of the imperfect and the aorist, but also asserts a resultant state or relevance to the present. This distinction imbues the perfect with a deeper layer of meaning, suggesting an ongoing impact or connection between the past event and the present situation.

Generally speaking, the perfect has been (mainly) associated with three prototypical readings:<sup>4</sup>

- i. The universal reading, describing events that started sometime in the past and run continuously to the present: e.g. *I have been sick since Tuesday*;
- ii. The resultative reading, describing result states from previous events that hold at present: e.g. *I have broken my glasses*;
- iii. The experiential reading, referring to the subject’s experience of some past event: e.g. *I have seen that movie (before)*.

Historically, the perfect is considered an “unstable” category (cf. Lindstedt 2000). Its evolution has been regarded as a dynamic process of grammaticalization, characterized by shifting semantic and syntactic patterns over time. Initially associated with stative possession, as in *I have my eyes closed*, it gradually extended its scope to encompass result states, as in *I have broken my glasses*. In other cases, the notion of result became less and less obvious, leaving only the trace of a state that exists by virtue of an event having taken place

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<sup>4</sup> cf. McCawley 1971; Comrie 1976; Parsons 1990; Iatridou et al. 2001, among others.

(what Parsons 1990 called *R-states*). An example of this is a sentence like *Anna has seen the Mona Lisa*, where there is no result of the seeing event as such, as the Mona Lisa painting remains unchanged. Describing this in the perfect, however, would amount to saying that Anna is in the state of having seen the Mona Lisa before, and this state would not be subject to change (Anna cannot “un-see” the Mona Lisa). Additionally, in French, German, and Northern varieties of Italian, among others, the perfect has come to be used as a marker of anteriority: to refer to a past event, and nothing else, just like the aorist in other languages.

The semantic variation on the use of the perfect over time revolves around two central features: one is the reference to a state of some sort, from a relation of stative possession to a result state, or a consequent R-state; the other is the inclusion of a past event, either in combination with a state (the prototypical perfect in English), or alone (acting like a past tense). All this variation maps in many cases onto a single analytic construction (such as *have* + participle in English).

Nevertheless, there are numerous attestations of languages where the perfect is associated with a synthetic form. Notably, in Portuguese, the aorist serves roles traditionally associated with the perfect in other Romance languages, as illustrated by the usage of *comi* to mean both ‘I ate’ and ‘I have eaten.’ This was also the case in Latin, before the development of the perfect in the Romance systems. In sum, across languages featuring an aorist and a perfect, there exists variability in how the semantics aligns with the morphosyntactic structures, reflecting an intricate interplay in the mapping between meaning and form.

### 3 The Expression of Past Events from Old Church Slavonic to BCMS

Focusing now on the South Slavic context, in Table 1 we summarize the temporal and aspectual information associated with the imperfect, the aorist and the perfect, in line with the general description above.

**Table 1** Temporal and aspectual values of past-referring forms in South Slavic

Tense	Morphology	Temporal semantics	Aspectual semantics
Imperfect	Synthetic	Past	Imperfective
Aorist			Perfective
Perfect	Analytic	Present~Past	Imperfective~Perfective

A preliminary observation from Table 1 – which we will return to later in the paper – is that the perfect typically displays a more complex

functional profile than the imperfect or the aorist. This aligns with the view that the perfect is a historically unstable category, characterized by a complex and often multifunctional meaning, which in South Slavic is also reflected in its morphosyntactic complexity. Indeed, this multifunctionality is attested in the Old Church Slavonic periphrastic perfect as well, which often diverges from strict syntactic and semantic equivalence with Greek models. Plungian, Urmanchieva (2017) argue that the OCS perfect resists a unified semantic description and displays highly text-sensitive distributions. They identify three primary uses:

- i. Interpretative perfect: used to evaluate or comment on a previously mentioned situation;

- (1)
 

СЪКАЗАЛЪ	еси	въ	людеѣхъ	силѣ	твоиѣ	избавилъ	еси
declare.PstP	AUX	in	people	strength	your	deliver.PstP	AUX
мышыцеиѣ	твоиѣиѣ	люди	твоиѣиѣ	сѣны	ѣковѣиѣ	ѣосѣфѣиѣ	
arm	your	people	your	sons	Jacob	Joseph	

‘You have declared your strength among the people; you have redeemed your people with your arm, the sons of Jacob and Joseph’  
(Psalm 76 (77):15; retrieved from Plungian and Urmanchieva 2017, 29)

- ii. Characterizing Perfect: denotes a property or identity by appealing to past action;

- (2)
 

Благо	сътвориѣхъ	еси	съ	рабомъ	твоимъ	г҃и:	По	словеси
good	create.PstP	AUX	with	servant	your	Lord	By	word
твоемоу:	Благости	ѣ	наказанию	ѣ	разумоу			
your	to goodness	and	instruction	and	understanding			
научиѣмѣ:	ѣко заповѣдемъ	твоимъ	вѣрѣ	ѣсѣ				
taught.1pl	for commandments	your	believe.1sg	be.1sg.pres				

‘You have done good to your servant, O Lord, according to your word: to goodness, correction, and understanding we are taught; for I have believed in your commandments.’  
(Psalm 118:65-6; retrieved from Plungian, Urmanchieva 2017, 26)

- iii. Existential/Experiential Perfect: signals that an event occurred at least once in the past, often without specifying exact temporal anchoring;

- (3)
 

показалъ	еси	ѣка.	ѣ	истаѣхъ	еси	ѣко	пажыиѣиѣ
show.PstP	AUX	wonder	and	make.PstP	AUX	as	spider_web
г҃иѣ	его						
Lord.dat	it						

‘You have shown mercy. And you have hidden it like a spider’s web from the Lord’  
(Psalm 38:11-12; retrieved from Plungian, Urmanchieva 2017, 30)

Plungian and Urmanchieva (2017) claim that the perfect also served disambiguation functions, especially in 2<sup>nd</sup>-person singular forms of *i*-conjugation verbs, to avoid homonymy with imperatives and aorists, as in (4).

- (4) 

ОУНИЧЬЖИЛЪ	ЕСИ	ВЪСТА	ОТЪЖПАИЖШТА	ОТЪ	ОПРАВЪДАНИЕ
destroy.PstP	AUX	all	those_who_depart	from	justification
твоихъ:	Ѣко	неправедно	помышление	їхъ	
your	for	unjustly	thought	their	

‘You have destroyed all those who turn away from your justification, for their thoughts are unjust’

(Psalm 79:5-8; retrieved from Plungian, Urmanchieva 2017, 26)

Moreover, Plungian, Urmanchieva (2017) provide attestations of auxiliary omission which they intend as pure stylistic variation, for instance *ѡудѡ сѣтворилъ зрѣцимъ* ‘(He) has performed a miracle before the onlookers’.

From a synchronic perspective, Pušić’s (2013) survey of BCMS (with particular attention to the Serbian variant) demonstrates that the perfect has become the default past tense across registers, largely replacing the synthetic aorist and imperfect. The aorist persists only in restricted contexts, i.e. speakers use it almost exclusively for telic events, especially in narrative or stylistically marked contexts,<sup>5</sup> and seldom (if ever) for atelic or ongoing past events. Even in spoken language the aorist can still be used for certain immediate past or modal effects, indicating it is *not* entirely moribund in the standard(ized) variety. By contrast, the imperfect is virtually absent in BCMS. Indeed, Pušić’s informants produced imperfect forms only rarely and many demonstrated an inability to conjugate the imperfect at all, signaling that this tense has all but vanished from *all* registers. In short, BCMS shows a strong shift toward a one-tense (perfect) past system, with the aorist retained only as a specialized narrative device and the imperfect in full decline. Pušić (2013) attributes the overall decline of the aorist and imperfect in the standard language to their functional overlap with the perfect and the consequent loss of their distinct semantic roles, compounded by decades of non-use that have led younger speakers to lose competence in these forms.

Similarly, Mišeska Tomić (2006, 631-5) discusses the perfect in BCMS and confirms a typological tendency shared with many

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<sup>5</sup> It has been reported at least since Žic Fuchs’s (2002) that aorist forms are widely spread across instant messaging platforms, possibly (but not exclusively) thanks to their morphological conciseness, for instance *Vidjeh te pred faxom* ‘I saw you in front of the faculty building’ (cf. Žic Fuchs 2002, 605 on Kajkavian). We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

European languages: the analytic perfect is replacing the older synthetic past tenses (aorist and imperfect). In contemporary use, it functions as a general past tense, covering a wide range of contexts. Specifically, it is used to express (a) past events with clearly defined temporal boundaries, (b) past events that maintain relevance for the present (e.g., resultative or experiential readings) and (c) events of which the speaker lacks direct knowledge – an evidential nuance emerging particularly in the southeastern dialects (Torlak).

## 4 Bcms as Compared to Torlak: The Empirical Description

### 4.1 BCMS

In BCMS, past events are predominantly expressed through an analytic tense, descriptively known as *perfect tense* (cf. Pušić 2013). Structurally, this perfect consists of a finite auxiliary, the verb *biti* ‘to be’ which agrees with the subject, and an active participle, as in (5).

- (5) *Prošle zime je bilo jako hladno*  
last winter aux be.PSTP very cold  
‘It was really cold last winter’

Semantically, the perfect in BCMS denotes general anteriority, just as the past tense in English (e.g. *I ate*) and the perfect tense in Northern regional Italian (e.g. *Ho mangiato* ‘I have eaten’), French (e.g. *J’ai mangé* ‘I have eaten’), and Standard German (e.g. *Ich habe gegessen* ‘I have eaten’). This tense structure encapsulates the notion of past events occurring prior to the time of speech. It covers a wide range of perfect values, such as the resultative or experiential perfect (cf. Stojanović 2017, 2018), but does not cover the so-called Universal Perfect where the described eventuality starts in the past and terminates at the reference time<sup>6</sup> (expressed by the present, e.g. *Živim u Beogradu 10 godina* ‘I have lived in Belgrade for 10 years). In addition to the perfect, BCMS features two synthetic past tenses, the aorist and the imperfect, both of very limited use. The aorist consists of a finite verb form (6), and denotes an event that took place shortly before the time of speech, expressing perfective aspect (cf. Pušić 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> See Grønn, von Stechow 2020 for an overview.



- (6) **Rekoh** ja da deca ne treba da skaču u bazen posle ručka  
say.AOR I that kids not need to jump in pool after lunch  
'I have said that kids shouldn't jump into the pool after lunch'

Although the aorist is rarely used in contemporary spoken language and is often considered as 'bookish' (cf. Jung 2025), it finds its place in literary works and exclamatory statements aimed at defining witnessed events occurring just before the speech time, for instance *Pade Sava!* 'Sava fell!', intended as the reporting of the witnessing of Sava falling shortly prior to uttering it. Such expressive meanings are exclusively attested for the VP-fronted aorist, as suggested by Halupka-Rešetar and Todorović (2015), which denotes a completed, factual event, making it compatible with exclamative factivity, as in *Pade Sava!* (lit. 'fell Sava') and (6). Arsenijević (2013) and Todorović (2016) further argue that BCMS aorists are purely aspectual, rather than temporal forms, expressing no inherent past interpretation.

Note that, as Reviewer 1 points out, the BCMS aorist is attested in contexts which are not witnessed *stricto sensu*, but are interpreted counterfactually, as in (7).<sup>7</sup>

- (7) *Ako ne budemo odlučni, propadoše nam svi planovi*  
if not be decisive fall\_through.AOR to\_us all plans  
'If we are not decisive, all our plans will fall through'  
(cf. Riđanović 2012, 317; retrieved from Todorović 2016)

On the other hand, the imperfect is the imperfective counterpart of the aorist, as in (8), denoting an ongoing or continuous event. Despite being reported in descriptive grammars, the imperfect has fallen out of use in contemporary spoken language and is primarily attested in literary texts.<sup>8</sup>

- (8) *Celu noć padaše kiša*  
entire night fall.IMP rain  
'It was raining all night'

<sup>7</sup> This use of the aorist in hypothetical context is not the default reading for the BCMS aorist. However, there is a parallel in Romance, where the Latin pluperfect *amaveram*, expressing a past-oriented, temporal meaning, shifted into a subjunctive form expressing a hypothetical or non-factual meaning in languages like Spanish. Nevertheless, in certain varieties, *amaveram* continued to express the pluperfect, temporal meanings that it had in Latin (Jardón 2016), and its use as a subjunctive is reported but rare. These meanings are expressed through *amase*, from Lat. *amavissem*.

<sup>8</sup> Reviewer 1, once again, points out that the only apparent productive imperfective form still currently used in spoken Štokavian is *be(ja)še* from *biti* 'to be': *Kako be(ja)še?* 'What was it again?'

## 4.2 Torlak

Interestingly, the aorist is still a productive category in Torlak, in contrast to its very limited use in BCMS.<sup>9</sup> In Torlak, like in Portuguese, the aorist seems to be able to express anteriority (9), but also perfect meanings where a past event is linked to a present state of affairs (10).

- (9) *Jučer gi obra*  
yesterday them pick.AOR  
'I picked them yesterday (the flowers)'

- (10) *Ja li te probudi?*  
I q you wake\_up.AOR  
'Have I woken you up?'

The imperfect in Torlak, on the other hand, marks imperfective aspect, leading to continuous (11) and habitual (12) readings.

- (11) *Koji su oni što svireševu kad[t] bemo u grad[t]?*  
which are they that play.IMP when be.IMP in town  
'Who were those [people] who played/were playing when we were in town?'

- (12) *Stanča čitaješe po 50 strane svak d'n.*  
Stanča read.IMP around 50 pages every day  
'Stanča used to read 50 pages per day'

In addition, the perfect is also attested in Torlak, as in (13-14). The auxiliary is generally omitted,<sup>10</sup> except in negated contexts (15).

- (13) *Deda (je) legnaja da spava*  
granpa aux lie\_down.PstP to sleep  
'Granpa has gone to sleep'

- (14) *Vodu gu pa puštija*  
water her again open.PstP  
'He has opened the water again'

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<sup>9</sup> For a broader overview of Torlak, its internal variation and contextualization within the Balkan area see Friedman 2007; Vuković 2021; Vuković et al. 2022; Mirić, Arsenijević 2024; Friedman, Joseph 2025; Milosavljević, Živojinović, forthcoming; Živojinović, forthcoming, a.m.o.

<sup>10</sup> Also attested in the Timok variety (see Escher 2021b).

- (15) *Doktorka ne me je **pitala** za tebe*  
 doctor not me aux ask.PSTP for you  
 ‘The doctor did not ask me about you’

A preliminary overview of the distributions in BCMS and Torlak is given in Table 2. As this summary reveals, there is very little descriptive information on the specific semantic contribution of the aorist and the perfect in Torlak. In what follows, we will develop a hypothesis about the semantic contribution of these two forms, based on evidentiality.

**Table 2** The distribution of past event-reporting forms in BCMS and in Torlak (preliminary)

Tense	Morphology	Semantics BCMS	Semantics Torlak
Imperfect	Synthetic	Ongoing or habitual events in the past	
Aorist		Witnessed events occurring just before the speech time	?
Perfect	Analytic	General anteriority	?

## 5 Past Tense and Evidentiality

We began this work by defining Torlak as a tendentially Balkan variety. In this section, we argue that there are reasons to believe that, when it comes to meaning, the division of labour between the aorist and the perfect in Torlak can be better understood and systematized in the general context of ‘Balkan’ evidentiality (Friedman 1986, 2003; Karagjosova 2021; Izvorski 1997; among others).

Evidentiality in Balkan languages has been extensively studied (Friedman 1986, 2003; Izvorski 1997; Karagjosova 2001; 2021; Simeonova, Zareikar 2015, Simeonova 2020), with a consensus that the perfect often functions as a locus for evidential marking. In Bulgarian, for example, the present perfect can encode indirect evidentiality, such as inference or hearsay (Karagjosova 2001), while the aorist is generally reserved for expressing direct or witnessed events. Izvorski (1997) explicitly refers to the Bulgarian and Macedonian perfects as ‘evidential perfects,’ which can convey inference or hearsay depending on the context and the presence of the auxiliary verb.

Simeonova, Zareikar (2015) further explore this relationship, suggesting that the perfect in Bulgarian is closely tied to indirect evidential meanings and cannot be used with direct evidentiality. In their analysis, evidential marking is parasitic on the

temporal-aspectual-modal (TAM) system, meaning that the perfect tense, which encodes indirect evidentiality, cannot simultaneously convey direct evidence, which would require a different syntactic structure or verbal form. This observation extends naturally to Torlak, where a similar distinction between the perfect and aorist tense systems is found.

Torlak exhibits a comparable asymmetry. For example, consider the data in (16),<sup>11</sup> where the analytic perfect is infelicitous unless it is embedded in a reportative or memory-impaired context:

- (16) ??*Jučer sam pročitaja Rat i mir.*  
 yesterday aux read.PstP War and peace  
 ‘Yesterday I read War and Peace’

The perfect in (16) is infelicitous unless it is used in a specific context of memory loss, with the utterance being reported. This constraint mirrors what Simeonova describes for Bulgarian: the perfect resists direct evidential uses. A felicitous version of this sentence in Torlak would instead have the aorist, which, consistent with Friedman (2003), encodes direct, witnessed events. The distribution thus aligns with the Balkan-wide tendency to mark evidential distinctions through past tense morphology.

This evidential split becomes clearer in examples (17a-c):

- (17) a. *Rodila sam ćerku 1968e* non-evidential  
 give-birth.PstP aux daughter 1968  
 ‘I gave birth to my daughter in 1968’  
 b. *Baba (je) rodila ćerku 1968e* inferential evidence  
 grandma aux give-birth.PstP daughter 1968  
 ‘Grandma gave birth to a daughter in 1968’  
 c. *\*Baba rodi ćerku 1968e* direct evidence  
 grandma give-birth.AOR daughter 1968  
 ‘Grandma gave birth to a daughter in 1968’

(17a) is fully felicitous and does not imply indirect evidence, inference, or renarration. Rather, it simply reports a past event without highlighting the source of information. This type of perfect aligns with what Izvorski (1997) terms the neutral perfect, where the speaker makes no epistemic commitment to whether the information was personally witnessed or indirectly obtained. Such

<sup>11</sup> The judgments for the examples discussed in this section are based on the intuitions of Author 1 who is a heritage speaker of Torlak.

uses are analogous to statements like *World War II began in 1939* – grammatically perfect, and evidentially neutral.<sup>12</sup>

In (17b), the optional auxiliary plays a key role in evidential interpretation. Following Karagjosova's (2001) analysis of Bulgarian, the absence of the auxiliary in third-person contexts pragmatically signals that the speaker did not witness the event but inferred it, marking an indirect evidential use of the perfect. When the auxiliary is overtly realized, by contrast, the evidential reading is not obligatory: in Torlak, third-person perfects may allow either a neutral (non-evidential) or an indirect evidential interpretation depending on context. This raises the possibility of a person split in evidential usage, where first- and second-person forms remain largely neutral, while third-person forms oscillate between neutral and evidential readings. However, this pattern requires further investigation; at present, the only robust clue is that auxiliary drop in third person systematically signals inferred evidence. This distribution nonetheless aligns with Izvorski's (1997) claim that evidential perfects lack temporal anchoring and rely on indirect epistemic authority.

Example (17c) is ungrammatical in most contexts because the aorist requires direct, perceptual evidence. Since the speaker could not have witnessed the grandmother's childbirth, the use of the aorist misfires. This supports the proposal that, in Torlak, the aorist encodes direct evidentiality – what Friedman (2003) terms "witnessed" – and that it is semantically incompatible with inferential or hearsay contexts.

Summing up, the distribution of the aorist and the perfect tenses in Torlak, as well as the possibility of omitting the auxiliary in the perfect in this variety, seem to both be related to evidentiality, as it has been described for other languages in the Balkan context. The main findings for Torlak complete the chart from Table 2, as shown below.

**Table 3** The distribution of past event-reporting forms in BCMS and in Torlak

Tense	Morphology	Semantics BCMS	Semantics Torlak
Imperfect	Synthetic	Ongoing or habitual events in the past	
Aorist		Witnessed events occurring just before the speech time	Witnessed events occurring any time in the past

<sup>12</sup> As a reviewer points out, in Izvorski's argument it is hard to keep epistemic modality and evidentiality separate, as they seem to blend in the discussion. We approach "neutrality" here from an evidential standpoint, that is, whether the speaker can rely on any circumstantial evidence supporting the evaluated proposition.

Perfect	Analytic	General anteriority	Inferred events in the past (auxiliary may be omitted in 3SG)
			Non-evidential events in the past (auxiliary can't be omitted)

## 6 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have provided a systematic overview of the factors that condition the distribution and use of past-referring tenses in Torlak, a tendentially Balkan variety of South Slavic spoken primarily in Southeastern Serbia.

While there is not much variation in the licensing of the imperfect past in Torlak with respect to BCMS, there are important differences in the conditions of use of the other two tenses: the perfect and the aorist. In BCMS, the perfect has come to be the default expression of general anteriority, and the aorist is restricted to literary contexts and specific sentences describing events directly witnessed by the speaker shortly before the utterance time, like *Pade Sava!* ‘Sava fell (just now)!’. By contrast, in Torlak, the aorist is not so restricted: it can refer to any event in the recent or distant past. What determines the choice of tense in Torlak is not temporality (relative distance between the time of the event described and the utterance time) or pragmatics (a sense of relevance to the present). Rather, the distribution of aorist vs. perfect is conditioned by the type of evidentiality reported in the sentence (if any): the aorist is used when the speaker has witnessed the event himself (direct evidentiality); otherwise, Torlak resorts to the perfect. As it stands, the evidentiality in Torlak seems to be built upon ‘temporality’, i.e. abstract deictic schemata specifying the relative position of the event participants with respect to the spacio-temporal coordinates of the event itself (cf. Pancheva, Zubizarreta 2019 for a comparison with Paraguayan Guaraní). This view of evidentiality is compatible with formal accounts such as Migdalski (2023) or Todorović (2016), who argues against the existence of a Tense projection in South Slavic. What follows is that the involved temporality in the computation of evidentiality might be more primitive than ‘tense’.

Furthermore, the perfect form itself is sensitive to whether there is still an indirect source of report (inference), and in those cases the auxiliary may be omitted, or whether evidentiality is gone altogether, in which case the speaker has to express the perfect in its full form (auxiliary + participle).

Our findings are in line with the general claims made in previous literature on Balkan evidentiality, with a systematic association

between direct evidentiality and the aorist. The link between evidential meaning and auxiliary omission, however, has only been briefly touched upon in the current study and deserves more attention. Overall, our study has examined morphosyntactic and semantic variation within South Slavic, providing a basis for more formal analyses of a range of linguistic phenomena.

## Abbreviations

aor	aorist
aux	auxiliary
imp	imperfect
pres	present
PstP	past participle
q	question particle (clitic)

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