

## Semantic readings of the indirect evidentials in Bulgarian: knowledge vs. reliability

Ekaterina Tarpomanova

**Abstract.** The paper deals with the categorial semantics of the evidentiality in Bulgarian offering a context analysis of the non-firsthand evidentials (inferential, reported and dubitative). The most typical contexts of the three evidentials are explored to evaluate the level of knowledge of the speaker and the level of reliability of the information which motivate the usage of the respective evidential.

**Keywords:** evidentiality, Bulgarian, knowledge, reliability

### Introduction

Bulgarian is one of the few Indo-European languages and the only Slavic language with a grammaticalized evidentiality, which can be viewed as a Balkan feature: within the Balkan *Sprachbund* this is a similarity shared with Albanian, probably developed under Turkish influence. Evidentiality appeared only recently in the inherited tense-aspect-mood verbal system of Bulgarian (12th - 13th century at the earliest, cf. Gerdzhikov 2003, 259), but it achieved a high level of obligatorification and in today's language almost every verb form can be interpreted in terms of evidential meaning. Still, the nature of the core categorial meaning is under discussion and the viewpoints of the researchers differ considerably. A brief overview of the opinions in recent works shows that evidentiality is defined as: a cognitive state of the speaker connected to the source of information and its classification (Nitsolova 2008); indirect information with a certain level of approval or distance (Guentchéva 1996); personal confirmation or lack of confirmation of the information by the speaker (Friedman 2004); level of reliability of the information acquired personally or intermediately (Gerdzhikov 2003). According to Plungian, the evidential and the modal values overlap in the field of the epistemic modality, where the probability of the proposition is evaluated - the visual perception is considered more reliable, while mediated information is always less reliable (Plungian 2001). To sum up, when defining the central meaning of evidentiality different authors give weight to its capacity

either to indicate the information source or to evaluate the reliability of the statement. The problem may be approached by exploring the typical contexts of the indirect evidentials and detecting the source of the speaker's knowledge and the level of credibility of the utterance from the viewpoint of the speaker. A detailed description of the contextual usages of the non-firsthand evidentials was made by Gerdzhikov (Gerdzhikov 1977; Gerdzhikov 2003), Aleksova (Aleksova 2015; Aleksova 2016), Moskova (Moskova 2019; Moskova 2020), among others.

### Evidentiality system in Bulgarian

In the typological study of Aikhenvald the evidentiality system of Bulgarian is classified as A1 type, i.e., firsthand vs. non-firsthand information (Aikhenvald 2004: 288). This classification is well-grounded taking into account the fact that in Bulgarian, unlike Albanian for instance, the indicative is marked for direct (firsthand) evidential meaning. On the other hand, there are three morphologically marked non-firsthand evidentials that emerged from the perfect tense ('be'-auxiliary + past active participle) and further developed temporal paradigm: reported marked by the *-l* participle and the omission of the auxiliary in the 3rd person, inferential marked by the *-l* participle and the presence of the auxiliary in the 3rd person, and dubitative marked by the additional auxiliary *bil*. The indirect evidentials have a reduced temporal paradigm where tenses are grouped by pairs (except the aorist). Additionally, the inferential has only the tenses with past reference, i.e., the imperfect, the aorist, the pluperfect, the future in the past (*futurum praeteriti*), and the future perfect in the past (*futurum exactum praeteriti*). Table 1 presents the tense forms of the reported, the inferential (with the tenses with past reference available) and the dubitative of the 3rd p. sg. of the verb *чета* 'read'.

**Table 1.** Temporal paradigm of the indirect evidentials

Tense	Reported	Inferential	Dubitative
PRS/IMPERF	<i>четял</i>	<i>четял е</i>	<i>четял бил</i>
AOR	<i>чел</i>	<i>чел е</i>	<i>чел бил</i>
PERF/PLUPERF	<i>чел бил</i>	<i>чел е бил</i>	-
FUT/FUT.PRAET.	<i>щял да чете</i>	<i>щял е да чете</i>	<i>щял бил да чете</i>
FUT.EX./FUT.EX.PRAET	<i>щял да е чел</i>	<i>щял е да е чел</i>	<i>щял бил да е чел</i>

There are two problematic issues in the temporal forms of the evidentials caused by grammatical ambiguity. The first one is the homonymy between the indicative perfect and the inferential aorist, which in certain contexts, especially after verbs of utterance, cannot be disambiguated:

- (1) *Тя каза, че е пристигнала в София.*  
 'She said she arrived in Sofia.'

According to Nitsolova, given the expansion of the inferential aorist, the usage of indicative perfect is reduced to contexts that explicitly designate witnessed situations (Nitsolova 2008, 354).

The second ambiguity is due to the very complex form of the dubitative which enhances the omission of its distinctive marker, the auxiliary *бил*. Therefore, the dubitative may coincide with the reported.

### Contextual readings of the inferential

By the inferential the speaker presents the information as non-witnessed and acquired through inference. In Bulgarian, it has achieved a high level of grammaticalization and may be found in a variety of text types.

**Indirect knowledge inferred from visible traces.** The prototypical situation where inferential is used is the inference of non-witnessed events based on visible traces, i.e., the knowledge of the speaker is acquired indirectly by making the logical relation between the event and its traces. This meaning may be found in various contexts, including colloquial speech, but the most representative one is the genre of detective fiction. Crime novels have similar structure: a mystery must be resolved, an investigator, professional detective or not, analyses the proofs and finally reveals the crime. This type of context enhances the use of the inferential, especially in the detective's speech when he or she assumes the actions of the criminal.

(2) *Не ще съмнение, че Стептън е имал влияние над нея, което може би се е държало на това, че тя го е обичала, или на страха, който е изпитвала от него, а най-вероятно и на двете, тъй като тези чувства са напълно съвместими. Във всеки случай влиянието му е било много голямо. По негова заповед тя се е съгласила да минава за негова сестра, но когато се е опитал да я накара да стане пряка съучастница в убийство, Стептън е разбрал, че властта му над нея има граници.* (Артур Конан Дойл, „Баскервилското куче“)

‘There can be no doubt that Stapleton **exercised** an influence over her which **may have been** love or **may have been** fear, or very possibly both, since they are by no means incompatible emotions. It **was**, at least, absolutely effective. At his command she **consented** to pass as his sister, though he **found** the limits of his power over her when he **endeavoured** to make her the direct accessory to murder.’ (Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*)

The inferential forms may be accompanied by lexical markers indicating that the information is non-firsthand (such as adverbials *probably*, *presumably*, *maybe*, etc.), but also specifying the level of the speaker's conviction in the facts. The speaker's stance is most often in support of a high reliability of the information, despite the non-witness position. In the text quoted here, the belief of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes in the credibility of his inference is supported by the initial expression *there can be no doubt*.

**The common knowledge as a source of inference.** Another field where the inferential is widely used are the scientific hypotheses. The register of science generally requires a neutral lexical and grammatical expression; that is why the most frequent verbal form is the indicative present tense, which is appropriate to

indicate reliable facts, statements and analyses. Still, the inferential occurs quite often in scientific texts to express hypotheses related to non-witnessed events rather based on well-known facts, logical relations or the common knowledge of the humanity about the world.

(3) Учените смятат, че тези същества **са изглеждали** повече като шимпанзета, отколкото като хора, и вероятно **са прекарвали** повече от времето си в гъстите гори, където могат да се прехвърлят от едно на друго дърво, без да слизат на земята. (...) Ранните ни предци, които **са се отделили** от общия ни прародител с шимпанзетата, вероятно **са били** способни да се катерят по дърветата и да ходят по земята. (nauka.offnews.bg)

‘Scientists believe that these creatures **looked** more like chimpanzees than humans, and probably **spent** most of their time in dense forests, where they could move from one tree to another without descending to earth. (...) Our early ancestors, who **separated** from our common ancestor with chimpanzees, **were** probably able to climb trees and walk on the earth.’

### Contextual readings of the reported

The reported is the most frequent and the most grammaticalized evidential in terms of obligatorification, i.e., in the majority of its typical contexts it cannot be replaced by another grammatical form.

**From indirect knowledge to quoting.** The general semantics of the reported is most often defined as reporting information from an indirect source, which is unspecified and therefore may be either known or unknown - a concrete person, a hearsay, etc. The speaker presents him/herself as a non-witness of the event. This general semantic interpretation is attested in many of the usual contexts of the reported: colloquial speech, fiction (both author’s speech and dialogue), media texts, etc.

(4) Фактите, които мъжът показа като картини, бяха ужасни. На сутринта той **отиде** до къщата на жена си, за да я помоли да се върне при него с децата. Тя **отказа** и той **си тръгна** много нервиран. Хората, които **срещал** - назова ги по име, го **поздравявали**, но той не им **отвърщал**. Един от тях му **бил** приятел и точно той **се изплашил**, като го **видял** в таква състояние. (Дуляна Герганска, „Аз съм една от вас“)

‘The facts the man showed as pictures were terrible. The next morning, he **went** to his wife’s house to ask her to go back to him with the children. She **refused** and he **went** back home very nervous. People he **met** - he mentioned them by name, **greeted** him but he didn’t answer. One of them **was** a friend of his and it was exactly him who **was scared** when he **saw** him in such a condition.’

The excerpt of a novel in (4) presents the narrator reporting a story she learned from a man she met. The first sentence starts with the narrator’s introducing words with indicative verb forms that she will further retell the men’s story, which is, on the other hand, conveyed by reported forms. It should be noticed that in the middle of the story there is a clause with an indicative aorist that interrupts the reporting and assigns a witness position to the narrator.

In similar contexts the speaker could use reported forms in order to distinguish quoted words.

(5) *Късно снощи мъж ми отива за гъзнапир. Отново му отказват, защото доставката **била** сутринта, тогава да **дойдел**, казват. Той започва да се жалва на касиерката, че не може да не отиде на работа, защото е лекар и това не е честно. Лекарите с мръсни задници ми да **стояли**...* (facebook)

‘Last night my husband went for a toilet paper. They didn’t give him again, because the delivery **was** next morning, he **should come** then, they said. He started to complain to the cashier that he can’t go to work, because he is a doctor and that’s not fair. **Shall** doctors **stay** with dirty asses...’

The speaker used for this story the historical present which is a widespread strategy to present past non-witnessed events. In the story only the quotations are in reported forms in order to be distinguished from the narrator’s speech thus replacing the direct speech.

In the examples given above the speaker takes a clearly non-witness position, pointing out that his or her source of information is another person, but, on the other hand, does not evaluate the credibility of the information as low. What is more, the reported information is rather trustable and the speaker does not express any doubts about its credibility.

**Knowledge and cognitive evaluation.** The choice between evidential or indicative in colloquial speech and fiction may be related to the cognitive classification of the information. A non-witnessed event expressed by a reported form may be further conveyed by indicative because it has been moved to the speaker’s cognitive structures of strong knowledge (Nitsolova 2008, 334-337).

(6a) *Иван **се оженил** миналата година.*

(6b) *Иван **се ожени** миналата година.*

‘John married last year.’

The choice of the indicative aorist does not make the information more reliable, but it rather focuses on the fact itself making the information source irrelevant for the utterance. Contrariwise, by choosing the evidential the speaker intends to underline the indirect source. Subsequently, in such contexts the reported, as opposed to the indicative, may be seen as emphatic.

**Knowledge and mediation.** *Имало едно време...* ‘Once upon a time...’ is the formula to introduce a fairytale, always using the reported evidential. Unlike Albanian, in which only the introducing formula preserves the evidential and the story goes further with past tenses of the indicative, in Bulgarian the whole text is in reported evidential and, what is more, the genre of fairytales is constantly associated with the reported. Similarly, the reported is frequently used in folklore songs and anecdotes. What unites these folklore genres is that the author is anonymous and the storyteller or the singer has the role of a mediator between the information (that he or she learned from somebody else) and the listener(s). The function of the reported is to indicate the indirect way the speaker acquires the information, at once implying the distance in time between the events and the moment of utterance.

The reported has a similar function in history texts pointing out that the information comprises past non-witnessed events recovered by historical sources. A number of researchers consider that, as opposed to the present historical

tense of the indicative, which is the neutral way to present historical events, the reported makes the historical texts sound legendary and associate its usage to the popular science (cf. Nitsolova 2008, 386). Nevertheless, both in folklore and history the credibility of the facts presented by reported is not questioned.

**Knowledge and/or reliability.** Evidentials are believed to express the reliability of the information or the speaker's personal commitment to the utterance. In Bulgarian, this function of the reported is found most often in journalism, but also in colloquial speech and fiction. The purpose of a journalistic text is, at best, to inform about certain events, but also to convince the public that those events are true. To present the facts as reliable, journalists make use not only of lexical connotations, but also of grammatical features, if available. The evidentiality in Bulgarian with its systematic opposition between firsthand and non-firsthand seems to be an expedient means for that purpose.

In journalism the events are presented by the indicative tenses, although the author is most often not a witness, but rather quotes another source. This is usually explained by the intention of the journalist to present the information as directly acquired and subsequently true, but in fact there is a deeper reason which is connected to knowledge. A good number of media texts report about publicly known events or persons and in such context indicative is used, while reported is preferred in case of specific events concerning unknown persons:

(7) *Тръмп **обяви** началото на бързо разработване на вакцина* (nova.bg)

'Trump announced the beginning of a vaccine development.'

(8) *Крадецът **успял** да ухапе единия от продавачите в магазина, който **бил откаран** в болница.* (dariknews.bg)

'The thief bit one of the sellers in the shop who was transported to the hospital.'

The nature of the events reported in the two texts is clearly different: the first one is about a well-known person, the American president, who has made this announcement publicly, in the presence of many media representatives, and whose words will be further transmitted by many media, which makes it a public knowledge and motivates the usage of indicative aorist; contrariwise, the second one concerns a local event involving unknown persons and the indicative is inappropriate. Still, in certain conditions the reported evidential may be used to indicate events of the type of public knowledge:

(9) *Тръмп **обявил** политиката на САЩ в Украйна за безсмислена*

*Бивши високопоставен служител на президентската администрация заяви, че Доналд Тръмп смята, че действията на Вашингтон в Украйна са безсмислени и дразнят Русия, предават РИА Новости и американският вестник The Washington Post, цитирани от Фокус. Според изданието бившият чиновник многократно е обсъждал този въпрос с Тръмп. Според него последните действия на САЩ в Украйна, „са безсмислени и само дразнят руснаците“.* (segabg.com)

'Trump declared US policy in Ukraine meaningless

A former senior official of the presidential administration declared that Donald Trump believes that Washington's actions in Ukraine are meaningless and irritate Russia, RIA Novosti and The Washington Post reported, quoted by Focus. According to the publication, the former official has repeatedly discussed

this issue with Trump. According to him, the recent US actions in Ukraine “are meaningless and only irritate the Russians.”

The title of the news contains a reported form which is usually interpreted either as a sign of non-reliability, i.e., the reporter does not believe that Trump has made the declaration or would like to suggest to the public that it is not the case, or as a sign of disengagement, i.e., the reporter is not sure about the reliability of the information and therefore would not like to take responsibility of it (cf. Guentchéva 1996, 52). Both assumptions are acceptable, but in fact the usage of reported is motivated by the source of information: the public declaration is not made by Trump himself, but by a former official of his administration. Therefore, the disbelief or the disengagement evoked by the reported in the title relies on the quotation of somebody else’s statement, which is explicitly mentioned in the text.

In media, quotations are not necessarily an expression of incertitude or disbelief:

(10) *Тръмп щял да се тества всеки ден за коронавирус* (plovdiv24.bg)  
‘Trump will be tested everyday for coronavirus (he said)’

In the example above the reported is an economical way the words of the president to be quoted.

### Contextual readings of the dubitative

**Unreliability of non-firsthand information.** The dubitative expresses the speaker’s doubt towards the reported information. It is a part of the evidential system in Bulgarian both formally, as its origin is related to the perfect tense, and semantically, as one of its semantic components is the source of information (non-firsthand). The second semantic component of the dubitative is the speaker’s subjective opinion that the information quoted is not to be trusted. The typical contexts of the dubitative are the expressive colloquial speech, fiction and (yellow) media texts. Unlike the other non-firsthand evidentials, it cannot be used in long texts.

(11) *Вадят се какви ми не неща за мен. Видите ли, била съм казала за Цветелин Кънчев, че бил най-великият политик. Но моля ви, политическите ми критерии са малко по-завишени.* (dnes.dir.bg)

‘They say all kind of things about me. You see, (they say) I had said about Tsvetelin Kanchev that he is the greatest politician. But please, my political criteria are a bit higher than that.’

In the sentence above, the dubitative is used in an unambiguous context: a famous actress quotes rumours she finds groundless and therefore wants to disprove.

**Dubitative or reported?** The morphological marker of the dubitative is the auxiliary *бил*, but in some cases of clearly dubitative context it is omitted, and the verb form completely coincides with the reported:

(12) *Пишел автобиография, той не може да пише, само да се подписва, пишел бил, тънак.* (fakti.bg)

‘So he is writing an autobiography, he can’t even write, he can barely sigh, and now he’s writing, idiot.’

In this sentence the author demonstrates his doubt towards the intention declared by the football player Dimitar Berbatov to write an autobiography. In the sentence the verb ‘write’ occurs twice, without and with the dubitative auxiliary, both forms having a dubitative reading. The omission of the auxiliary may be explained by the late grammaticalization of the dubitative in the frame of the evidential system of Bulgarian (cf. Gerdzhikov 2003, 258) and by the language economy principle which applies in this case due to the complexity of the dubitative form. On the other hand, the semantic proximity between the dubitative and the reported (both comprising the semantic component of quoted speech) allows that the latter occurs in dubitative contexts where the doubt is expressed by the intonation or by lexical markers.

## Conclusions

The choice of an evidential form in Bulgarian depends on multiple factors, the most important being the information source, or how the speaker gets to know the information in the utterance. The opposition between the indicative and the indirect evidentials emerged from the perfect tense is based on the type of information source: the indicative is marked for firsthand source whereas the indirect evidentials are marked for non-firsthand source. This opposition is regularly found in any contexts of use and seems to be crucial for the category of evidentiality. A neutralization is possible in cases of further cognitive classification of the information where the indicative is associated with a strong knowledge while the indirect evidentials indicate a weak knowledge. Thus, if the information is classified as well-known for the speaker or for the listener(s) regardless of its source, it may be expressed by the indicative. In such cases the indirect evidentials as opposed to the indicative become an emphatic means to denote an indirect knowledge. The evidentiality system in Bulgarian interacts also with other factors such as the communication strategy of the speaker, the text register and text genre, the pragmatic context of the communication act, etc.

The reliability of the information is another prominent factor, but it is a part of the core semantics of the dubitative only. As for the other two indirect evidentials, the reported and the inferential, they are rather neutral in evaluating the reliability, which may be specified according to the speaker’s intentions by lexical means, by the intonation or by the general context. With this respect an important question arises whether the dubitative should be considered a part of the evidentiality system of Bulgarian.

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**Assoc. Prof. Ekaterina Tarpomanova, PhD**  
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”  
15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd.  
1504 Sofia, Bulgaria  
Email: [katya@slav.uni-sofia.bg](mailto:katya@slav.uni-sofia.bg)