

On the Unusual Variation with *tamam* in the Balkans

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Writing *Festschrift* papers is always a challenge; one wants to respect the honoree in a suitable way by producing a contribution that demonstrates a good effort on one's part, treats interesting material, and, if possible, is in line with the research interests and publications of the honoree. It is my hope that this small piece, dealing as it does with a variable conversational element found across the Balkans, is a fitting tribute, especially since it reflects a deep admiration on my part for the work that the honoree, Grace Fielder, has done on another variable conversational element in the Balkans, the constellation¹ of adversative connectives, including Greek *amá* and Bulgarian *ami*. Moreover, in this case, the honoree has been a good colleague and friend for literally decades, so I happily dedicate this article to Grace, with my congratulations.

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In this piece so appropriately honoring Grace Fielder for a long and distinguished career of important contributions to Balkan linguistics, I examine the range of forms found in languages of the Balkans that are related to Arabic *tamam* 'full, complete.' My goal is at once descriptive, offering an accounting of the forms that are found, but also analytic, in that I attempt to explain the variants that occur. In this way, I am emulating, imperfectly to be sure, however, the superb work of the honoree on a set of Balkan adversative connectives (*e.g.*, Fielder 2008, 2019); one way in which the present study falls short of Grace's model is that I plan to look just at the variation in form, and not any variation in function.

The descriptive basis for this investigation is the following set of forms across various languages of the Balkans:

Albanian	<i>tamam, taman</i>
Balkan Romance	
Aromanian	<i>tamam, tamamá, tamamaná</i>
Meglenoromanian	<i>tamam, taman</i>
Romanian (dialectal)	<i>taman</i>
Balkan Slavic	
Bulgarian	<i>tamám, tamán</i>
Macedonian	<i>tamam, taman</i>
BCMS ²	<i>tàmām/n, tamàm/n</i>
Greek	<i>tamam, tamami</i> (dialectal)
Romani	<i>tamami</i>

To these can be added the dialectal Bulgarian and Macedonian *tastamam* ‘perfect.’

The ultimate source of all of these forms is Arabic, as noted above, but the proximate source for the Balkans is Turkish, where the form *tamam* occurs, in many meanings and, as it happens, in a variety of forms and with various derivatives. The meanings, as given in Redhouse (1979:s.v.), are as follows:

- complete, finished, ready, completely, exact
- just right, true, correct
- being or becoming complete, completion
- finishing, ending, end
- the whole of a thing, complement
- dead, killed
- (as an exclamation) that’s right!
- (used to express unpleasant surprise) There you are! What a mess!

This wide range of meanings in itself is interesting, as is the apparent transition from an ordinary adjective (‘complete,’ etc.) and noun (‘end,’ etc.) to an exclamatory discourse element indicating “unpleasant surprise.” This latter shift has a suggestive parallel, though with a different sense from *tamam*, in the present-day English use

of *totally* as a discourse marker indicating an assurance about shared knowledge in a way that “tracks and nods to the opinions of others,” as McWhorter 2014 puts it.

Looking now at the range of different forms evident in the displayed items above, it turns out that most of the forms are readily explained in terms of variation within Turkish itself. Still, a cataloguing of these differences reveals some ambiguities and in some instances, no complete answers but rather just suggestive pathways for the emergence of these forms in the Balkans.

For instance, the form *tastamam* in dialectal Bulgarian and Macedonian reflects the CVC- emphatic prefixed reduplication that is well represented in Turkish, e.g., *bembeyaz* ‘very white’ from *beyaz* ‘white.’ This pattern is instantiated occasionally in the Balkans, as with Greek *tsiplákis* ‘naked’/*tsirtsiplákis* ‘stark naked,’ from Turkish (*çıplak/çırcıplak* ‘idem’), and even with native roots, as in Bulgarian *gol-goleničǎk*/Macedonian *gol-goleničok* ‘stark naked’, built on the Slavic root *gol-* ‘naked.’ In the case at hand, however, *tastamam* is found in Turkish itself in the meaning ‘perfect,’ so that the occurrence of this form in both Bulgarian and Macedonian most likely—as with the aforementioned Greek forms—is to be treated simply as a direct borrowing of the Turkish emphatic form, rather than a creation within Balkan Slavic.

With regard to *tamami*, found dialectally in Greek and also in Romani, there are several possibilities. First, depending on the precise dialect in question for the Greek, a detail which is not readily available, the addition of a final *-i* in Greek could simply be a “repair strategy” for the problematic phonotactics posed by a loanword ending in a final consonant other than *-s* or *-n*. The dialect provenance of such a form matters, because in northern Greek dialects, final *-m* is possible because underlying high vowels that are unstressed are deleted; this also means that if *tamam* entered Greek in the north, southern speakers could have interpreted it as having a missing final unstressed *-i* and “restored” the *-i* in their usage. Thus in the absence of a clear indication of where this form originated, a phonological basis for the final *-i* must remain speculative. The Romani form does not admit of the same sort of phonotactic account, so that it could well be a borrowing from a Greek source with the final *-i*. Alternatively, both for the Greek and for the Romani, there is a possible, though less likely, Turkish source, namely the noun *tamamî* ‘complementary; completeness, integrity’; this, however, is not a very persuasive account because it is a learned word—with its original Arabic ending intact—and thus would seem to stand outside the rather colloquial register that the exclamatory *tamam* belongs to. There is, however, a phrase *tamamî tamamına* (with accusative and dative forms juxtaposed)

Balkanistica 33 (2020)

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How about changing the second “because”? That is, change it as follows: “... matters, because in northern Greek dialects, final *-m* is possible due to the fact that underlying high vowels ...”

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How about this: “The Romani form does not allow for the same sort of phonotactic argument ...”.

meaning ‘exactly, precisely,’ and conceivably *tamami* could have been extracted from this phrase and subjected to a semantic shift; this account would [also](#) require an accent adjustment from end-stressed Turkish *tamamı* to Greek *tamámi*, so that it is less compelling. Overall, then, the phonotactically based explanation would seem to offer the best account of the occurrence of this variant with final *-i*.

The expression just cited, *tamamı tamamına*, does provide a basis for understanding the two additional Aromanian forms, *tamamá* and *tamamaná*. If it is assumed that the phrase was borrowed into Aromanian, then each piece of the phrase is reflected in these additional forms. The shift from [Turkish high back unrounded *ı*](#) to [Aromanian low back *a*](#) perhaps requires a special assumption, since the Aromanian vowels *ă* (mid central) or *î* (mid high) might be thought to be closer matches to Turkish *ı*; [however](#), it must be realized that loanword phonology is not always an exact matching exercise and there can be some “leakage” in the adaptation of a loanword into a borrowing language’s system.

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What remains to be addressed is the form *taman*, with final *-n*. This, too, has a direct Turkish source, though other possibilities need to be considered as well. In particular, *taman* is found in Turkish, cited for instance in Redhouse (1979:s.v) and labeled there as “provincial,” and means ‘you know; well!’ It presumably is the same word as *tamam* with the final nasal somehow being affected, perhaps as simply as via a cross with another exclamatory discourse item, specifically *aman*, from the Arabic for ‘mercy,’ but used as an exclamation with meanings of surprise or unhappiness, imperfectly glossed as ‘Oh! Ah me!’ or the like.³ Moreover, a dialectal sound change of *-m#* to *-n#* within Turkish cannot be ruled out, though there are no identifiable dialects with such a change. In either case, whatever the source of Turkish *taman*, the Balkan variation could have resulted from the availability of both forms on the Turkish side of the ledger. There are, however, some further considerations to take into account here. In particular, in part of South Slavic, taking in much of Croatian, as discussed recently by Pennington 2019, etymological final *-m* has undergone a sound change, becoming *-n*. Thus, a form *tamam*, borrowed from Turkish, could well have ended up as *taman* in some of South Slavic, so that a Balkan-internal account cannot be entirely ruled out, at least as far as the *-n#* form in Croatian is concerned. However, the other South Slavic and Balkan languages with *taman* are not amenable to such an account, [inasmuch](#) as they do not show a sound change of *-m#* to *-n#*;⁴ and, while a cross with *aman* is possible in any of the Balkan languages that have both *tamam* and *aman*, such developments tend to be

rather sporadic in nature so that invoking it multiple times for the emergence of *taman*, while possible, is less than satisfying.

There is more that can be said about other discourse elements in the Balkans and variation in form involving nasals. For instance, both *korsan* and *korsam* are attested in Turkish for ‘as if, supposedly,’ though the *-n* forms do not occur in Balkan languages, and Bulgarian has both *zatǎ* and *zatǎn* ‘indeed, really’ from Turkish *zaten* ‘essentially; already.’ But for now, and for the purpose of honoring Grace, this small glimpse into the multiple forms of *tamam* is, well, *tamam*, even if not *tastamam*!

Notes

1. Fielder 2019 uses “constellation” in the technical sense proposed in collaborative work of mine with Richard Janda (as in Joseph and Janda 1985, Janda and Joseph 1999, and related works). Both that technical sense and a simply metaphorical sense work here.
2. The Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS) complex is not strictly speaking part of Balkan Slavic, as defined in Friedman and Joseph (2021), in which that label is restricted to those South Slavic languages that participate most fully in the Balkan *Sprachbund*. However, some Balkan features are found in BCMS, so that including it in this survey of forms of *tamam* in the region is perfectly reasonable.
3. I thank my wife, Mary Clark, for this suggestion. Note that though now sounding rather old-fashioned, *mercy* could be used in English as an exclamation of surprise or unhappiness.
4. A change of *m* to *n* in the 1pl personal ending is found dialectally in Macedonian and Bulgarian (e.g., *sne* for expected *sme* ‘we are’) but first of all involves a non-final nasal and second seems to be best analyzed as a morphological change due to influence from the 1pl pronoun, as argued by Joseph 2004.

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