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NOTES ON THE ENGLISH PRESENT PERFECT

James D. McCawley

The largely programmatic second half of my 1971 article 'Tense and time reference in English' was devoted to the present perfect. In this paper I will fill several gaps and correct certain errors in my earlier treatment of the present perfect.

1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE USES OF THE PRESENT PERFECT

In the 1971 article I distinguished four separate uses of the present perfect:

(a) to indicate that a state of affairs prevailed throughout some interval stretching from the past into the present ('Universal'):

I've known Max since 1960.

(b) to indicate the existence of past events ('Existential'):

I have read 'Principia Mathematica' five times.

(c) to indicate that the direct effect of a past event still continues ('Stative'):

I can't come to your party tonight – I've caught the flu.

(d) to report hot news ('Hot news'):

Malcolm X has just been assassinated.

In discussing the question of whether these four uses correspond to distinct logical structures, I considered briefly but rejected an idea that might have provided the basis for identifying the 'hot news' sense with the 'existential' sense:

one might say that the 'hot news' present perfect is an existential present perfect in which the speaker bases the [domain of the time variable] not on his own presuppositions as to when the event in question might happen but on his estimate of his addressee's presuppositions: if the addressee does not know that Malcolm X has been killed, then for him the period in which Malcolm X might be killed extends indefinitely far into the future and thus includes the present.

In rejecting that idea as ad hoc, I made the mistake of assuming that presuppositions are simply beliefs of the speaker. I have subsequently come to accept Karttunen's (1974) account of pragmatic presupposition, in which the interpretation of sentences is based on what the speaker

and addressee take to be shared knowledge rather than on the knowledge or beliefs that they have individually. Thus for Karttunen (see also McCawley 1979) a pragmatic presupposition is a demand that a linguistic element makes on contexts, where the 'context' is the set of propositions that the parties to the discourse treat as shared knowledge at the given point in the discourse; a sentence containing the element is acceptable only relative to a context that entails the 'pragmatically presupposed' proposition. Thus sensitivity to the presumable state of the addressee's knowledge would not be a peculiarity of the hot news present perfect but something that it shares with virtually all uses of language.

In the passage above, I alluded to the presupposition of the existential present perfect that events of the type in question are possible at the time of the speech act, as illustrated by the fact that only (1b) and not (1a) can be used if the exhibition has closed, or, even if the exhibition is still running, if the addressee is known to be unable to visit it by virtue of illness or imprisonment:

- (1) a. *Have you seen the Monet exhibition?*
b. *Did you see the Monet exhibition?*

This statement of the presupposition is all right as far as it goes but leaves unclear what the appropriate sense of 'possible' is. Let us take the relevant sense to be: the speaker and addressee's shared knowledge does not rule out the continued occurrence of events of the kind in question. Then a proposition that the speaker knows to be impossible can still be possible in the sense that is relevant to the present perfect: if you know that an assassin killed the archbishop of Schenectady two days ago, you know that it is not possible for an assassin to kill the archbishop (you can't kill someone who is already dead), but if you are speaking with someone that you cannot presume to know of the archbishop's assassination, your shared knowledge still allows for the possibility that the archbishop is still alive and can still be murdered, and thus the (pragmatic) presupposition of the existential present perfect is fulfilled in the cases that I had taken to constitute the separate hot news present perfect, as in *The archbishop of Schenectady has been murdered by Alaskan separatists*.

A fairly obvious test of the adequacy of the logical structures that I proposed or hinted at (I was quite explicit in my claims about the logical structures of the existential and universal present perfects but very implicit as to those of the stative and hot news perfects) is to form negations of typical example sentences and determine whether the meanings of the resulting sentences are in fact the contradictories of the meanings of the original sentences. The structure that I proposed for the existential present perfect passes this test with flying colours:

- (2) a. *I have read 'War and Peace'*
 $(\exists t: t \leq \text{now}) (\text{I read 'W\&P' at } t)$
 b. *I haven't read 'War and Peace'*
 $\sim(\exists t: t \leq \text{now}) (\text{I read 'W\&P' at } t)$

An example of a negation of a hot news present perfect, if there is such a thing as distinct from the existential present perfect, would be:

(3) *The Soviet Army has not withdrawn from Afghanistan.*

This can plausibly be rendered by a formula like that in (2b), with a negated existentially quantified time variable, as it should if the hot news present perfect is simply the existential present perfect used in a situation in which the addressee lacks information about the events reported. However, (3) raises a problem regarding whether a plausible border can be drawn between existential and stative present perfects. Note that (3) does not imply that the Soviet Army has never withdrawn from Afghanistan (maybe they invaded Afghanistan, withdrew, and then invaded it again a couple of years later, in which case (3) is appropriate if they are still there). The bound variable is apparently restricted to relevantly 'recent' values. But the same is true of stative present perfects, e.g. (4) does not imply that NO event of your breaking your arm has ever taken place, only that you have not broken it in the recent past:

(4) *Don't be alarmed at these bandages— I haven't broken my arm.*

If the domain of the time variable in existential present perfects can bear an implicit restriction to some narrow interval of the recent past, telling the difference between an existential present perfect and a stative present perfect will not be so easy as I made it out to be in my 1971 paper. For example, note that (2a) or (2b) can be embedded in a context in which the time variable is taken to range over only the last few weeks, as in a conversation between students in a comparative literature course in which 'War and Peace' is one of the assigned readings:

(5) *Have you read 'War and Peace'?*

No, I haven't. I've had to spend all my time doing the anthropology readings, so I'm just going to have to rely on what I remember from reading it in high school.

It is not clear whether the answer in (5) should be regarded as a negated existential present perfect (that is, as an assertion that there is no instance of the speaker reading 'War and Peace' in the limited interval of time that is understood to be at issue) or as a negated stative present perfect, that is, as an assertion that the speaker is not in the state of preparedness for exam questions and class discussion of 'War and Peace' that one normally enters by reading 'War and Peace'.

Negated stative present perfects such as (4) provide a basis for improving my vague suggestions as to the logical structure for that use of the present perfect. My suggestion that it has the meaning 'direct effect of . . . continues' yields the ludicrous result that (4) ought to mean 'the direct effect of my breaking my arm does not continue', i.e. my broken arm has healed. But what (4) means is that the arm wasn't broken in the first place (or at least, that it wasn't recently broken: it is neutral as to

whether you had a broken arm as a child). A better paraphrase would have been '(state of affairs under discussion) results from . . .': what (4) says is that the bandage-swathed condition of my arm is not the result of my breaking it. But this won't do either. If there has been a recent event of the type in question, you can't use a negated stative present perfect merely to deny that the present state of affairs is the result of that event, e.g. if you do in fact have a cold, you can't say *I haven't caught a cold* in the course of explaining that your absence from tonight's party will be for some reason other than your cold.

My guess as to how these observations can be reconciled in a single analysis of what I have been referring to as the 'stative present perfect' is that it should be treated as an existential present perfect accompanied by an implicature (whether conversational or conventional I am not sure) that the event type that is referred to would normally result in the present state of affairs that the speaker conveys is the case (with an affirmative present perfect) or is not the case (with a negated present perfect), e.g. in (4) one says that in the relevant past interval there is no instance of your breaking your arm and implicates that the occurrence of such an event would lead naturally to you having your arm in bandages. The implicature and the assertion are interconnected, however, in that the relation between past events and present states that is involved in the implicature determines how far into the past the domain of the bound time variable should extend. The following illustrates the possibility of that interval being quite short:

(6) *I haven't eaten yet.*

Here the sentence implies only that the speaker has not yet consumed the meal that is appropriate to the current time of the current day, not that he has never eaten; the domain of the bound time variable extends only as far back as the most recent normal 'meal time' relative to the assumed culture (e.g. 'lunch time' on 29 Jan., 1974), and the sentence conveys that the speaker has not yet eaten that particular meal (e.g. he has not eaten his lunch for 29 Jan., 1974), even though he may very well have eaten a candy bar and a doughnut in the temporal stretch in question.

Let us turn to the universal present perfect. Straightforward combination of negation with a universal present perfect yields sentences like (7):

(7) *I haven't lived in Chicago for thirty years.*

This sentence does not normally convey the negation of a universal present perfect but rather a universal present perfect of a negation: that '~(I live in Chicago)' is true at every time between thirty years ago and now.¹ However, it is possible to embed (7) in contexts where it

[1] The fact that (7) conveys that the speaker lived in Chicago until about thirty years ago and then left is clearly a matter of conversational implicature:

can more readily be interpreted as the negation of a universal present perfect:

- (8) *Unlike you, I haven't lived in Chicago for thirty years, so I of course defer to your judgement on where we should go for a bowl of czarnina.*

I accordingly do not regard (7) as conflicting with my claim that the universal present perfect has a logical structure involving a universally quantified variable whose domain extends from the past into the present. However, sentences that do pose a serious problem for that claim have been pointed out by Robert McCoard (1978:46), for example:

- (9) *I've lived in Chicago on and off for ten years.*

This present perfect is clearly a 'universal', especially in view of the possibility of sentences in which it is identified with present perfects that are universal if anything is:

- (10) *Fred has lived in Chicago for ten years, and so have I on and off.*

The problem is that the ten year period in (9) cannot be interpreted as the domain of a universally quantified time variable: (9) does not mean that you have lived in Chicago at every moment of some interval, nor does it mean that *I live in Chicago on and off* is true of every moment of some interval.

There are various ways in which one might alter my proposed logical structure for universal present perfects so as to allow for sentences like (9). While I do not have a firm conclusion as to what revision is correct, I wish to call attention to one alternative analysis in which the universal present perfect' can be analysed as not involving a universal quantifier. Dowty 1979 argues convincingly that the semantics of time must be done in terms of intervals of time rather than just points. (A point in time for Dowty is a degenerate interval: a closed time interval whose endpoints coincide.) I wish to suggest that a 'universal present perfect' may simply be a proposition that is asserted to hold OF AN INTERVAL extending from the past up to the present, not necessarily of every point of that interval. *John lives in Chicago on and off* (tenseless) is a proposition that can be true only of intervals, not of points in time. In many instances, a proposition is true of an interval if and only if it is true of every point of that interval, as is the case with state propositions such as *John be tired*,²

if the speaker either has never lived in Chicago or left Chicago at a time that in round figures is more than thirty years ago, he would have been obliged to say so since he could then have been more informative than he was, at no extra cost.

[2] Taylor 1977 argues that stative propositions have the property of being true on an interval if and only if they are true at all points of the interval.

in which case the difference between my original proposal and the alternative that I am suggesting here is of no significance. Examples like (9) suggest that where the two proposals diverge, it is the interval proposal and not the universal quantifier proposal that best accounts for the possibility of a 'universal present perfect'.

It has often been remarked that English is unusual in using a present perfect in the cases that I have identified as 'universal': such languages as German, French, Russian, and Japanese use a present tense instead. I conjecture that the English present perfect here represents a compromise between two conflicting demands: a requirement that the present tense be used to convey that a proposition is true of an interval containing the present (e.g. *Larry is in New York this week*) and the requirement that past time reference be marked as such. While the interval involved in the 'universal present perfect' includes the present, the bulk of the interval lies in the past.

2. EVIDENCE FOR AN EMBEDDED PAST IN THE PRESENT PERFECT

A fairly simple demonstration that present perfects involve an embedded past tense is provided by the possibility of combining them with relative clauses in which a simple past is used to indicate simultaneity with the time variable that I have posited:

- (11) a. *I've never met a man that I didn't like.*
 b. *I've often read books that I wasn't able to understand.*
 c. *The mayor has just stabbed a reporter who was heckling her.*
 d. *I've lived for thirty years in houses that had leaking faucets.*
 e. *Can I see the doctor right away? I've eaten something that had poison in it.*

In uttering (11a), Will Rogers was claiming that as soon as he met any man, he liked him. By contrast, if he had said *I've never met a man I haven't liked*, he would have conveyed only that he ultimately grew to like everyone he met, without indicating whether he took an instant liking to them. (11b) refers to understanding the books at the time you read them and is non-committal as to whether you subsequently understood them. In (11c) the reference is to the mayor stabbing a reporter while he was heckling her; with *who had been heckling her*, the sentence would convey that an interval had elapsed between the heckling and the stabbing. The speaker in (11d) is saying that wherever he lived the faucets leaked while he lived there; it is noncommittal as to whether the faucets leaked before he moved in or after he moved out. Finally, (11e) refers to the food containing poison at the time the speaker ate it and is neutral as to whether the poison is still in the food (it is immaterial whether in the course of digestion the cyanide has already separated out of the brownie that had contained it).

Note that in all these cases a past tense is completely normal despite the fact that there is no apparent past reference point, in the sense of

Reichenbach (1947): the past tense does not refer to an already established past time, nor is there any time adverb providing a reference for the past tense. In each instance the past tense refers to the variable time of the present perfect, and there is temporal 'agreement' between the relative clause and the main clause notwithstanding the different surface tenses that they manifest. An analysis of present perfects as having a past tense embedded in a superstructure that provides a present tense enables one to make sense of this otherwise anomalous pattern of agreement. For example, suppose that (11b) is assigned the logical structure (12), in accordance with what I have suggested about the existential present perfect:³

$$(12) \text{ (Many } t: t \leq \text{now) At}(t, (\exists x: (x \text{ book}) \wedge \sim(\text{I understand } x)) \\ (\text{I read } x))$$

I assume that 'At t ' gives rise to a tense marker whose present, past, or future form depends on whether t is included in, prior to, or subsequent to the time of the next higher structure (in this case, the present time), and that that tense marker is distributed over the clauses that the 'At' commands. Those steps plus the steps involved in formation of restrictive relative clauses yield the derived structure (13):

$$(13) \text{ (Many } t: t \leq \text{now) (I PAST}_t \text{ read a book that I PAST}_t \text{ not} \\ \text{understand)}$$

If the formation of present perfects involves adjunction of a present tense marker to an S that is combined with a quantifier expression binding a time variable whose domain includes the present time, (13) will yield a structure having PRESENT + PAST in the main clause (thus, a present perfect) but PAST in the relative clause.

3. PRESENT PERFECTS WITH A VARIABLE REFERENCE POINT

For Reichenbach, the present perfect corresponded to the formula $E - S, R$, i.e. the time of the speech act is the reference point, and the reported event is prior to it. Reichenbach's analysis, however, is insufficiently general: the controlling factor is not whether the reference point coincides with the time of the speech act but whether it coincides with a time that is referred to by the present tense. The latter generalisation takes in more cases than Reichenbach's, since it covers cases in which the reference point is a variable time that includes the present, as in sentences referring to panchronic generalisations such as the following:

[3] I assume here a system of RESTRICTED quantification, in which each quantifier is combined with two propositional functions, one giving the domain over which its variable ranges, the other being the function whose truth in that domain is at issue. See McCawley 1980 for arguments against the standard framework of unrestricted quantification, in which all bound variables of a given type have the same domain. For arguments in favour of the analysis of restrictive clauses assumed here, in which they are conjoined to a clause having the head noun in predicate position, see McCawley 1981.

- (14) a. *I often take aspirins when I've caught a cold.*
 b. *I usually eat lightly when I've had a big dinner the night before.*
 c. *If a person has been weaned too early, he generally has a nasty disposition.*
 d. *Persons who have lived in one city all their lives are narrow-minded.*
 e. *A country that has been ruled by a philosopher can't be all bad.*
 f. *Fred always calls me whenever he has run out of money.*
 g. *There's always a 'Tribune' reporter on the scene when a disaster has occurred.*
 h. *You know, this guy whose résumé you think looks so good was sent to prison for burglary last year. I think it's stupid to give a position of responsibility to someone who has been convicted of a felony a year before.*

In none of these sentences does the present perfect refer only to events that are prior to the speech act, e.g. (14d) implies that if your as yet unborn grandson lives all his life in one city he will be narrow-minded. I interpret these examples as involving a use of the present tense for points and intervals of time that are 'unanchored', in the sense of having no determinate relationship to the present. This includes both cases like (14) in which the time in question is a variable that takes past, present, and future values, and instances in which a constant time is unanchored by virtue of its role in a fiction whose temporal relation to the real world is left unspecified:

- (15) *I've just read a story in which someone steals the crown jewels.*

Present perfects in such sentences are exactly parallel to ordinary present perfects, provided the time referred to by the present tense is used for the reference point:

- (16) a. *In that story, someone who has just been released from prison steals the crown jewels.*
 b. *In 'The big toenail', a man who has lived in Scranton all his life takes a trip to Binghampton.*
 c. *I'm writing a story in which a student who has read 'War and Peace' five times fails a comp. lit. exam.*

The same is true of present tenses that refer to future times in conditional clauses:

- (17) a. *If I ever meet a woman who has read 'War and Peace' five times, I'll ask her to marry me.*
 b. *Keep searching until you find a linguist who has done field work on Burushaski and would be interested in working for us.*

- c. *When you have worked on this language for thirty years, you'll know how Boas felt.*

The one instance in which the present tense appears to be used for a time that cannot serve as reference point for a present perfect is that of the 'futurate' present tense:

- (18) *On Friday the Pirates play a team that has been in last place for two weeks.*

Here a present perfect occurs but has the present time and not Friday as its reference point, i.e. two weeks has to be the time that the unnamed team has been in last place as of now, not the time that they will have been in last place as of Friday. Note that this is true even if the National League standings and schedule are such as to make it impossible for that team to get out of last place by Friday (though *On Friday the Pirates play a team that will have been in last place for two weeks* is possible in that case). It may be possible to explain away this exception by accepting the suggestion (by Ellen Prince, as elaborated in Dowty 1979:157) that the time reference of future progressive clauses is the present (the time of the plan or schedule that is alluded to) rather than the future time that is mentioned, though at the moment I maintain neutrality on that proposal.

It is interesting to note that the sentences in (14) allow a present perfect even more freely than do corresponding nongeneric clauses:

- (19) c. *?My grandfather has been weaned too early, so he has a nasty disposition.*
 e. *?Bhutan has been ruled by a philosopher, namely King Phidliput (A.D. 843-902).*
 h. *?Fred Schwartz has been convicted of burglary a year ago.*

In no instance that I have been able to devise is a present perfect less natural in the adverbial clause of panchronic sentences like (14) than in a corresponding temporally anchored sentence like those of (19). I conjecture that this may be because the panchronic generalisation may provide the very basis for the 'present relevance' that is often held to be a necessary condition for the use of a present perfect: the information that the philosopher-king Phidliput ruled Bhutan in the ninth century does not tell us anything about Bhutan now (thus the oddity of (19e)), though one can manufacture a generalisation such as (14e) that would make that information of relevance to the question of what Bhutan today is like.

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