On the Cross-Linguistic Variation of 'One-Step Past-Referring' Tenses
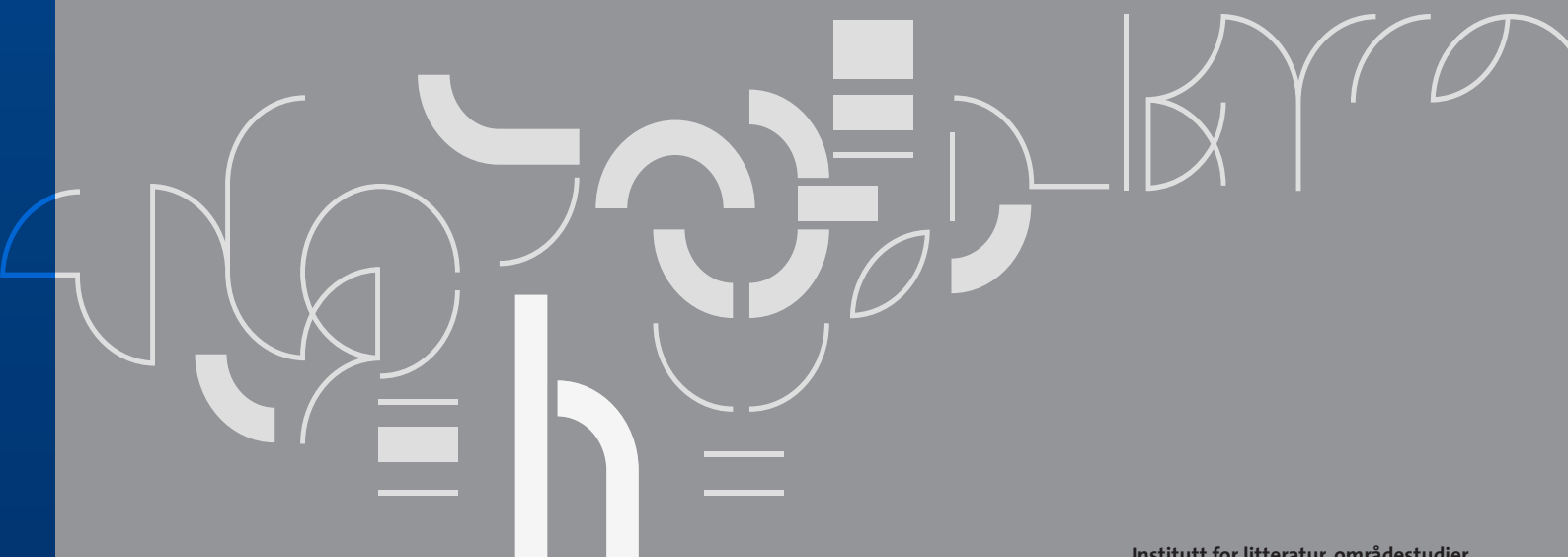
Gerhard Schaden
CNRS Laboratoire de linguistique formelle
Université Paris 7

On the Cross-Linguistic Variation of 'One-Step Past-Referring' Tenses [*]

Gerhard Schaden
CNRS Laboratoire de linguistique formelle
Université Paris 7

`gerhard.schaden@linguist.jussieu.fr`

Abstract

This paper proposes a new look at the so-called 'present-perfect puzzle'. It suggests that it is in fact part of a bigger problem, concerning all tenses in a language situating an event one step before the moment of utterance.

I argue that present perfects compete with simple past tenses, and that the distribution of these tenses shows signs of the impact of this competition. The outcome of the competition is argued to be heavily dependent on which of the two tense-forms is the default.

A pragmatic theory is proposed which accounts for the reduced distribution of the present perfect in languages like English and Spanish, and the reduced distribution of the simple past tense in languages like French and German.

1 Introduction

The cross-linguistic variation of the present perfects has received much attention in recent years. As far as I am aware, all scholars involved in the discussion base their claims in one way or another on the influential paper by Portner (2003). This article has been criticised in various aspects. However, the crucial assumption of Portner has remained unchallenged: the behavior of the present perfect in languages like English is to be explained in the core-grammar of the languages involved, that is, either in syntax or semantics. More precisely, according to Portner and his followers, the culprit of the rather eccentric behavior of the present perfect in such languages is — in one way or another — the present tense feature.

The aim of the present paper is threefold: first, I will show that any theory making the assumption of a semantic or syntactic origin for the variation of the perfect tenses will

---

fail, because there is data which contradicts this basic assumption. Second, I will show that the present perfect is not the only tense to vary cross-linguistically: the simple past tense does so, too. Crucially, the simple past tenses vary in a way that is interrelated with the variation of the present perfect tenses. Thirdly, I will propose a new, pragmatic and competition-driven account of the distribution of what I call "one-step past-referring tenses". One-step past-referring tenses are tenses which locate an eventuality (or an interval of assertion in the sense of Klein (1994), depending on your favorite theory of what a *tense* should do) prior to the moment of utterance, but without the intervention of a secondary point of reference, as would be the case with a pluperfect.

The paper is structured as follows: I will first lay out the present perfect puzzle as it has been stated by Portner (2003) and his followers. As far as I can see, this is generally agreed upon. Then, I will present some solutions to this problem, and outline very briefly the problems they face. After that, I will introduce the idea of competition between present perfects and simple past tenses, and present the data which a grammar-driven approach to the present perfect variation cannot handle. I suggest that in a language like English or Spanish, the present perfect is the loser of the competition, whereas in French or German, the simple past tense shows evidence of being blocked in certain contexts.

Finally, the last section presents the analysis I am advocating. It is based on standard assumptions on the semantics of the simple past tense and the present perfect tense, and uses Gricean pragmatics to explain the respective distributions of these tenses in languages like English vs. languages like French.

2 The Present Perfect Puzzle

It is a well-known fact that present perfects differ cross-linguistically. In languages like English or Spanish, the present perfect does not combine felicitously with past-denoting temporal adverbials like *yesterday* or *at five o'clock*.[1]

(1)   a.   *John has arrived yesterday | at five o'clock.
       b.   *Juan ha llegado ayer | a las cinco.
           J.   has arrived yesterday | at the five.

In languages like French or German, such combinations are perfectly felicitous:

(2)   a.   Jean est arrivé hier | à cinq heures.
           J.   is   arrived yesterday | at five o'clock.
       b.   Hans ist gestern | um fünf gekommen.
           H.   is yesterday | at five come.

---

[1]These are the *definite* past expressions of Klein (1992), opposed to *indefinite* past expressions like *on Mondays* and the like, which are acceptable with the present perfect.

Another difference between these two types of present perfects are the so-called "life-time" effects: dead persons or no longer existing objects are not felicitous in subject-position with a present perfect in English and Spanish:

(3)   a. #Einstein has visited Princeton.
        b. #Einstein ha visitado Princeton.
            E.   has visited   Princeton.

According to Portner (2003), (3a-b) are not agrammatical. However, they require Einstein to be alive in order to be felicitously uttered. In languages like French or German, no such life-time effect obtains:

(4)   a. Einstein a   visité Princeton.
            E.   has visited P.
        b. Einstein hat Princeton besucht.
            E.   has P.   visited.

Various explanations for this pattern have been suggested. Scholars like Klein (1992, 2000) have proposed that there is a parametric variation between the PERFECT-features of languages like English and those of languages like German.

However, as Portner showed convincingly, this cannot be the answer to our problem: in English, the only perfect-form concerned by the restrictions observed so far are the present perfects. All other perfect forms, like future or past perfects, but also perfects embedded under modals, or involved in participial constructions,[2] exhibit no restrictions against localizing past-denoting expressions:

(5)   a. Mary had arrived yesterday.
        b. Mary will have arrived yesterday.
        c. Mary might have arrived yesterday.
        d. Having arrived yesterday, Mary will be able to accompany us tomorrow.

This is not specific to English: the Spanish perfects pattern alike:

(6)   a. María había llegado ayer.
            M.   had   arrived yesterday.
        b. María habrá   llegado ayer.
            M.   will have arrived yesterday.
        c. María debería haber llegado ayer.
            M.   should   have arrived yesterday.
        d. Habiendo llegado ayer,   María podrá   accompañarnos.
            Having   arrived yesterday, M.   will be able to accompany us.

---

[2]In order to refer to all these perfects forms, in the rest of the paper I will use the term of '*non-present perfects*'.

As is to be expected, French or German perfects do not show any restrictions in these tenses, either:[3]

(7)   a.   Marie était arrivée hier.
              M.   was   arrived yesterday.
        b.   Marie sera   arrivée hier.
              M.   will be arrived yesterday.
        c.   Marie pourrait être arrivée hier.
              M.   could   be   arrived yesterday.
        d.   Étant arrivée hier,   Marie pourra   nous accompagner.
              Being arrived yesterday, M.   will be able us   accompany.

(8)   a.   Maria war gestern   angekommen.
              M.   was yesterday arrived.
        b.   Maria wird gestern   angekommen sein.
              M.   will yesterday arrived   be.
        c.   Maria könnte gestern   angekommen sein.
              M.   could yesterday arrived   be.

The restrictions against localizing temporal expressions are not the only ones to vanish with non-present perfects: as can be shown, there are no life-time effects either associated with these tenses.

(9)   In 1942, Hitler attacked Russia. Napoleon had tried before him, but without success.

If there were any life-time effects to be observed with a pluperfect in English, one should expect them to arise at a contextually fixed moment of reference (the Reichenbachian R (cf. Reichenbach, 1947/1966)). In (9), the discourse context fixes R at the year 1942. But at this moment, Napoleon had long been dead. However, (9) remains felicitous. Thus, there is no life-time effect. As is to be expected, German and French pluperfects do not show any life-time effects either in such a context.[4]

The conclusions that have been drawn from these facts are the following: the English (and Spanish) present perfects have restrictions they do not share with any other perfect construction in the respective language. On the other hand, non-present perfects seem to be rather similar cross-linguistically. Furthermore, the German and French present perfects behave in a way that is consistent with non-present perfects not only in these two languages, but also in English and Spanish.

---

[3]In German, one cannot use the participial construction as freely as in English. The sentence corresponding to (5d) would not be acceptable in German, for reasons however that do not concern the perfect.

[4]For want of space, I have to omit the demonstration that there are no life-time effects with any perfect in French or German, and that the Spanish pluperfect behaves like the English pluperfect with respect to life-time effects.

Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that the French and German present perfects are not odd perfect tempora, lacking the typical current relevance restrictions characteristic for such tenses, as is assumed for instance in the typological litterature of what is sometimes called the "Bybee-Dahl school" (cf., for instance Bybee & Dahl, 1989). It appears on the contrary that German or French present perfects are more in line with the general perfect behavior than their English or Spanish equivalents.

Much of the recent litterature has tried to explain how the restrictions applying to the present perfect come about, without abandoning the idea of a unified semantics for the PERFECT-feature in languages like English or Spanish.

2.1   The 'Present-Tense-As-Culprit' Solution

One of the the most appealing aspects of Portner (2003) is the fact that he manages to give a unified account of the PERFECT-feature in English, by shifting away the problem from the perfect itself to the PRESENT-tense feature. As far as I am aware, all subsequent work has followed him in this move, although his account of the perfect has been contradicted on several points and has been subsequently heavily modified.

Because of the very limited space available, I will have to be rather brief about the individual proposals; I will however try to show their interest and where they run into problems. For a more detailed presentation and criticism of the proposals, I invite the interested reader to consult Rothstein (2006) or Schaden (2007).

Portner proposes that the impossibility of a sentence like (1) is due to the clash of two different presuppositions: an Extended-Now (XN) presupposition triggered by the present tense, and a non-XN feature triggered by the localizing temporal adverbial.

(10)   a.   XN presupposition of the Present Tense: A present tense sentence is only usable in context c if the event it describes falls within c's Extended Now.[5]
       b.   For any past time adverbial α, the use of α in context c presupposes that no event e described by α in c overlaps c's Extended Now.[6]

When a sentence like (1) occurs, we therefore have two presuppositions which cannot be satisfied at the same time. Therefore, such a sentence is out. But, as Nishiyama & Koenig (2004, 102f.) have pointed out, the problem does not seem to be presuppositional. It is a standard assumption that one can attack presuppositional content by the means of metalinguistic negation. However, a life-time effect is not affected by metalinguistic negation:

(11)   #Einstein has not visited Princeton. He is not alive.

The proposal of Rothstein (2006) is very much in the spirit of Portner, and follows the

---

[5]Cf. Portner (2003, 496).
[6]Cf. Portner (2003, 496).

lead of Musan (2002): according to this idea, in languages like English and Swedish, the present feature is able to restrict the choice of the localizing temporal adverbial, whereas in languages like German, this is not the case. He assumes a basically syntactic mechanism, where something like a non-past feature of the PRESENT enters in conflict with the past-denotation of the temporal adverbial. Basing his proposal on syntactic c-command, Rothstein predicts that in languages with restricted present perfects, the temporal adverbial is c-commanded by the perfect auxiliary, and therefore, the auxiliary is able to restrict the choice of the temporal adverbial. In languages with an unrestricted present perfect tense, the perfect auxiliary does not c-command the temporal auxiliary, and is not able to interfere with the selection of a temporal adverbial. However, as I have argued in (Schaden, 2007, p. 67ff.) this proposal, designed for the Germanic languages, cannot be applied to French.

Pancheva & von Stechow (2004) came up with another way of attributing the perfect variation to the PRESENT-feature. They suppose in their analysis for English and German that these two languages have different present tense features. However, in their analysis, the present tenses of English and German do not differ with respect to their presuppositions, but with respect to the temporal semantics. The intuition behind the formulae in (12) is that the German present is a non-past, whereas the English would be a 'real' present tense (cf. Giorgi & Pianesi, 1997).

(12)   a. $[\![\text{present}]\!]_E = \lambda p.\lambda i[i = n \wedge p(i)]$ [English]
        b. $[\![\text{present}]\!]_G = \lambda p.\lambda i[n \preceq i \wedge p(i)]$ [German]
              where $t \preceq t'$ iff there is no $t'' \subset t'$ such that $t'' \prec t$.

However, what one should generally expect according to such a proposal is that languages with similar present tenses have similar present perfects. But this is not the case, as has been argued by (Rothstein, 2006, p. 82ff.). The Swedish present tense patterns systematically with the German present tense against the English present, yet the Swedish present perfect behaves like the English present perfect: it does not allow for a past adverbial to apply to the present perfect.

Therefore, Rothstein argues that the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the behavior of the present tense in a language is not correlated with the behavior of the present perfect in the same language.

2.2   Are there Morphological Reasons for the Variation?

In the languages we have considered so far, there is a morphological fact that might play a role for the distribution of the present perfect: English and Spanish have only one perfect auxiliary, namely *have*, whereas French and German have two perfect auxiliaries, namely *have* and *be*.

(13)   a.   English: b.   Spanish:
            (i)   I have arrived.   (i)   He   llegado.
            (ii)   I have sung.   have arrived.
                                                              (ii)   He   cantado.
                                                                     Have sung.

(14)   a.   French: b.   German:
            (i)   Je suis arrivé(e).   (i)   Ich bin angekommen.
                   I   am   arrived.   I   am arrived.
            (ii)   J' ai   chanté.   (ii)   Ich habe gesungen.
                   I   have sung.   I   have sung.

However, as shown by (Rothstein, 2006, p. 76f.), this is no general pattern correlated
with the distribution of the present perfect: the Danish perfect has two auxiliaries, *have*
and *be*, but nevertheless, it's perfect shows an English-like distribution:

(15)   a.   *Han er kommet igår.[7]   b.   *Han har arbejdet igår.
            He   is come   yesterday.   He   has worked yesterday.

Therefore, the fact of having one or more perfect auxiliary does not play a role either in
the distribution of the present perfects and their cross-linguistic variation.

2.3   The Basic Assumption and Some Reasons to Disagree with them

Summing up: none of the analyses I have considered here assumes that the semantics of
the PERFECT-feature is involved in the cross-linguistic variation of the present perfects.
Such a position has some important advantages. First of all, languages like English
may be assigned one single value for the PERFECT-feature, even though the restrictions
on present- and non-present perfects are not the same. Taking this reasoning further,
one can assume cross-linguistically one single value for the PERFECT-feature. This is a
consequence of the analysis that one should try to maintain.

All analyses assume that the cause of the variation of the present perfects — as it cannot
be the perfect — must be in some way the PRESENT. While the exact implementation of
this idea varies widely, the basic incompatibility is always the one between the PRESENT-
feature and some other element of the sentence.

Finally, all analyses assume that the cause for the cross-linguistic variation of the present
perfect is rooted somewhere in the semantics or the syntax, that is, somewhere in the
core-grammar of the language. This means that these analyses are committed to the
view that sentences like (1) — repeated below — are *agrammatical*.

(1)   a.   *John has arrived yesterday | at five o'clock.

---

[7]Examples in (15) taken from Rothstein (2006, p. 76.).

    b. *Juan ha llegado ayer | a las cinco.
       J.   has arrived yesterday | at the five.

However, in the (not so recent) literature, as well as in corpora, such examples are attested for both English (cf. (16)) and Spanish (cf. (17)):

(16)   a.   We *have received* information on F.S. from you *on the 22ⁿᵈ of September last.*[8]

        b.   In the event my Lord, erm, that er your Lordship felt that further guidance was required, there are the two routes that I'*ve indicated* to your Lordship briefly *yesterday,* [...][9]

(17)   a.   Don Fulano de Tal y Tal *ha muerto ayer,*   a las seis de la
          D. F.   d. T. y T. has died   yesterday, at the six of the
          tarde.[10]
          afternoon.

        b.   [...] estaba previsto en primer término rendir un muy merecido
          [...] was   planned in first   place   give   a   very deserved
          homenaje a una figura de las letras   argentinas que *ha fallecido*
          homage   to one figure of the literature Argentinean that has deceased
          ayer,   Adolfo Bioy Casares.[11]
          yesterday, A.   B.   C.

So even if the constraints observed with present perfects in English and Spanish are very strong tendencies, they do not seem to be inviolable. Let me state clearly what I think this data does, and does not, show. I do not claim that (17) or (16) are 'normal' or common — they clearly are not. Nor do I claim that they mean the same thing as the corresponding sentences with a simple past — I do think that they are quite different. Finally, I do not claim that something is 'grammaticalizing' here, and that English or Spanish present perfects are evolving into something more 'past-tense'-like. I merely want to point out that — even in languages like English and Spanish — there are circumstances, marginal though they may be, in which a combination between a present perfect and a past-denoting localizing temporal expression is *possible*. Now, if the reason for the oddness of sentences like (1) was rooted in the core-grammar of the language, such sentences should never be possible. Therefore, I believe that a theory which assumes that syntax or (compositional) semantics are at stake in such sentences must be wrong.

Secondly, I believe that any theory focusing exclusively on the behavior of the present perfect tense across languages (which is the case for all formal theories I am aware

---

[8]Example taken from Maurice (1935), cited from McCoard (1978, 129).

[9]Example (16b) found in the *British National Corpus* [11-09-2007]. Query: "`has _ yesterday`".

[10]L. Rosales, *Cervantes y la libertad*. REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Banco de datos (CORDE) [online]. Corpus diacrónico del español. `http://www.rae.es` [11-09-2007].

[11]Recorded in a meeting of the Argentinean Senate, 1999, REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Banco de datos (CREA) [online]. Corpus de referencia del español actual. `http://www.rae.es` [11-09-2007].

of) misses an important empirical generalization: the distribution of the present perfect tense in a given language is interrelated with the distribution of the corresponding simple past tense. The more restricted the former is, the less restricted the latter, and vice-versa. This is what I will show in the next section.

3 Competition With and Against the Simple Past

In all languages under consideration here, the present perfect competes against a simple past tense. For the sentences in (1), the correct version in English and Spanish requires the simple past tense, whereas in German and (with some restrictions[12]) French, one *could* have used the simple past tense in such a configuration:

(18) a. Mary arrived yesterday | at five o'clock.
     b. María llegó   ayer | a las cinco. (Spanish)
        M.   arrived yesterday | at the five.
     c. Maria kam   gestern | um fünf an. (German)
        M.   arrived yesterday | at five on.
     d. Marie arriva *hier | à cinq heures. (French)
        M.   arrived yesterday | at five o'clock.

Similarly, in order to eliminate the life-time effects in English and Spanish, one must use the simple past tense in these two languages. In German and French, one could have used the simple past tense, as well:

(19) a. Einstein visited Princeton.
     b. Einstein visitó Princeton.
        E.   visited P.
     c. Einstein besuchte Princeton.
        E.   visited   P.
     d. Einstein visita Princeton.
        E.   visited P.

So, the question one should ask is the following: Could it be that the determining influence in the variation of present perfect tenses is not the present tense, but the simple past tense? Clearly, if competition were a determining factor in the present perfect puzzle, one would expect there to be restrictions of the simple pasts as well. In what follows, I will argue that there is a cross-linguistic variation of simple past tenses mirroring the variation of the present perfects.

There are indeed restrictions on the use of a simple past tense in German, which do not exist in English. Kratzer (1998) observed that in a context where speaker and hearer

---

[12]The French *passé simple* is no longer compatible with expressions like *yesterday*, which are strongly linked to the deixis.

stand in front of the church, (20a) is infelicitous, whereas (20b) is fine:[13]

(20)   a. #Wer baute diese Kirche? Borromini baute diese Kirche.
           who built this church? B.   built this church.
        b.   Who built this church? Borromini built this church.

As Kratzer noted, for German, the use of the present perfect in such a context is obligatory. Interestingly, exactly the same opposition can be observed between French and Spanish:

(21)   a. #Qui construisit cette église? Borromini construisit cette église.
           Who built this church? B.   built this church.
        b.   ¿Quién construyó esta iglesia? Borromini construyó esta iglesia.
           Who built this church? B.   built this church.

This observation did not have much impact on the research about the present perfects, or the simple past tenses; Kratzer herself doesn't seem to have pursued this issue further. However, it is a general fact that, in French and German, in some situations one simply cannnot use the simple past tense:

(22)   [Archimedes in his bath . . .]   (23)   [Kasparov to Deep Blue . . .]
       a.   I found it!   a.   I won!
       b.   ¡Lo encontré!   b.   ¡Gané!
           it   found   won
       c. #Ich fand es!   c. #Ich gewann!
           I   found it   I   won
       d. #Je le trouvai!   d. #Je gagnai!
           I   it found   I   won

Suppose the sentences in (23) and (22) are preceded by an exclamation like *Oh my God!* or *Yesss!*. Intuitively, in such sentences, the center of attention is not so much the event in itself, but rather a consequence of that event for the moment of utterance. For instance, (23) does not state only that there was a winning event; it is more about the speaker being a winner at the moment of utterance. Similarly, (22) is not so much about a past event of `finding`, but a statement of a present `having`. Such statements can be accomplished with English or Spanish simple pasts, but not with their German or French equivalents.

It is important to notice that in (22) and (23), it is not temporal proximity that is at stake. The issue is rather the presence of immediate repercussions of the event with respect to the moment of utterance. In some way, it is an equivalent of a "hot news" perfect. The simple past of German and French is inadequate as a "hot news" past, whereas the English and Spanish simple pasts may have such a meaning component.

---

[13]Examples in (20) from Kratzer (1998).

For contexts like (23) or (22), one *has to* use a present perfect in French or German, and one *can* use a present perfect in English or Spanish.

The generalization I would like to propose is therefore the following: in English and Spanish, you can (almost) always use the simple past tense, and sometimes, you have to use the simple past tense. In these latter contexts, the present perfect is blocked. In German and French, you can (almost) always use the present perfect, and sometimes, you have to use the present perfect. In these latter contexts, the simple past is blocked.

4 A Pragmatic Analysis

I have suggested in the preceding section that the cross-linguistic variation of the present perfect and the simple past are interrelated, and that one should not try to resolve it in the core-grammar (that is, syntax or compositional semantics). Therefore, the variation must be resolved in pragmatic terms, which however have to interact with a language-specific parameter. In order to be as explicit as possible, I will present first the compositional semantics I am assuming, before presenting the pragmatic proposal.

4.1 Semantic Underpinnings

I suppose the following semantics for the simple past tense and the composition of the PRESENT with the PERFECT, for English as well as German, French and Spanish (cf. Portner, 2003; Nishiyama & Koenig, 2004; Schaden, 2007):

(24)   a. $[\![\text{past}]\!] = \lambda p \exists i [i \prec n \wedge p(i)]$
where n is the moment of utterance, i an interval, and p a variable over propositions. '$\prec$' denotes a relation of strict precedence.

  b. $[\![\text{present} \circ \text{perfect}]\!]^{14} = \lambda p \exists i, i', s[n \subseteq i \wedge i' \prec i \wedge Q(s) \wedge i \subseteq \tau(s) \wedge p(i')]$
where n is the moment of utterance, Q a free variable, and s is the perfect state

---

[14]This relation is composed from the following two basic functions:

(i)   a. $[\![\text{present}]\!] = \lambda p \exists i [n \subseteq i \wedge p(i)]$
  b. $[\![\text{perfect}]\!] = \lambda p \lambda i \exists i', s[i' \prec i \wedge Q(s) \wedge i \subseteq \tau(s) \wedge p(i')]$
where Q is a free (predicate) variable, and s is the perfect state

Kjell Johan Sæbø (p.c.) brought up the question of whether the analysis I am proposing really requires such a rich semantics for the perfect, or if a lighter version would do. As far as I can see, I am minimally committed to the assumption that the PERFECT-feature encodes some relation of (strict) anteriority and that it provides some means of encoding a link between the event and a contextually fixed moment of reference.

Therefore, any theory of the perfect in DRT I am aware of (cf. Kamp & Reyle, 1993; de Swart, 1998; Reyle et al., 2005) and some Extended-Now-theories (cf. Rathert, 2001) could serve as a semantic support for my pragmatic analysis.

(24ab) have some important properties in common: they both situate an interval (the interval of assertion, according to Klein (1994)) in the past with respect to the moment of utterance. In principle, both should be available when it comes to situating an event in the past. However, the present perfect introduces a *Perfect State* at the moment of utterance (cf. Nishiyama & Koenig, 2004). The exact nature of Q of the perfect state must be infered by the listener through pragmatic reasoning. I assume that the restrictions on the use of the present perfect and past tenses are (basically pragmatic) consequences of the presence (or absence) of the perfect state, in contexts where the absence (or presence) of such a state would have been expected.

4.2   The Pragmatics

The basic assumption for the pragmatic analysis is the following: a speaker has to choose from two alternative ways of expressing that the interval of assertion is situated before the moment of utterance. One of the alternatives will be the default form, the other one will be marked. The use of the marked form will trigger additional, pragmatic inferences. Depending on which form is the marked one, the pragmatic effects will be different. The two possible configurations I assume are the following:

(25)   a.   English, Spanish:

Unmarked form:	Marked form:
Simple past tense $\Downarrow$ no pragmatic effect	Present perfect $\Downarrow$ triggers pragmatic reasoning

    b.   French, German:

Unmarked form:	Marked form:
Present perfect $\Downarrow$ no pragmatic effect	Simple past tense $\Downarrow$ triggers pragmatic reasoning

The main difference between a simple past and the present perfect tense is the presence of a perfect state in the latter. Therefore, the pragmatics will capitalize on the presence or absence of a perfect state.

Let us now consider the two possible cases. Suppose first that the simple past is the default form (which is the case in English and Spanish). Therefore, the default is *not* to use a perfect state for events situated before the moment of utterance. Now, if the speaker uses the simple past (i.e., the default), the event under consideration may or may not have any particular consequence for the moment of utterance. However, if the speaker uses the marked present perfect, the addressee will have to suppose that there was some reason to use the non-default tense-form. Introducing a perfect state, when there was no need to, can only be interpreted in the following way: the listener intended to convey a special link between the event under consideration and the moment of utterance.

Suppose now that the present perfect is the default form (which is the case in French and in German). The use of the default is — like before — non-commital as to the existence or not of any specific consequence of the event for the moment of utterance. However, if the speaker uses the marked simple past tense, the hearer will infer that there was some good reason to omit the perfect state. Therefore, the addressee will conclude that the speaker commits to the non-existence of special consequences of the event for the moment of utterance.

Before showing that this line of argumentation is able to explain the incompatibilities affecting the simple past tenses and present perfect tenses, let me point out two consequences of this analysis: first of all, it predicts that other perfect forms — which are not competing with a perfect-state-less tense-form — will not show any of the restrictions we observe with (some) present perfects. This prediction seems to be borne out.

Second, a competition-based account comes with a typological prediction: no language having only one one-step past-referring tense (as, for instance, Latin) should display restrictions reminiscent of the present perfect or simple past puzzles. However, if a semantics- or syntax-based account is correct, such a language might exist.

4.3   Where do the 'Incompatibilities' Come From?

In this last section, I will discuss one by one the different 'incompatibilities'[15] we have seen so far. I propose that they can be accounted for with standard Gricean maxims.

Let us start with the incompatibility of the simple past tense with direct present results. This incompatibility arises in languages where the present perfect is the default form, such as German and French. The marked form in these languages thus lacks a perfect state. When a speaker chooses the marked form, without perfect state, there must be some reason to do so. The hearer will infer that this reason is that the event under consideration has no tangible consequence at the moment of utterance, and does not justify the presence of a perfect state at the moment of utterance. Using a simple past in such a context would be a violation of the quantity-maxim: *say as much as you can.* A speaker anticipating this reasoning should therefore avoid the use of a simple past tense in a context where (s)he wants to convey direct present results for the event under question.

Next, let us consider the incompatibility of the present perfect with localizing, past-denoting temporal adverbials like *yesterday*. This arises in languages where the simple past tense is the default form for referring to an event situated before the moment of utterance. The reasoning leading to avoidance of this combination is the following: if the event itself and its localization is important, why bother to introduce a result state, if the default is not to introduce one? The preference for the simple past in such a context is an instance of a quantity maxim: *do not say more than you need.* Yet, if the localization of the event as well as the existence of a perfect state at the moment

---

[15]I put the word 'incompatibility' in quotes because I do not think that we are faced with an impossibility, but rather with a strong dispreference. Keeping this in mind, I will omit the quotes in the remainder of the paper.

of utterance are important, one might find such combinations. The corpus-examples in (16) and (17) seem to be of that type.

Finally, let us consider life-time effects. These arise also in languages where the default one-step past-referring tense is the simple past tense. The use of a present perfect should therefore be interpreted as entailing the existence of a specific perfect state at the moment of utterance. The non-existence of the subject of the sentence would render it more difficult to imagine what perfect state there might be. Still, it should be possible, and it has been often pointed out that life-time effects are variable (cf., e.g., Inoue, 1979; Portner, 2003):

(26)   a.   A: Which Nobel Laureates have visited Princeton?[16]
              B: Let's see, Einstein has (visited Princeton), Friedman has, . . .
        b.   Shakespeare has influenced every known author to some extent.

(26) shows that, in a suitable context, life-time effects against the subject of a sentence with a present perfect may simply vanish.

5   Conclusion and Perspectives

In this paper, I have proposed a new approach to the so-called present-perfect puzzle, arguing that it is in fact a part of a bigger problem, namely the cross-linguistic variation of one-step past-referring tenses. I have shown that not only present perfect tenses vary cross-linguistically, but also the simple past tenses these present perfects compete with.

Furthermore, I argued against a core-grammatical (i.e., syntax or compositional semantics) treatment of the present perfect puzzle, presenting data from corpora. I outlined a basically pragmatic solution — supplied by the opposition between a default and a marked tense — to account for the different incompatibilities that arise.

References

Bybee, Joan and Östen Dahl (1989) "The Creation of Tense and Aspect Systems in the Languages of the World", *Studies in Language* **13**(1), 51–103.

Giorgi, Alessandra and Fabio Pianesi (1997) *Tense and Aspect. From Semantics to Morphosyntax*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Inoue, Kyoko (1979) "An Analysis of the English Present Perfect", *Linguistics* **17**, 561–589.

Kamp, Hans and Uwe Reyle (1993) *From Discourse to Logic. Introduction to Modeltheoretic Semantics of Natural Language, Formal Logic and Discourse Representation Theory*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.

---

[16]Example cited from Portner (2003, 464).

Klein, Wolfgang (1992) "The Present Perfect Puzzle", *Language* **68**, 525–552.

Klein, Wolfgang (1994) *Time in Language*, London: Routledge.

Klein, Wolfgang (2000) "An Analysis of the German Perfekt", *Language* **68**(2), 358–382.

Kratzer, Angelika (1998) "More Structural Analogies Betweens Pronouns and Tenses", in *Proceedings of Salt 8*.

Maurice, William (1935) "Discrimination between Past and Present", *Neuphilologische Monatsschrift* **6**, 312–330.

McCoard, Robert W. (1978) *The English Perfect: Tense-Choice and Pragmatic Inferences*, Amsterdam: North Holland.

Musan, Renate (2002) *The German Perfect. Its Semantic Composition and its Interaction with Temporal Adverbials*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Nishiyama, Atsuko and Jean-Pierre Koenig (2004) "What is a Perfect State?", in B. Schmeiser, V. Chand, A. Kelleher and A. Rodriguez (eds.) *WCCFL 23 Proceedings*, Somerville: Cascadilla Press, 101–113.

Pancheva, Roumyana and Arnim von Stechow (2004) *On the Present Perfect Puzzle*, ms., University of Southern California and Universität Tübingen.

Portner, Paul (2003) "The (Temporal) Semantics and (Modal) Pragmatics of the Perfect", *Linguistics and Philosophy* **26**, 459–510.

Rathert, Monika (2001) "Anteriority versus Extended Now: Theories of the German Perfect", in Caroline Féry and Wolfgang Sternefeld (eds.) *Audiatur Vox Sapientiae. A Festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 410–426.

Reichenbach, Hans (1947/1966) *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, Toronto: Collier-MacMillan.

Reyle, Uwe, Antje Rossdeutscher and Hans Kamp (2005) "Ups and Downs in the Theory of Temporal Reference", ms., Universität Stuttgart, submitted to *Linguistics and Philosophy.*

Rothstein, Björn (2006) *The Perfect Time Span. On the Present Perfect in German, Swedish and English*, PhD Thesis, Universität Stuttgart.

Schaden, Gerhard (2007) *La sémantique du Parfait. Étude des "temps composés" dans un choix de langues germaniques et romanes*, PhD Thesis, Université Paris 8, `http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00143261/en/`.

de Swart, Henriëtte (1998) "Aspect Shift and Coercion", *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, 347–385.