

Almost perfect: some notes on the present perfect puzzle.

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It has long been observed that closely related languages like Dutch, German and English differ subtly but considerably in their use of the present perfect.

The German varieties characterised by *Präteritumschwund* stand out in allowing the present perfect to refer to an ongoing event in the past, without any implication of 'current relevance' (to use Twaddell's term).¹ In English and Dutch, cotemporaneity with a reference point in the past is the hallmark of the simple past. Thus, it is impossible to say, in Dutch, **Toen hij binnenkwam heb ik geslapen* ('When he came in I have slept'), and likewise for English as the translation shows, while High German *Als er hereingekommen ist habe ich geschlafen* is perfectly acceptable.

English, again, is more restrictive in its use of the present perfect than Dutch, in that the simple past may be used when the current relevance of the past event is merely implicit, as in *He left*, which must be rendered by the present perfect *Hij is vertrokken* in Dutch (a subtlety systematically overlooked in English-language children's movies dubbed for a Dutch audience).² In this sense, the English simple past finds itself in opposition to the past progressive, an opposition which is somewhat confusingly characterised in terms of perfective vs. imperfective viewpoint aspect.³

In Dutch and German, viewpoint aspect is not grammaticalised, and hence the present perfect may be characterised as expressing both perfective (as in *Ik heb het gevonden* 'I found it') and imperfective (as in *Ik heb het zitten doen* 'I have been

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W.F. Twaddell, *The English verb auxiliaries*, Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 1963², p. 8. See Raymond H. May, 'Contextual factors in the use of the present perfect', *TESOL Quarterly* 11.3 (1977), p. 305, and Robert W. McCoard, *The English perfect: tense-choice and pragmatic inferences*, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1978, chapter 2, for the history of the concept and term 'current relevance' in this context.

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As Alasdair MacDonald informs me, the statement in the text applies to American English only, British English being similar to German and Dutch in this respect (when no adverbials are used).

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Carlota S. Smith, *The Parameter of Aspect*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, p. 106. In perfective viewpoint aspect, a situation is presented as a single whole. The imperfective viewpoint presents no information about the endpoints of a situation. In English, perfective viewpoint aspect is typically expressed by the simple past (e.g. *He left*), while imperfective viewpoint aspect is expressed by the progressive (e.g. *He is leaving*).

doing it.') aspect.⁴ In this respect we might say that in Dutch, as in German, the simple past is more marked than the present perfect.

While it appears to be the *Hauptbedeutung* of the Dutch simple past to express coteremporaneity with a reference point prior to the here and now, the *Gesamtbedeutung* of the Dutch simple past – paraphrasing Ebeling (1962), with whose opinion I concur – locates the event at a point at some remove from the here and now.⁵ This *Gesamtbedeutung* includes the use of the simple past in counterfactuals (*Als ik rijk was* 'If I were rich'/'Were I rich') and in the common and productive childplay register (*We spelen dat ik bang was* 'We are playing that I was afraid'), both situated in the unreal and hence in a different dimension compared to the here and now. In line with the *Gesamtbedeutung*, the simple past is the tense marking of choice in Dutch narrative contexts, where we may assume a steady reference point at some distance from the here and now.⁶ The present perfect cannot be used for describing a normal sequence of events in a narrative context.

The more constrained use of the present perfect in English is also apparent from its incompatibility with an adverbial or modifier making the reference point in the past explicit (*John (*has) kissed Mary yesterday*). This has been viewed as a puzzle: since the event described by the present perfect is obviously anterior to the here and now, why can the exact reference point in the past not be made explicit?⁷ The observation is very old, as is the observation that the present perfect in Dutch and German is not likewise constrained (Dutch *Jan heeft Marie gisteren gekust*, German *Johann hat Maria gestern geküsst*). As we find in Poutsma:

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For German, see Renate Musan, *The German perfect: its semantic composition and its interaction with temporal adverbials*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, p. 6.

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C.L. Ebeling, 'A semantic analysis of the Dutch tenses', *Lingua* 9 (1962), 86-99. For the terms *Gesamtbedeutung* and *Hauptbedeutung*, see Roman Jakobson, 'Beitrag zur allgemeinen Kasuslehre', 1935, in: Eric P. Hamp, Fred W. Householder, and Robert Austerlitz, eds., *Readings in Linguistics 2*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 51-89.

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From this perspective, the function of the more lively historic present in narrative contexts appears to be the identification of the narrative reference point with the here and now. With 'narrative contexts' I refer to stories (written or spoken), not oral reports, where the reference point is the here and now and the events are described as anterior to the reference point.

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The term 'present perfect puzzle' was coined in Wolfgang Klein, 'The present perfect puzzle,' *Language* 68.3 (1992), p. 525-552.

(...) one of the functions of the perfect is to describe an action or state of the past whose results or consequences extend to the present. [...] Now to the English mind the placing of an adjunct or clause denoting a point of time in the past severs, or at least weakens (...), the connection of the past action or state with the present of the perfect. To a Dutchman this is not necessarily the case, anymore than to a Frenchman or German, and therefore in their language the use of such an adjunct or clause does not, as a rule, affect the application of the perfect.⁸

This is essentially the analysis we also find in contemporary treatments, characterising the present perfect in terms of event time (E), reference time (R), and perspective time (P, the 'here and now'), such that E precedes R, and P is included in R.⁹ Expression of a past time indicating adverbial shifts the reference time to a point prior to the here and now, such that P is no longer included in R, and the present perfect can no longer be used to describe such an event.

The comparative question of why Dutch and German differ from English in this respect has been linked to the different status of the present tense in both types of languages.¹⁰ In the English present tense, the event time is necessarily part of the here and now (i.e. E and P are both included in R), whereas in the Dutch and German present tense, the event may actually be located in the future (Dutch *Morgen regent het* 'It's going to rain tomorrow').¹¹ Like all Germanic languages, Dutch and German lack a morphological future tense, hence the only competition faced by the present tense for referring to future events is presented by periphrastic constructions involving modal (Dutch *zullen*, German *werden*) and aspectual (Dutch *gaan*) auxiliaries, each with their own characteristics not further discussed here. In the past, the present-tense form faces competition from the simple past

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H. Poutsma, *A Grammar of Late Modern English for the Use of Continental, especially Dutch, Students. Part II: Parts of speech, section II, The verb and the particles*, Groningen: P. Noordhoff, 1926, pp. 256-257.

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Paul Kiparsky, 'Event structure and the perfect,' in: David I. Beaver, Luis D. Casillas, Brady Z. Clark, and Stefan Kaufmann, eds., *The Construction of Meaning*, Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2002, p. 113-135. Kiparsky uses perspective time rather than speech time, the moment of utterance (cf. Hans Reichenbach, *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, New York: The Free Press, 1947).

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Alessandra Giorgi and Fabio Pianesi, *Tense and Aspect: from Semantics to Morphosyntax*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Roumyana Pancheva and Armin von Stechow, 'On the present perfect puzzle,' *Proceedings of the thirty-fourth annual meeting of the North East Linguistic Society*, Amherst: GSLA (2003), pp. 469-483.

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In English, the present tense can only be used to refer to a future event if the future event is presented as the outcome of a planned or natural course of events, as in *My plane leaves tomorrow at eight*.

(cotemporaneity with a reference point in the past, i.e. E included in R and R preceding P) and the present perfect (anterior tense), making the present unsuitable for the unmarked reference to a past event in all languages under consideration here. But in marked contexts, such as those including an adverb like Dutch *al* 'already' or *nog niet* 'not yet', or an adverbial involving the preposition *sinds* 'since', the present tense can be used to refer to events stretching far back in time (Dutch *Ik werk hier al sinds 1989* 'I have been working here since 1989'). This freer use of the present tense in Dutch and German suggests that it is an unmarked tense in these languages, unlike the situation in English, where the present tense is marked for its association with the here and now.

However, it is the contention of the present writer that the nature of the present perfect in Dutch and German is not simply a matter of the present tense being less constrained. We can also observe that the perfect construction in Dutch is unsuitable for the description of events leading up to and including the here and now. Using the terminology of Iatridou et al (2001), the Dutch present perfect is never a universal perfect (or U-perfect).¹²

The U-perfect describes a situation as holding throughout some interval up to and including the reference point (the here and now, in the present perfect), without being *bounded* by the reference point. An example is *I have been ill since 1990*, which (on its most ready interpretation) implies that the speaker is still ill at the here and now (in this case, the speech time). The U-perfect contrasts with the experiential perfect (or E-perfect, also called existential perfect), which asserts that the event described took place one or more times during the interval stretching up to the reference point (again, the here and now in the present perfect). On this reading, *I have been ill since 1990* conveys that the speaker had several bouts of illness during the period from 1990 until now, but is actually healthy now.

The U-perfect can be diagnosed by various tests discussed by Iatridou et al. An adverb like *always* normally brings out the U-perfect reading: *I have always lived in Cambridge*. On this reading, a continuation like *but now I'm living in Boston* is impossible.¹³ A fronted *for*-time phrase also forces the U-perfect reading: *For two*

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Sabine Iatridou, Elena Anagnostopoulou, and Roumyana Izvorski [=Pancheva], 'Observations about the form and meaning of the perfect,' in: Michael Kenstowicz, ed., *Ken Hale: a Life in Language*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, pp. 189-238.

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With 'stage level predicates' like *be sick* we can also bring out an E-perfect reading if we add adverbials

weeks, *John has been in Boston* implies that John is still in Boston at the here and now. Also, a U-perfect fails to trigger a *consecutio temporum* past in an embedded clause; thus, besides the E-perfect *John has claimed on several occasions that Mary was ill*, where the claim may apply to Mary's current state of health, so that the past tense of *was* is a function of the anteriority of John's claim to the here and now, we find the U-perfect *John has always claimed that Mary is ill*, where the sequence of tense effect does not take place. This latter observation suggests that the U-perfect is really a kind of present, whereas the E-perfect is a kind of past.¹⁴

In Dutch, all tests bringing out the U-perfect fail. Thus, *Ik ben sinds 1990 onafgebroken ziek geweest* ('I have been sick without interruption since 1990') finds a natural continuation in *maar nu ben ik gezond* ('but now I'm fine'). Similarly, *Twee weken is Jan in Boston geweest* does not force the interpretation according to which Jan is still in Boston at the moment of speaking. And the *consecutio temporum* past is not excluded in *Jan heeft altijd volgehouden dat Marie ziek was* ('John has always maintained that Mary is sick'). In fact, it appears that Dutch uses a simple present tense to express the English U-perfect. Thus, *Ik ben sinds 1990 ziek* ('I have been [literally: am] ill since 1990') cannot be continued with *maar nu ben ik gezond* ('but now I'm fine'). Likewise, *Jan is nu twee weken in Boston* ('John is now two weeks in Boston') describes the exact same interval as the English U-perfect, entailing that John's being in Boston includes the here and now and is unbounded by the moment of speaking.¹⁵ Dutch, then, appears to be one of the languages lacking a U-perfect, which means that the present perfect relates an event to an interval running up to the here and now, but cannot express that that event itself applies to the here and now.¹⁶

For the present perfect puzzle, this means that the present perfect in Dutch is more like a past than like a present, and its compatibility with adverbials denoting past time is then not surprising. It still leaves unexplained why the perfects of English

referring to the relevant subintervals, as in *Since 1990 I have always been sick during Christmas*.

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See Gerhard Brugger, 'Event time properties,' *Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 4.2 (1997), p. 51-63.

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The sequence of tense test is not discussed here, since a present tense *verbum dicendi* can always be interpreted as a describing a generic event rather than a U-perfect event.

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Cf. Bernard Comrie, *Aspect*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 60. Alternatively, the definition of the U-perfect as including the here and now is mistaken, and the difference between the U-perfect and the E-perfect should be defined in terms of the way the event and the interval overlap, not in terms of inclusion of the end point of the interval in the event.

and Dutch/German are different in this respect, as there is reason to believe that the variation cannot be reduced to a different treatment of the present tense in the two types of languages.

Another aspect of the present perfect puzzle is that, within the English language, incompatibility of the perfect with adverbials denoting past tense is restricted to the present tense. Thus, we do not find a similar effect as with the present perfect (**John has kissed Mary yesterday*) with the past perfect (*John had kissed Mary yesterday*) and with the infinitival perfect (*John must have kissed Mary yesterday, John claims to have kissed Mary yesterday*). Naturally, in these cases the here and now (the P-time) is no longer included in the reference time (R), and the association of the perfect with the present is no longer enforced.¹⁷

In Kiparsky's analysis, the absence of the present perfect puzzle effect in nonfinite clauses can be explained on the assumption that "the infinitive is unspecified for the relation between P and R".¹⁸ Such an analysis is consonant with the view that infinitives are tenseless. However, I believe there are reasons for adopting a more specific analysis, in which the perfect infinitive may be the morphological realization of nonfinite past tense, so that these cases, too, would be characterised by the reference time (R) preceding the here and now (P).¹⁹

Since the past tense expresses cotemporaneity with a reference point preceding the here and now, the relevant observation is that the addition of a past time reference point in the infinitival clause forces a morphological adjustment of the infinitive: *John claims to **be** ill today* vs. *John claims to **have been** ill yesterday*. This morphological adjustment is forced in infinitival complement clauses, but not in gerunds: *John's **being** ill yesterday was a major embarrassment*. This suggests that the feature [tense] is a property of complement clauses, regardless their specification for finiteness, but not of gerunds/nominalisations.

Other observations likewise suggest that perfect infinitives may express nonfinite past tense. Under certain conditions, having to do with the nature of the predicate,

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As Kiparsky, *op. cit.* 128f. shows and discusses, there is in fact an ambiguity in clauses like *John had kissed Mary yesterday* depending on whether the adverbial is associated with the event time or with the reference time.

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Kiparsky, *op. cit.* 131.

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The P-time of the infinitive is inherited from the matrix clause.

the simple past triggers a 'lifetime effect'. Thus, in *Scriabin was a genius* we infer that Scriabin was a genius all his life and is no longer alive, whereas *Scriabin has been a genius*, if at all grammatical, triggers a number of strange readings (for instance, that Scriabin is still alive, as in *Scriabin has always been a genius*). But the infinitival perfect *Scriabin appears to have been a genius* simply yields the lifetime reading.²⁰ Similarly, a U-perfect like *He has had brown eyes since he was born* is ungrammatical without the modifier *since he was born*.²¹ In the infinitive, the effect disappears: *He appears to have had brown eyes*. I suspect that such examples showing the past tense behaviour of infinitival perfects can be multiplied.²²

If infinitival perfects may be used to express past tense in nonfinite contexts, we must conclude that perfective morphology in itself is not a linguistic sign indicating anteriority (relative tense) as in the present perfect. Infinitives, being essentially nominal categories, are not organised in temporal paradigms. In order to express past tense, a language has to make do with whatever morphological means are available. The original perfective construction, having long lost its aspectual characteristics, can be applied to the infinitive as well as to the finite verb, and as such is the closest the infinitives will ever get to the expression of anteriority in the Germanic languages. It's not perfect, but close.

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On the lifetime effect, see Renate Musan, 'Tense, predicates, and lifetime effects', in *Natural Language Semantics* 5 (1997), p. 271-301.

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Cf. Iatridou et al., *op. cit.* p. 197, where it is argued that unmodified perfects are never U-perfects. It is important for the example that the property predicated of the subject is inalienable ('individual-level'), as alienable ('stage-level') properties (such as *have brown hair*) allow an E-perfect reading which does not require the adverbial modifier to be present.

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See Jan-Wouter Zwart, 'On the tense of infinitives in Dutch', unpublished manuscript, University of Groningen, 2007, for similar observations on Dutch infinitival perfects.