On the cross-linguistic variation of ‘one-step past-referring’ tenses

Current accounts of the cross-linguistic variation of present perfect tenses have one thing in common: they do not work. I argue that this is due to the fact that, so far, they have not clearly identified the problem. The present perfects are not the only tenses to vary cross-linguistically: simple past tenses do so as well, and crucially, these two variations are interdependent.

I will first introduce the elements of the variation of the present perfects, and then show how and why the variation of the simple past tenses is related to the former.

In languages like English or Spanish, one cannot combine a present perfect with an adverb like yesterday, and there are clear-cut life-time effects associated with the subject of the sentence:

(1)  
   a. *Pierre has arrived yesterday.  
   b. *Einstein has visited Princeton.

If (1a) lacked yesterday, the event arrive(p) might have occurred within the day preceding the moment of utterance; one cannot, however, add this specification to the sentence. (1b) is infelicitous because Einstein is dead — in a world where Einstein were still alive, (1b) would be perfectly normal.

In languages like French or German, present perfects do not show such restrictions. The sentences corresponding to (1) are felicitous:

(2)  
   a. Pierre est arrivé hier.  
   P. is arrived yesterday.  
   b. Einstein a visité Princeton.  
   E. has visited Princeton.

Whereas present perfects display quite some variation, other kinds of perfect tenses (like pluperfects, future perfects, or any non-finite perfect forms) do not vary to the same degree. More specifically, the restrictions of the present perfect in English-type languages (with respect to the variation of the present perfect) do not carry over to the other perfect tenses of these languages: there are no life-time effects associated with pluperfects (or future perfects), and there are no restrictions that the eventuality occurred within the day containing the contextually fixed reference time:

(3)  
   a. Pierre had arrived the day before.  
   b. Einstein might have visited Princeton in 1938.

Therefore, it is clear that one cannot explain the variation of the present perfects by some language specific parameter affecting the meaning of the perfect-feature (as did Klein, 2000).

Following Portner (2003), most scholars conclude that the restrictions on the Present Perfect of languages like English are the consequence of some kind of semantic or syntactic clash between the present tense and the properties of localizing temporal adverbials. The most interesting consequence of this claim is that one may assume a compositional and unique semantics for a perfect feature, and attribute the singular behaviour of the present perfect to other components of the tense-aspect system. Even if the details of Portners implementation have been challenged, the basic idea of attributing the variation of the present perfects to the present feature rather than the perfect has had some success, cf., e.g., Pancheva and von Stechow (2004).

However, as argued convincingly by Rothstein (2006), Swedish provides a counter-example to such an analysis: the Swedish present tense behaves like the German present tense, but the Swedish present perfect behaves like the English present perfect. Therefore, the semantics of the present perfect may not be determined by the semantics of the present. The syntactic solution advocated by Rothstein (2006), however, conceived for Germanic languages, cannot deal with Romance languages, and, more specifically, French.

The failure to account for the variation of the present perfect tenses stems from the fact that this is only one side of the puzzle. Simple past tenses vary as well. This has been noted for German by Kratzer
(1998), and it is common wisdom that French passé simple is not felicitous when a (strong) link with the deixis is required. For instance, in a context where speaker and hearer stand in front of the church, (4a) is infelicitous, whereas (4b) is fine:

(4)

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.

The pertinent generalization is thus the following: languages with constraints on the present perfect lack constraints on the simple past tense, and vice versa. The reason for this is that these two tenses compete.

In order to be more explicit about this, I will assume the following semantics for the PAST and the composition of PRESENT and PERFECT features (for English and German):

(5)

\[ \text{[past]} = \lambda p \exists i [i \prec n \land p(i)] \]

\[ \text{[present} \circ \text{perfect]} = \lambda p \exists i, i', s [n \subseteq i \land i' \prec i \land Q(s) \land i \subseteq \tau(s) \land p(i')] \]

where \( n \) is the moment of utterance, \( Q \) a free variable, and \( s \) is the perfect state.

Both tenses situate an interval before \( n \). However, they are not quite the same: it is commonly assumed that perfect tenses introduce a perfect state, whereas simple past tenses simply mark anteriority, without adding any state.

The variation is basically a pragmatic effect. One of these tenses is assumed to be the default tense: its use does not trigger any additional meaning effect. This default tense is the present perfect in German, and the simple past in English. The use of the unmarked, default tense will not trigger any pragmatic inference.

However, if the marked, non-default tense is chosen, a pragmatic reasoning will interpret the presence or absence of a perfect state. If the simple past is the default tense, the use of a present perfect (containing a perfect state) will invite the hearer to construct a special link between the eventuality and the moment of utterance, and life-time effects are one manifestation of this link. This is the case in languages like English or Spanish. If the present perfect is the default tense, the use of the simple past will trigger additional inferences, based on the absence of a perfect state: one will infer the absence of any link between the eventuality and the moment of utterance. The latter is what happens in German or French.

There are independent reasons to believe that the variation is pragmatic in nature, and not hard-wired in syntax or semantics. The observations about the present perfect variation made at the beginning are rather strong tendencies than absolute rules. For instance, it is not true that French or German present perfects never show life-time effects. Consider the following.

(6) #Jetzt hab ich das World Trade Center besucht.
Now I the W. T. C. visited.

Nowadays, with no WTC existing, (6) is infelicitous. By replacing WTC by “Chrysler Building”, however, one obtains a felicitous sentence: (6) displays thus a clear life-time effect. As far as I am aware, no current theory of perfects explain why such an effect arises. The pragmatic account suggested here provides however a clue to this: jetzt renders the Perfect state more salient, and so, we obtain for languages like German the same meaning effects one observes commonly in English.

Selected References


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1Examples in (4) from Kratzer (1998).