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Indefinite and Continuative Interpretations of the English Present Perfect

Summary

The objective of our paper is to demonstrate that the English present perfect is not by inherent meaning either indefinite or continuative. Notions like indefinite and continuative are context-dependent interpretations of whole constructions and their broader context. However, continuative interpretation can also be triggered by certain adverbials, negative constructions and verbs in the progressive form. But, even these factors do not always guarantee continuative interpretations. Construction, continuative meaning can be cancelled by the context in a broader sense, this fact being a proof that this meaning is merely an implicature. We will demonstrate how different factors interact and trigger either indefinite or continuative interpretations which are not inherent in the present perfect itself. Our paper will attempt to provide sufficient evidence that there is no indefinite/continuative distinction in the English present perfect; the inherent meaning or function of the present perfect is merely to locate the situation somewhere within a period that starts before the time of utterance and leads up to it.

Key words: the present perfect, inherent meaning, interpretation

Nedoločna in kontinuativna interpretacija angleškega present perfecta

Povzetek

Namen našega članka je pokazati, da inherentni pomen angleškega present perfecta ni niti nedoločen niti kontinuativen. Nedoločni in kontinuativni pomen izhajata iz kontekstno odvisnih interpretacij celih konstrukcij in širšega konteksta. Povod za kontinuativno interpretacijo so lahko določeni adverbiali, negativne konstrukcije in glagoli v progresivni obliki. Vendar pa celo ti dejavniki dostikrat ne zagotavljajo kontinuativne interpretacije. Kontekst v širšem smislu namreč lahko razveljavi kontinuativni pomen. To dejstvo predstavlja dokaz, da je ta pomen zgolj implikatura. Pokazali bomo, kako različni dejavniki medsebojno vplivajo drug na drugega in povzročijo bodisi nedoločno bodisi kontinuativno interpretacijo. Naš članek bo poskušal priskrbeti dovolj dokazov, da v angleškemu present perfectu nedoločno/kontinuativno razlikovanje sploh ne obstaja. Ugotovili bomo tudi, da je inherentni pomen present perfecta zgolj postavljanje situacije nekje v obdobju, ki se je začelo pred časom govorjenja in vodi do njega.

Ključne besede: present perfect, inherentni pomen, interpretacija

Indefinite and Continuative Interpretations of the English Present Perfect

1. Introduction

Grammarians distinguish between at least two meanings of the present perfect. Moreover, most grammarians assign three or even more meanings to the present perfect, their approach being based on the pragmatic meanings of the present perfect. Comrie's (1976, 56–61) classification is four-fold: (1) "Perfect of result", (2) "Experiential perfect", (3) "Perfect of persistent situation" and (4) "Perfect of recent past". Leech (1987, 36–40) also assigns four different meanings to the present perfect: (1) "State-up-to-the-present", (2) "Indefinite past", (3) "Habit-in-a-period-leading-up-to-the-present" and (4) "Resultative past". Quirk et al. (1985, 192–5) do not differ substantially from the above mentioned authors although their classification is three-fold: (1) "State leading up to the present", (2) "Indefinite event(s) in a period leading up to the present" and (3) "Habit (i.e., recurrent event) in a period leading up to the present". Greenbaum (1996, 270–2) argues that the present perfect has three basic functions and should be classified into: (1) "the state present perfect", (2) "the recurrent present perfect" and (3) "the event present perfect".

The mention of these linguists is sufficient to show that there is no common agreement on how many meanings the present perfect actually has. These linguists find it difficult to establish in which particular environments the perfect occurs. Our paper will not be concerned with these contextual meanings of the present perfect but will try to establish what the inherent meaning of the present perfect is. Among the linguists concerned with this question mention must be made of Declerck (1991, 28–34), who claims that the present perfect has (1) "indefinite" and (2) "continuative meaning" although he (1991, 339) agrees "that the perfect itself has no indefinite or continuative meaning", but according to him only yields an indefinite or continuative interpretation in a certain context. Our paper takes a similar point of view.

The objective of our paper is therefore to demonstrate that the English present perfect is not by inherent meaning either indefinite or continuative. Notions like indefinite and continuative are context-dependent interpretations of whole constructions and their broader context. However, this type of context is not the only factor that triggers these two interpretations. Continuative interpretation can also be generated by certain adverbials, negative constructions and verbs in the progressive form (i.e., narrower context within the clause). However, even these factors do not always guarantee continuative interpretations. Even if there is an adverbial *for ...* in the perfect construction, continuative meaning can be cancelled by the context (i.e., broader context outside the clause), this fact being a proof that this meaning is merely an implicature. We will show how different factors interact and trigger either indefinite or continuative interpretations which are not inherent in the present perfect itself, but arise from other factors belonging to the pragmatics of the linguistic and/or extra-linguistic context. Our paper will attempt to

provide sufficient evidence that there is no indefinite/continuative distinction in the English perfect and that the inherent meaning of the perfect is merely the function of locating the situation somewhere within a period that starts before the time of utterance and leads up to it. At the same time, our paper will emphasise that indefinite/continuative interpretations should not be simply collapsed, for they have important theoretical and practical implications.

2. Adverbials and linguistic context

Indefinite and continuative interpretations can be triggered by certain types of adverbials. The most commonly mentioned adverbials are *for ...* and *since ...*, which are frequently believed to generate continuative interpretation in the perfect constructions as in (1) and (2):

- (1) Although I *have* personally only *been associated* with the Project *for* a comparatively brief six years, I am extremely conscious that there is an understandable impatience for results.
(Ayckbourn 1999, 397)
- (2) It's alright for you. *I've been up since* six o'clock. I've been up and down the wards. Emptying the bed pans. Serving breakfasts.
(Ayckbourn 1999, 409)

The constructions (1) and (2) obtain continuative interpretation. However, the question remains whether this interpretation is due to the nature of these adverbials or due to the adjacent or even extra-linguistic context. As Declerck (1991, 323) claims, the continuative interpretation is possible: (1) when there is a certain adverbial present, (2) when the sentence is negative, (3) when the context enforces the continuative interpretation and (4) when the verb is in the progressive form. The constructions (1) and (2) fulfil two of Declerck's conditions for the continuative interpretation, i.e., adverbials *for ...* and *since ...* and the adjacent context that enforces this interpretation. Moreover, in the construction (2) extra-linguistic context, which remains unrevealed to the reader of this paper, also plays an important role. However, when these constructions occur in isolation, e.g., *I have personally only been associated with the Project for a comparatively brief six years* and *I've been up since six o'clock*, they become ambiguous between two readings although the indefinite is less salient when the construction occurs in isolation. Hence it follows that the temporal adverbials such as *since* and *for-phrases* contribute little to the meaning of the present perfect construction, or, more precisely, less than the adjacent context itself. The construction (3) will support this claim even more strongly:

- (3) It's like some big bird *has been hovering* over me *for* fifteen years, and suddenly it's flown away.
(Miller 1993, 15)

The construction (3) acquires indefinite interpretation despite having the same temporal adverbial as (1). The construction (3) even contains the present perfect in the progressive form; it therefore fulfils two out of four of Declerck's conditions for continuative interpretation, i.e.,

the adverbial *for ...* and the verb in the progressive form. Nevertheless, the adjacent context (i.e., context in the broader sense) is decisive in determining the interpretation. Its role in assigning the interpretation to this construction is of paramount importance. However, when this construction occurs in isolation, e.g., *It's like some big bird has been hovering over me for fifteen years*, it is ambiguous between the two readings, indefinite being less salient. Interestingly, even if indefinite interpretation is less salient when the construction appears in isolation, its real contextual interpretation is indefinite and not continuative. In (3) continuative interpretation is cancelled by the adjacent context. We therefore believe that continuative interpretation cannot be an inherent meaning (i.e., implication) of the present perfect because inherent meaning cannot be cancelled by any means. We claim that it is merely conversational implicature, which can be cancelled.

- (4) *Since* my son died it *has rained* three times. All evidence washed away.
(Pinnock 1999, 107)

The construction (4) differs from (3) because the broader context has no significant role in defining the interpretation, however this *since ...* construction acquires an indefinite interpretation unlike *since ...* construction (2), which obtains the continuative. Declerck (1991, 335–7) distinguishes between bounded and unbounded temporal adverbials. He classifies *since ...* as a bounded adverbial. In his opinion, this indicates that bounded adverbials can refer to the time span as a whole, but cannot refer to the subinterval. According to Declerck, *since ...* constructions always obtain continuative interpretation. However, the construction in (4) implies that this is not always true. It acquires indefinite interpretation. In (4) there are more subsituations (*it has rained three times*) that also lie entirely before the time of utterance. The period that is established by *since ...* leads up to the time of utterance. The fact that constructions with *since ...* can express indefinite interpretation has already been noted by Quirk et al. (1985, 538). They emphasise that the *since ...* constructions can indicate the period in which one or more actions took place. This is illustrated by the construction *She has got married since you saw her in June*.

The idea of continuity can therefore not be considered a defining property of the present perfect. And even more surprisingly, it can be claimed that certain temporal adverbials such as *since* and *for-phrases* contribute little to the continuative interpretation of the present perfect.

3. Negation

A negative element in a perfect construction can trigger a continuative interpretation, which would be indefinite in its affirmative counterpart. The constructions (5) and (6) obtain continuative interpretation due to their negative element:

- (5) *I've never been* in Mrs Crow's room. We painted it yellow last year.
(Churchill 1973, 17)
- (6) *I've never had* a postman go down on me.
(Elton 1991, 102)

The affirmative counterparts of (5) *I've been in Mrs Crow's room* and (6) *I've had a postman go down on me* obtain indefinite interpretation due to the absence of the negative element *never*. The negative element in (5) and (6) actually implies that the action has not occurred within a period that begins before the time of utterance and leads up to it. This non-occurrence of the situation stretches up to now, hence the continuative interpretation. On the other hand, the affirmative counterparts of (5) and (6) locate the situation within a period that leads up to the time of utterance, but the situation itself lies entirely before it, hence the indefinite interpretation.

The negative element also plays a significant role in triggering the continuative interpretation of the perfect construction, this finding being an additional support to our claim that continuity should not be considered an inherent meaning of the present perfect.

4. Progressive aspect

As far back as 1947, Reichenbach demonstrated that the progressive (i.e., extended) forms of tenses have the same temporal structure as their simple counterparts. More recently, Schlüter (1999, 317) has argued that "Verb phrases in the present perfect progressive do not form a function of their own, but rather add certain connotations of the progressive verb phrase (e.g. duration, iteration or incompleteness) to the existing functions of the present perfect." We adopt a similar point of view and claim that the verb in the progressive form does not always affect the temporal location, i.e. it does not always trigger continuative interpretation of the perfect construction. We also reject Feigenbaum's claim (1981, 402) that "[...] the progressive aspect overrides other constituents in the clause, to determine that the perfect is continuative". In order to prove his claim, he provides examples such as ... *They have been building the bridge* etc., which always gain continuative interpretation due to the progressive element. Although we believe that the present perfect in the progressive form frequently obtains continuative interpretation, we believe that an indefinite one is also possible. The construction (7) illustrates that indefinite interpretation can be triggered by other elements in the clause:

- (7) *I've just been husking the corn.*
 (Shepard 1979, 75)

The construction (7) denotes an activity which finished just before the time of utterance. It may be claimed to be explanatory in nature. The adverbial *just* is decisive in triggering indefinite interpretation of this construction. However, the extra-linguistic context, which remains unrevealed to the reader of this paper, also plays an important role; i.e., the farmer comes to the house dirty and uses this utterance as an explanation of his present state. The importance of the interplay between various elements in determining the interpretation of the perfect constructions will be revealed in the following examples:

- (8) *I've been asking you for seven years now.*
 (Simon 1972, 658)

- (9) (The difference is we've done this sketch twelve thousand times, and you've always said "Come in," and suddenly today it's "Enter.")
 You know why we've *been doing* it the same way *for* forty-three years?
 Because it's good.
 (Simon 1972, 670)

In (8) the progressive form of the perfect and the adverbials *for ...* and *now* trigger continuative interpretation, whereas (9), although also having progressive form and the adverbial *for ...*, acquires indefinite interpretation due to the adjacent context (provided in brackets). Even though the construction (9) fulfils two conditions for continuative interpretation, i.e., (1) the progressive form and (2) the adverbial *for ...*, the interpretation is indefinite, suggestive of the paramount significance of the context in the broader sense in determining the interpretation of the perfect construction. However, it should be borne in mind that all these factors, i.e., (1) the broader context, (2) the progressive/simple form and (3) the adverbials, which determine whether the interpretation of the perfect construction is either indefinite or continuative, are not part of the perfect form. These findings support our claim that there is no indefinite/continuative distinction in the perfect form itself, this claim bringing us close to Bauer's approach (1970, 194) that the continuative perfect is an interplay between the function of the perfect and certain contextual factors and to Zydatiś (1978, 352), who claims that even if a perfect construction is in the progressive form and has the adverbial *for ...*, it may be ambiguous between indefinite and continuative interpretation. He consequently reaches the conclusion that with certain types of situations only context can decide which interpretation can be assigned to the present perfect construction.

The significance of the context in the broader sense will be illustrated in the construction (10), which may even transfer the perfect construction in the progressive form from the pre-present sector into the past time-sphere. In this case, we suppose the preterite (i.e., simple) would be a more appropriate form:

- (10) The school board *has been abusing* me *for* years. (Refused to believe me – took the word of pathological liars over mine. I ended up being called a racist – I!)
 (Oates 1991, 83)

The context in the broader sense indicates that the period in which the situation is placed lies entirely before the time of utterance. This construction is uttered by a retired teacher, who was sacked because of racism, though according to her belief she was a victim. She thinks a lot about this event and is not ready to accept that she was dismissed; therefore this utterance is emotionally coloured. Additionally, her perception of time is different; she is retired, has nothing to do and constantly makes things up to draw people's attention.

Interestingly, if (10) *The school board has been abusing me for years* were taken out of its linguistic and extra-linguistic context, the most salient meaning for this construction would be continuative meaning of the present perfect. If the construction were accompanied by

some linguistic context such as *The school board has been abusing me for years, but now I have a new job*, the meanings would be indefinite. However, nobody would think of the meaning of the preterite with a period lying entirely before the time of utterance.

To sum up, if the construction with the present perfect as in (10) is accompanied by an appropriate context, it may obtain three different meanings, the meaning of the preterite being the most unusual. As far as the meaning of the preterite in (10) is concerned, we believe that even if the preterite seems to be the most appropriate form for unaffected people, the present perfect perfectly fits the psychological reality of the speaker who utters the above mentioned construction, and therefore remains open as to whether this construction really lies wholly before the time of utterance; it may lie before it for unaffected hearers, but not for affected speakers. As a consequence, some doubt remains as to whether this perfect construction can be assigned the meaning of the preterite.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we aimed at providing evidence that there is no indefinite/continuative distinction inherent in the present perfect form itself. The inherent meaning of the present perfect is merely the function of placing a situation within a period that starts before the time of utterance and leads up to it. We showed that the continuative interpretation is an interplay between the function of the present perfect and certain contextual factors. The analysis of our examples showed that we should distinguish at least between two types of context, i.e., context in the narrower sense and context in the broader sense. Context in the narrower sense includes elements within the clause, i.e., adverbials, negation/affirmation/interrogation and verb in the simple/progressive form. It should be borne in mind that these elements belong to the linguistic context within the clause, but they are not part of the present perfect itself. However, they contribute to the interpretation of the present perfect construction. Context in the broader sense includes information outside the clause, i.e., the adjacent linguistic and extra-linguistic context.

Our analysis revealed that context in the broader sense plays an even more significant role than the context in the narrower sense. Even if perfect constructions contain elements belonging to the narrower context that are necessary to trigger continuative interpretation, this can be cancelled by the broader context. Hence it follows that indefinite/continuative meaning is not inherent in the present perfect itself but arises from the context in the narrower and/or broader sense. If a certain perfect construction acquires continuative interpretation, this can be cancelled by the context. As a consequence, this interpretation cannot be considered an inherent meaning of the present perfect but merely an implicature. Implicatures can be denied, but if they are not, they will be taken to hold. It follows, then, that the present perfect has only one inherent meaning.

However, we do not believe that indefinite and continuative interpretations should be simply collapsed because it makes a difference in terms of temporal structure. This distinction should

not be abolished because it proves to be very useful for research and pedagogical purposes. Moreover, in Slovene indefinite interpretation is frequently translated by *preteklik*, whereas the continuative is frequently translated by *sedanjik*. However, this observation should not be accepted as a general but rather a simplified rule. When we discuss the English present perfect, we should be aware that it does not place the situation in time by itself, but with the help of adverbials and many other elements. As Crystal (1966) claims, an adequate study of temporal relations in English can only be reached by studying the relations between adverbial and tense. The tenses on their own do not locate situations in time, this task being performed by the help of temporal adverbials and context (Declerck 1991, 254–5). "Together, these create temporal structures which to a large extent determine the temporal interpretation of the clauses in which they occur" (Declerck 1997, 103).

We actually do not want to depart from the above mentioned claims by Crystal and Declerck; however we firmly believe that linguists should be aware of the difference between inherent and contextual meanings of the present perfect even if the finding that the present perfect inherently merely locates a situation somewhere within a period that starts before the time of utterance and leads up to it proves to be of minor value for empirical research and pedagogical implications. In the theoretical field this distinction is of significant value because it enables linguists to distinguish between different elements involved in the temporal structure and their different contributions to locating a situation in time.

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