The past is present

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I

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THE PAST IS PRESENT:
NOTES ON THE PERFECT TENSE

"The past is here to stay."
(a graffito)

In this paper I shall concentrate upon the common meaning of perfect tenses in some languages and also upon the relationship of this general meaning to one special use of the perfect, the inferential. It is reasonable to assume that there is something in common to most tenses labelled "perfect" in various languages, and the obvious differences should be related to this basic similarity (cf Lindstedt 1978). I shall confine my observations to the present perfect, for the pluperfect and future perfect seem to have some functions which are not comparable to those of their present counterpart¹.

1. Any semantic description of the perfect must cope with sentences like the following:

   (i) Have you been to Paris?
   (ii) I have read Chomsky's Aspects.

There is no easily identifiable result of somebody's having been to Paris, and (ii) could be continued "...but I don't remember anything of it". The use of the perfect (rather than the preterite) is often ascribed to some kind of "current relevance" of the past event. This notion is difficult to explicate because what is involved is a pragmatic factor deriving its exact content from the specific characteristics of each speech situation (McCoard 1978:65; Dinsmore 1981:478). Note that what is being asked in (i) is the existence of a certain type of event in the past ("Have you ever been to Paris?") and
the inquirer does not commit himself to any "current relevance" of that event, except for the fact that any question asked is pragmatically assumed to be relevant to the subject discussed. This kind of "existential" or "indefinite" perfect can be described as existential quantification over points in time, but this is too simple a description to capture the whole picture. The problem is that, in some cases, resultativity really is a perfectly good interpretation of the perfect, as in

(iii) He has gone to Paris.
(Cf Comrie 1976:59.)

In many languages there are cases where the perfect tense (or the past tense used with a perfect meaning) of certain verbs has begun to denote the mere resultant state without reference to any prior event (Comrie 1976:57^2). The resultative and the existential functions of the perfect seem to be fairly universal; but the former is too concrete to cover the latter, while the latter is too general to imply the former. In some languages they are even represented by two morphologically distinct tenses (cf Comrie 1981:72-73 on the Armenian "resultative" and "perfect" tenses). And the main uses of the perfect are not confined to these two. In English there is the perfect of persistent situation^3, such as in

(iv) We've known each other for a long time.

But this is only possible in certain languages; Finnish would be similar to English here, but German, French or the Slavonic languages would use the present tense. Even in English this reading is always dependent on adverbials and context (McCoad 1978:46-49). More important is the perfect of "recent past" or "hot news":

(v) Mary's had her baby -- it's a girl.

Just how long after the event this type of perfect can be used is regulated by language-specific constraints. But as soon as
Mary has had her baby, the sentence Mary has had her baby never ceases to be true -- it will merely become gradually a less appropriate way of reporting the fact. Here is an interesting and somewhat cryptic Finnish example heard from a news broadcast:

(vi) Maisteri Timo Tiuisnen on juuri palannut Puolasta -- tai viikonvaihteessa pälasi Puolasta.

'Mr <lit. Master (of Arts etc)> Timo Tiuisnen has just returned from Poland -- or returned <preterite, with contrastive stress> from Poland this weekend.'

This was said on a Monday evening. In Finnish, on viikonvaihteessa palannut Puolasta (lit. 'has at weekend returned from Poland') is entirely grammatical, so the added adverbial is not a direct reason for the tense change. It seems that the speaker suddenly realized that has just arrived might -- though it need not! -- be interpreted too narrowly (e.g. as referring to the same day) and he decided to present the event from another angle of view so as to make the sense less vague. Such pragmatic factors in the perfect/preterite opposition are something that cannot be ignored.

At present, the two main candidates for the semantic description of the English present perfect are the "past embedded under the present" and "extended now" theories (McCawley 1971; McCoard 1978). An earlier model, to some extent equivalent to the "embedded past" one, was proposed by Reichenbach (1966<1947>:287-298; cf Wiik 1976). He used an additional "point of reference" besides the point of speech and the point of event. In the preterite, the reference point coincides with the event point, whereas in the perfect it is simultaneous with the point of speech. This system has intuitive appeal but the exact nature of the concept of "reference point" is difficult to see; it has been claimed by Lyons (1977:812-813) that even simple preterite statements have a reference point in the present. On the other hand, the "embedded past" theory was originally formulated in the framework of generative semantics
and has now lost its underpinning — though it keeps appearing in new guises, as in Winograd 1983 (:485-489).

The problem with the "extended now" theory — i.e. the theory that the present perfect is "the marker of prior events which are nevertheless included within the overall period of the present" (McCoard 1978:123) — is that it rests upon adverbal co-occurrence restrictions typical of English, and therefore cannot show what is universal in the meaning of the English perfect. For instance, in response to the question Why do you look so tired? an appropriate answer could be I got up at five o'clock; speakers of English would not be happy with the perfect here:

(vii) *I have got up at five o'clock (this morning)."

As Comrie (1976:54) points out, in Spanish the perfect would be grammatical — and the situation is the same in Finnish:

(viii) Olen noussut viideltä (tänä aamuna).

— and in Bulgarian:

(ix) Sābudil sām se dnes v pet časa.  
(Andrejčin 1976:279)  
'I woke up <lit. have woken up> at 5 o'clock today.'

(Cf also Weinrich's <1964:91> discussion of the German perfect.)

John Dinsmore (1981) has proposed a theory whereby the "embedded past" model is supplemented with two constraints that are specific to English and also integrate the central arguments of the "extended now". I think this is a convenient way of combining the universal and the particular in the description. I shall now try to shed a little more light on the universal.
2. Weinrich (1964) and Benveniste (1966) divide tenses into narrative and discursive. Lyons (1977:688-689) speaks of the historical and experiential modes of description in the same sense. The preterite is the basic tense of the narrative mode. In the discursive mode, the present is the prevailing form and past events have to be referred to with the perfect. The preterite and the perfect are generally not used to describe the same events in the same context; it would indeed be difficult to tell a story in the perfect tense, which lacks the basic linearity of the preterite. Although we may not want to go as far as Weinrich does by denying the temporal function of tenses completely and looking at them only through the prisms of "erzählte Welt" and "besprochene Welt", it is certainly true that the choice between the preterite and the perfect depends on the large context and on the speaker's point of view towards the past. But why should there be two conceptualizations of the past?

In the ontology of natural language, things carry their histories with them. A man born in Helsinki will remain a man born in Helsinki till the end of his life, though nothing in his body shows where he was born; perhaps he hasn't got Finnish parents, doesn't speak Finnish and hasn't lived in Helsinki ever since; but he is still a man born in Helsinki. We see nothing strange in this; his place of birth is simply his permanent property. Likewise it could be somebody's property to have been to Paris or to have read Chomsky's Aspects, even if he cannot remember reading it. It is also a property of Paris to have been visited by this remarkable somebody and it is even a property of Aspects that one of its copies has been read. It seems that everything that has happened can, when needed, be interpreted as a property of the present state of the world. Historically, perfects have often developed from expressions assigning a property to the object (have perfects) or the subject (be perfects) of the sentence; perhaps it is only a minor leap to associate the past-event property with the total PRESENT SITUATION discussed.

We can now say that the preterite describes a past situation and its changes, and the perfect the present situation.
It really seems as if natural language has two alternative con-
ceptualizations of time. The events in the preterite tense
proceed in *linear* time, whereas the perfect presupposes an
*integrative* view in which past events are present. The present
of the past is not a mysterious concept because, from one point
of view, what exists exists only in the present and the past
exists only in the memory. The time-line model is not the most
primitive way of perceiving, either, because it, too, has to be
abstracted from the trichotomy: memory -- immediate perception
-- expectation (see Miller -- Johnson-Laird 1976: 142, 462; and
Lyons 1977:811-812, referring to St Augustine).

In one place McCoad (1978:83) actually uses the ex-
pressions "the past done with" and "the past with us" but
interprets them in the light of his "extended now" theory.
Weinrich (1964:77) is worth citing:

> Die Sprache kennt zweierlei Art Vergangenheit: eine,
die unmittelbar zu mir gehört und die ich bespreche
genauf wie die Dinge, die mir in meiner Sprechsitua-
tion leiblich begegnen -- und eine andere, die durch
den Filter der Erzählung von mir distanziert ist.

Ruth Kempson (1975:108) hides an important suggestion in a
footnote:

> ... past tense is an opaque context describing a
world which is necessarily not co-extensive with the
present, whereas perfect aspect\(^7\) does not provide an
opaque environment but is interpreted as co-exten-
sive with the present.

I do not use the word *situation* in the sense 'the state of
affairs denoted by one sentence' as Reichenbach, Lyons and
Comrie do. The situation is simply the *total* state of affairs
being spoken about. Perhaps the speech situation studied in
pragmatics is a kind of prototype of this concept, as deixis is
the prototype of definiteness. The notion is obviously akin to
Barwise's (see Barwise 1981; Barwise -- Perry 1981). His situ-
ation semantics has many formal properties that I am not competent to assess, but in the present context the following characteristics of his model may prove helpful:

(a) Situations are considered to be epistemically primary, though in the model they are reconstructed with the formalism of logic and set theory.

(b) Sentences can be interpreted on the basis of partial models, without the need to refer to the whole state of the world and other possible worlds.

(c) Since the denotatum of a sentence is not its truth value and the truth has a less central position than in traditional model-theoretic semantics, a situation -- as far as I can see -- need not be constrained to the physical present and its immediately verifiable properties.

In the "past events present" model the existential perfect, as in (i) and (ii), could be explained as follows: existential quantification is a kind of search and the search domain must first be defined. It can only be a particular situation, not the set of all situations -- which would make the search a second-order one -- hence quantification over events requires that they should be subsumed under the epistemically primary present situation.

The celebrated example

(x) Einstein has visited Princeton.

which is said to imply or suggest that Einstein is still alive (though textual factors may cancel this implicature), is explained by the fact that Einstein can be the topic of the sentence only if he is present, i.e. alive. This seems to mean that the topic of a sentence is considered to be the primary repository of the past event reported with a perfect (cf Leino-
nen 1980), though in some contexts the repository is simply "the world in general", i.e. the present situation as a whole.

3. After the foregoing observations we can finally turn to one more use of the perfect, viz the inferential. It is not typical of English but is found in Scandinavian languages, among others. The following sentences are taken from Kinnander's abundant examples in Swedish (1973:129,141):

(xi) Vi vet att för ungefär 4.000 år sedan avled en egyptisk farao till följd av något som har varit en allergisk sjukdom.
'We know that some 4,000 years ago an Egyptian Pharaoh died <preterite> of something that must have been <lit. "that has been"> an allergic disease.'

(xii) Under hela denna händelserika dag, den 11 juli, har Andrée icke haft tid att göra mer än några korta anteckningar i sin dagbok.
'During all this eventful day, the 11th of July, Andrée did not have <lit. "has not had"> time to write more than a few short notes in his diary.'

This use of the perfect is common especially in historical writing when the author shifts from narration to general conclusions. The phenomenon is noted by Kinnander (1973) and Haugen (1972:137-138) in Scandinavian, Weinrich (1964:84-86) in German, and Andrejčin (1976:23) in Bulgarian. In several languages the perfect has functions that have to be rendered in English with the simple preterite, as in (xii), or with some kind of explicit epistemic modality, such as

(xiii) He must have been here last Sunday.

(Note the use of the English perfect infinitive in such sentences as the representative of both the perfect and the preterite — see Hofmann 1976<1966>.) This inferential perfect
is common in Bulgarian, where (xiii) can be translated simply as

(xiv) Bil e tuk minalata nedelja.

i.e., 'been-is-here-last-Sunday'. This use is formally and semantically distinct from the famous "narrative" or "reported" mood of Bulgarian, although space does not permit me to deploy arguments on this question. (At any rate, Comrie 1976 <108-110> should be used with care.) So, the perfect pisal e 'has written' is used instead of the aorist pisa 'wrote' when the speaker has not witnessed the event of writing herself but only infers it from the evidence at hand (but if she has learnt of it from another person, she will use the narrative aorist pisal). An example:

(xv) Trjabva mnogo da priličam na mama -- pomisli si tja. -- Kakto se vižda, mama sa ja znajali vsički.
(Jordan Jovkov, cited in Demina 1959<321>.)
'I must resemble my mother very much, she thought. It seems that mother was <lit. "has been"> known to everybody.'
<Lit. mother - are - her - past participle act.pl. of know - all>

The interesting thing is that events and actions presented in the imperfect, pluperfect and past future tenses can likewise be either witnessed or inferred -- the phenomenon is not confined to the aorist. Modern Bulgarian has developed a whole correlation of inferentials:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;NORMAL&quot;</th>
<th>INFERENTIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pisa</td>
<td>'wrote'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pišeše</td>
<td>'was writing'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beše pisal</td>
<td>'had written'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>šteše da piše</td>
<td>'would write'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pisal e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pišel e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bil e pisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>štjal e da piše</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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(Theoretically there exists even štjaļ e da e pisaļ, from šteše da e pisaļ 'would have written'.)

Except for pisaļ e, the inferential forms are not regularly used by all speakers -- even in (xv) the form is znajali sa, based on the aorist stem, not the imperfect-based znaeli sa which would be semantically more appropriate. Nevertheless it seems that the new system is gaining ground. It might appear that a new inferential mood is emerging in Bulgarian beside, or rather between, the indicative and narrative moods, but this would be a hasty conclusion. The form pisaļ e, which is by far the most usual among the inferentials, still continues to have all the customary meanings of an indicative perfect. Since it is quite normal for a sentence to express both inferentiality and, say, resultativity, the inferential mood could not be distinguished from the indicative at this crucial point. We must therefore conclude that a language can have several indicative present perfects which correlate with different past tenses in the same way as the English present perfect is correlated with the simple past.

Semantically, inferentiality is current relevance the other way round, for causality is utilized in the opposite direction (cf Kinnander 1973:142-143). The traces of a past event are only relevant as a basis for inferring the event itself and in some cases they may be of a very abstract nature. But the inferential is still a way of viewing the past from the present standpoint because, in it, the present situation is highlighted as the primary epistemic point at which the evidence can be observed and the inferring itself must take place.

Footnotes

1 As pointed out by McCawley (1971: 102-103), among others, the English past perfect is not only the past of the perfect but also the past of the past, i.e. the anterior past. In some languages there are paradigmatic limitations as well; the Bulgarian perfects of the type pišel e, treated later in the main text, have no pluperfect counterpart (*beše pišel),
and the verb sām 'be' lacks a pluperfect form though its perfect is quite normal.

2 To Comrie's examples could be added the Hausa Na shan shi 'I know him', lit. 'I have got to know him' (completive aspect), and Na gan shi 'I see him', lit. 'I have perceived him' (Kraft -- Kirk-Greene 1973:76-77).

3 Other names are "continuous" (McCoard) or "universal" (McCawley) perfect.

4 I owe this explanation to Tuula Lindstedt.

5 The purpose of this morning is to block the existential reading, i.e. "There has been at least one occasion such that..."

6 It is true that in English we would say He was born in Helsinki, whereas in Finnish the perfect would be preferred. But the point is a more general one: there exist such individual histories and perfects refer to them, but I do not claim that all such histories are necessarily referred to by perfects in all languages. It is a peculiarity of English, linked with its adverbial co-occurrence restrictions, that we do not normally say *This picture has been painted by Leonardo da Vinci; in Finnish and Bulgarian the perfect would be the usual form in such sentences. (Cf Dinsmore 1981 on the restrictions in English.)

7 I prefer to call the perfect a tense. Both as an aspect and as a tense it would be sui generis but in view of its deictic nature it seems better to consider it a tense.

8 Salomon August Andrée's expedition by balloon to the North Pole in 1897 ended in disaster. The men's bodies and their notebooks were not found until 1930. The sentence (originally from a book published in that year) is obviously an inference based on Andrée's newly found notebook.
9 The English translations are not meant to be precise. In particular, the would and šteše forms do not behave in the same manner when used in counterfactual sentences.

10 It might seem that bil e pisal is a kind of surcomposé of the French type. But whereas in French the development of il a eu écrit is due to the new aorist meaning of il a écrit (Benveniste 1966:249), in Bulgarian the meaning of pisa is not being taken over by pisal e. Some kinds of surcomposés have appeared in other Slavonic languages at times when they have been losing this opposition.

References


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