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Implications for the Analysis of the Present Perfect in English

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The Translation of the Present Perfect into Serbo-Croatian and Implications for the Analysis of the Present Perfect in English¹

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The tense system of English is generally treated as an interaction among the speech time, the reference time, and the event time (following Reichenbach 1969). Using these three parameters, one can explain the differences between the present perfect and the simple past or between the simple past and the past perfect. However, the tense system of Serbo-Croatian (and many other Indo-European languages which lack a system of perfect tenses) appears to be simply a relationship between speech time and event time. Reference time in Serbo-Croatian plays no role in the choice of tense; rather it plays an important role in the choice of aspect. However, a somewhat different concept of reference time is used in analyses of Slavic aspect than is used in the analysis of the English perfect. It is the goal of this paper to reconcile these two concepts of reference time and provide a single concept of reference time which can be used in both languages. Our second goal, once we have established such a unified concept of reference time, is to provide a system of correspondences between the present perfect in English and the present and past tenses of Serbo-Croatian.

1. In English, given a three parameter scheme of event time, speech time and reference time, tense is taken to be the relationship between the speech time and the reference time. The simple past in such a scheme represents a situation in which the reference time equals the event time and both precede the speech time. In contrast, the present perfect represents a situation in which the reference time equals the speech time and the event time is prior to speech time. The difference between these two tenses can be illustrated as follows:

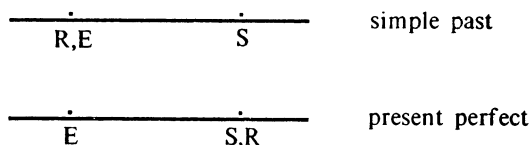


Figure 1.

Serbo-Croatian, however, lacks a present perfect tense and only has a past, present and future. The present perfect in English is translated into Serbo-Croatian sometimes by a present imperfective and sometimes by a past (usually perfective). For example, a sentence such as *he has just left* is translated as (1):

1. Upravo je otišao.
(He) just left (past pf)

while a sentence such as *they have lived here for years* translates as (2):

2. Već godinama tu stanuju.
For years' here (they) stay (pres)

Anyone familiar with the literature on the present perfect will immediately recognize (1) as an example of the "perfect of result" (Comrie's term) and (2) as an example of the "perfect of persistent situation". The present is used in (2) because the event continues all the way to the moment of speech; the past is used in (1) because the entire event took place during some interval prior to the moment of speech. Such a situation suggests that in Serbo-Croatian the reference time is irrelevant in the choice of tense. Only the relationship between the event time and the speech time seems to be relevant.

The reference time is, however, relevant in the choice of aspect in Serbo-Croatian. Aspect is usually considered to be the relationship between the reference time and the event time. There are two ways in which this relationship can be viewed. One, which is best represented in Isačenko (1960), is the view that the perfective is used if the reference point is outside the interval during which the event takes place, while the imperfective is used if the reference point is inside that interval. However, such a view fails to account for sentences such as the following:

- 3a. Otišao je u dva sata.
He left (pf) at two o'clock.
b. Došao sam u Petak.
I came (pf) on Friday.

In (3a) the reference point is two o'clock, which is identical to the event time (in this case an instant), and in (3b) the reference time is Friday, which does not seem to be a point at all, but is an interval which surrounds the event time. Thus it seems preferable to follow the analysis of Garey for French (1957) or Allan for English (1966) and assume a reference period or interval. We can then let the perfective represent a situation in which the event takes place entirely within the bounds of the reference period and the imperfective represent a situation in which the event period extends beyond the bounds of the reference period.

2. The question which now arises is how to reconcile the idea of reference time used by Reichenbach and the idea of reference period we have decided to adopt for Serbo-Croatian. Our first task then is to establish a concept of reference time that can be used in a contrastive analysis of the tense systems of the two languages.

Let us first consider the different uses of the present perfect in English. The following four uses are listed by Comrie and repeated in Woisetschlaeger's analysis of the perfect tenses of English (1976):

I. Perfect of persistent situation. Examples are:

- 4a. Max has lived here since 1960.
b. I have waited for years.

Such sentences imply that the situation being described persists all the way up to the present moment. This uses is referred to by Dubravčić (1970) as the *continuative* perfect, and this is the term I will use throughout this paper.

II. Experiential perfect. An example given by Woisetschlaeger (p. 79) is:

5. Max has won money at the dog track exactly twice in his life.
Woisetschlaeger points out that this sentence can be uttered felicitously only if

Max is still alive, if the dog track still exists and if Max is still betting (or has the potential of betting some more) at the track. Such conditions are referred to by Comrie as a "requirement of present relevance". Woisetschlaeger suggests that this be replaced with the expression "maintenance of the status quo" (p. 82): that is "whatever state arises automatically from the narrated situation".

III. Perfect of result. Examples are:

- 6a. John has left.
- b. John has given his bike to Bill.
- c. Max has closed the door.

All these imply that the result of the action being described is still in force: that is John is still gone, Bill still has John's bike, and the door is still closed. This according to Woisetschlaeger is a special case of the requirement for the "maintenance of the status quo".

IV. Perfect of recent past. Examples are sentences such as *Bill has been killed in an auto wreck*. This is a rather vaguely defined category, which Woisetschlaeger also claims can be subsumed under the requirement for the "maintenance of the status quo".

All four of these uses of the present perfect Woisetschlaeger claims can be represented by the following diagram (p. 78):

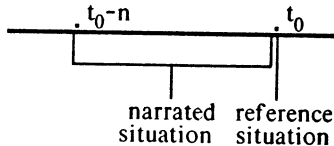


Figure 2.

In all four uses of the present perfect the event is asserted to take place during the interval labelled *narrated situation*. The content of the *reference situation* is not specified, but must in some way be "relevant" to the narrated situation. According to Woisetschlaeger, the perfect of persistent situation is a special case of the above in which the reference situation is assumed to be identical to the narrated situation.

Using such a schema, Woisetschlaeger explains why only certain time adverbials such as *since, lately, recently, now*, etc. co-occur freely with, and in some cases require, the present perfect, while adverbials such as *on Monday, last year, in 1960* and *yesterday* are incompatible with the present perfect. He then gives the following requirement for the use of a given adverbial with the present perfect (pp. 85-6):

... the time adverbial may not specify a past time interval whose right bound is such that there must exist another time interval between it and t_0 .

That is the adverbial must not name an interval such as:

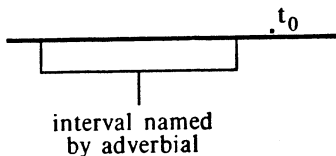


Figure 3.

An admissible adverbial must name an interval such as



Figure 4.

But what does this interval represent? Surely in sentences such as (7):

7a. Harry has recently been mugged.

b. Uncle Charley has written three times since he left town.

this interval cannot be said to represent the event time. The event time in (7a) is some interval whose right bound precedes t_0 , since the mugging is completely over, and in (7b) the event time consists of three disjoint intervals all of which precede t_0 . If the interval (t_0-n, t_0) is not the event time, then what is it?

Let us propose a slightly different interpretation of the present perfect. Let us refer to the interval (t_0-n, t_0) and not t_0 as the reference time (now a reference period), and let us then state that the present perfect is used when the reference interval is of the form (t_0-n, t_0) for some $n \neq 0$. Under such an interpretation of the present perfect, the event period can fill up the entire reference period, in which case we have the continuative perfect, or it can be shorter than the reference period, in which case we have one of the other three types, where which one of the three it is depends in part on the semantics of the verb and in part on the context of the utterance. We can still explain the ungrammaticality of *John has left yesterday*: the reference period is yesterday, which does not extend up to t_0 . Since, as we have noted above, only the event time seems to be relevant in the choice of tense in Serbo-Croatian, we can now explain why the Serbo-Croatian translations of the sentences in (7) must use the past perfective. In (7a), for example, the interval implied by *recently* extends up to the moment of speech. The mugging, however, took place entirely within that interval; hence the past perfective is used.

3. However, when we turn to the Serbo-Croatian equivalents of the continuative perfect, we find that our analysis is in need on some revision. According to Woisetschlaeger, the continuative present perfect asserts that the event fills up the entire interval designated as the *narrated situation* in Figure 2, but does not actually assert that the event period includes the moment of speech. What the continuative perfect actually asserts is thus represented by Figure 2. The reference situation is normally assumed to be identical to the narrated situation, but this is

not necessarily the case. Woisetschlaeger points out that the middle clause of the following sentence may seem pedantic, but is not redundant (p. 78):

8. Certain approaches to politics have always been wrong, they are wrong now, and they always will be.

Without the middle clause the sentence would still suggest, but it would not assert, that certain approaches are still wrong at the moment of speech.

Such ambivalence in the status of the reference situation in such sentences seems confirmed by facts in Serbo-Croatian. In many cases we find that the present perfect in English can be translated into Serbo-Croatian equally by the present or the past:

- 9a. Oduvijek želim putovati na talijanska jezera.
Always (I) want (pres) to travel ...
I have always wanted to travel to the Italian lakes.
- b. Oduvijek sam želila putovati na talijanska jezera.
Always (I) wanted (past imp) to travel ...
- c. Dva dana ne spavam.
Two days (I) not sleep (pres)
I haven't slept for two days.
- d. Dva dana nisam spavala.
Two days (I) not slept (past imp)

When questioned, speakers say that the difference between (9a) and (9b) or between (9c) and (9d) is a difference in focus. When the present tense is used, the emphasis is on the fact that the situation being described is still going on at the moment of speech. (9a) implies that I am still longing to go to the Italian lakes and haven't much hope of going in the near future. (9b) suggests that perhaps I now finally have a chance to go: that is, my longing is a thing of the past. This feeling is even stronger in (10) (taken from Dubravčić 1970):

10. Oduvijek sam želila doći na talijanska jezera, i sad evo kako je to.
I have always wanted (past imp) to come to the Italian lakes and now here is how they are.

Since I have now arrived at the lakes and am looking at them, my longing is definitely a thing of the past. Thus in this sentence the past is preferred to the present. Similarly, (9c) is felt to be more emotionally colored than (9d) - more self-pitying, said one speaker. In (9c) the emphasis is on my present condition; in (9d) the emphasis is on the length of time I have been without sleep.

However, the choice of tense in such sentences is not always free. In the following sentences the choice of tense is more or less prescribed (these are also from Dubravčić):

- 11a. Sad radim ovaj posao već dugo vremena.
Now (I) work (pres)
Now I have worked a long time on this task.
- b. Mislila sam na tebe zadnja dva dana.
I thought (past imp)
I have thought of you for the last two days.

Sentence (11a) would be ungrammatical in the past tense, although without *sad*

"now" the past tense would be acceptable. In sentence (11b) the past is greatly preferred. Other examples in which the present is required, or at least preferred, are given in (12), and examples requiring the past in (13) (12 a, c, and e are from Dubravčić):

- 12a. Netko mi krade knjige.
Someone steals (pres) my books
Someone has been stealing my books.
- b. Netko mi je krao knjige.
steal (past imp)
Someone was stealing my books.
- c. Da li pravi budalu od sebe u posljednje vrijeme?
Does he make (pres) a fool of himself ...
Has he been making a fool of himself lately?
- d. ?Da li je pravio budalu od sebe u posljednje vrijeme?
made (past imp)
- e. Ti mi nanosiš bol čitavo vrijeme otkako smo u braku.
You me bring (pres) pain ... since we are married.
You have been causing me pain ever since we have been married.
- f. ?Ti si mi nanosio bol čitavo vrijeme otkako smo u braku.
You brought (past imp) me pain ...
- g. Mislim na tebe već od juče.
I think (pres) of you since yesterday
I have thought of you since yesterday.
- h. ?Mislila sam na tebe već od juče.
I thought (past imp)
- 13a. Uvijek sam čitao mnogo.
Always I read (past imp) a lot
I have always read a lot.
- b. Uvijek čitam mnogo.
read (pres)
I always read a lot.
- c. Nedavno sam mnogo čitao
Recently much I read (past imp)
I have read a lot recently.
- d. ?Nedavno čitam mnogo.
read (pres)
- e. Još se ništa nije dogodilo.
Yet nothing happened (past pf)
Nothing has happened yet.
- f. Još se ništa ne događa.
happen (pres)
Still nothing is happening.

It appears that some adverbs necessarily include the present moment, others necessarily exclude the present moment, and still others allow either interpretation. The following table shows a list of such adverbials and which tenses they take (that is, when used in sentences equivalent to the English present perfect):

Present only

otkad "since"
od juće "since yesterday"
u posljednje vrijeme "lately"
sad "now"

Past only

nedavno "recently"
zadnjih nekoliko dana "in the last
 few days"
još "yet"
uvijek "always"

Both present and past

oduvijek "since always"
već godinama "for years"
dva dana "for two days"
cijeli dan "the whole day"

The most reasonable proposal to make on the basis of such facts is that there are two cases in which the present perfect is used: first if the reference period extends up to but does not include the moment of speech, and second if the reference period includes the moment of speech. In the first case the Serbo-Croatian equivalent of the present perfect is the past tense, and in the second case it is the present tense. Which is the case is sometimes indicated by the context of the utterance and sometimes by an accompanying time adverbial. Certain adverbials, such as *since*, *now*, etc. name a reference period which includes the moment of speech, others such as *recently* and *yet* name an interval which excludes the moment of speech, and others can name either type of interval.

One requirement then for the use of the present perfect is that the reference period either extend up to or extend up to and include t_0 . This can be stated formally as follows:

X has *V-ed* is true at t_0 iff

- (i) for some $t_1 < t_0$, there exists a subinterval I of the interval (t_1, t_0) such that X *V's* is true at I ; or
- (ii) for some $t_1 < t_0$, there exists a subinterval I of $(t_1, t_0]$ such that X *V's* is true at I .

Of course, this condition, although necessary, is not sufficient. We need in addition a condition requiring the "maintenance of the status quo". For the continuative perfect, this *status quo* is the protraction of the event itself. For the other types of present perfect, the status quo is some state of affairs ψ which is brought about by the completion of the action named by the verb (the exact content of ψ must remain unspecified, as it is often determined not by the semantics of the verb, but by the context). Whichever the case, this status quo must, in case (i) described above, remain true until t_0 , and in case (ii) it must continue to be true at t_0 .

4. In order to show how this interpretation of the present perfect can be used as a basis for the comparison of the tense systems of English and Serbo-Croatian, we need to appeal to the *telic - atelic* distinction introduced by Garey (1957) and discussed under a different name by Bennett and Partee (ms.). Briefly, telic VP's include those such as *build a house*, *walk to the park* and *write a letter*. These represent actions which are directed towards a goal, and one cannot truthfully utter

the sentence *He has V-ed* until that goal is reached. Atelic VP's include *push a cart, run, sit*, etc. These denote actions which are not directed towards a goal, and one can truthfully say *He has V-ed* at any moment of the interval at which he is V-ing. In Bennett and Partee's terms, if a sentence containing an atelic VP is true at some interval I, then it is true at any subinterval of I. When a sentence containing a telic VP is true at I, it is not the case that the sentence is true at any proper subinterval of I.

Present perfects (non-progressive) of telic VP's will always be translated into Serbo-Croatian using the past perfective. There can be no interval I such as the following:

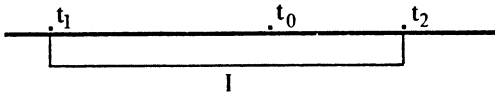


Figure 5.

such that *X V's* is true at I and *X has V-ed* is true at t_0 , where V represents a telic VP. According to the definition of telicity, if *X V's* is true at $I = (t_1, t_2)$, then *X V's* cannot be true at (t_1, t_0) , since this is a proper subinterval of (t_1, t_2) . The sentence *X has V-ed*, however, asserts that *X V's* is true either at (t_1, t_0) or at some subinterval of (t_1, t_0) .² Thus the event time must be entirely within the bounds of the reference period; consequently, the past perfective is used in Serbo-Croatian.

Present perfects of atelic VP's are translated into Serbo-Croatian as a present tense if the reference period includes the moment of speech (see 14a), and the past tense if the reference period excludes the present moment (see 14b):

14a. Na ovo čekam već godinama.

For this I wait (pres)

I have waited for years for this.

b. Na ovo sam čekala već godinama, a sad evo ga.

I waited (past imp)

I have waited for years for this, and now here it is.

Sentence (14a) represents a situation such as the following:

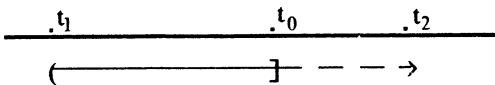


Figure 6.

The waiting extends from t_1 to t_0 , is still going on at t_0 , and continues possibly beyond t_0 . The sentence states nothing about the state of affairs after t_0 : even if the waiting extends all the way to t_2 , one can still truthfully utter (14a) at t_0 . According to the definition of atelics, *na ovo čekam* "I wait for this" is true at any subinterval of (t_1, t_2) , including $(t_1, t_0]$. Sentence (14b) asserts only that the waiting goes on at (t_1, t_0) . However, the sentence would not be contradicted if the waiting was still going on at t_0 . It should be stressed, though, that where the event is only asserted to be going on throughout the interval (t_1, t_0) , the past tense must

be used, regardless of the state of affairs at t_0 .

There are also cases such as the following of atelic present perfects which definitely refer to a state of affairs which has now ceased:

15. Ja sam stanovala u Nju Jorku.

I have lived in New York.

In such cases the present perfect is translated by the past imperfective, which asserts that the state persisted throughout some proper subinterval of the reference period.³

The translation of the present perfect progressive follows the same rules as atelics. Present perfect progressives are most often translated by the present tense as in (16) (taken from Dubravčić):

16a. Netko mi krada knjige.

Someone has been stealing my books.

b. Otkad sam prestala pušiti, stalno dobivam na težini.

Since I stopped smoking, I have constantly been gaining weight.

However, in cases such as the following (also taken from Dubravčić) we tend to find the past tense imperfective:

17a. Iscrpljen sam. Čitav dan sam radio.

I am exhausted. I have been working all day.

b. Kad se Tommy vratio te večeri kući, majka ugleda izgrebano lice i natečeni nos is reče puna nade: "Jesi se tukao?"

When Tommy returned home that evening, his mother saw the scratches on his face and his swollen nose and said hopefully: "Have you been fighting?"

In (17a) if I am sitting down exhausted, I am clearly no longer working, and in (17b) since Tommy is now home, he is obviously no longer fighting. Thus the past imperfective is used in both sentences.

5. In this paper I have argued for a new concept of reference time which can account both for the use of the present perfect in English and the perfective aspect in Serbo-Croatian. With this concept of reference time, we are now able to show the relationship between the perfect tenses of English and the aspect system of Slavic languages - we also see that the perfect in English is not at all equivalent to the perfective aspect in Slavic. We should be able to extend this analysis to show correspondences between the tense system of English and those in other Indo-European languages, possibly even in non-Indo-European languages. This last, however, is a subject for future work.

Footnotes

1. This paper is a product of research I am presently carrying out for the Zagreb English - Serbo-Croatian Contrastive Project at the Institute of Linguistics in Zagreb. This project is aimed at helping English speaking learners of Serbo-Croatian; the volume I am now working on is devoted to problems of verbal tense. I will be using the scheme developed in this paper to predict errors in verbal tense that will be made by English speaking learners, predictions which are already partially confirmed by error analysis carried out by other members of the Project.

I owe gratitude to Dr. Filipović, director of the Institute, and other members of the Project for their cooperation in this undertaking. I especially want to acknowledge the work of Maja Dubravčić in the present perfect in English, which has been a major source of inspiration for this work.

2. It is not clear to me whether or not a telic present perfect can be used if the event fills up the entire interval (t_1, t_0). It is unclear whether a sentence such as *he has just eaten his porridge* implies that the action fills up this entire interval or not. However, it is clear that the event must be over at t_0 .

3. Garey's analysis of aspect in French would predict that an atelic of this sort would be translated by the perfective, since such sentences are translated by the *passé composé* in French. However, while Serbo-Croatian contains a limited number of atelic perfectives, these are not at all productive, and in most cases the imperfective will be used. For further discussion of this problem see Cochrane 1978.

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