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A Discourse-Pragmatic Consideration of the English Simple Past and Present Perfect

—reexamination of the notion of “Current Relevance”—*

山内 真理**

英語の現在完了形は、従来、「現在との関連」Current Relevance という概念のもとに記述されてきた。しかし、しばしば指摘される通り、この概念はその規定の曖昧性のために完了形の使用を十分に説明しているとは言いがたい。

本稿では、まず、従来の研究がこの概念を話者の主観の関与としてとらえていながら、その概念規定に際しては、表現される出来事に関する特性であるかのように記述してきたことが、完了形の使用の説明におけるこの概念の不備の大きな要因であることを指摘する。

さらに、話者の主観の関与といった特性の分析・特徴づけには、語用論的・談話構成的なレベルでの観察が必要であるとの想定に基づき、過去の出来事を表現する（すなわち意味論的レベルでは等価になる）ときの現在完了形と単純過去形を対比させていく。

議論は、既に指摘のある、定冠詞・不定冠詞の対立との平行性から出発し、両者が情報の提示の仕方次第で際立った対照を示すことを談話構成レベル・対人関係レベルにおいて例証していく。

0. Introduction

The English Present Perfect (henceforth, PP) is often described in terms of Current Relevance (henceforth, CR). It is true that PP is felt to indicate CR (or something that might be called CR), but, as has been pointed out, the idea of CR itself is too vague to tell us when and when NOT to use the PP (cf. Leech, 1971: 31).

In this paper I point out that there is a discourse-pragmatic viewpoint

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** 現在完了形と単純過去形に関する論用論的考察 —「現在との関連」再考—

(Mari YAMAUCHI)

which has been missing in describing the use of PP and, through the following discussion, I attempt to show that this viewpoint can bring us a better understanding of the use of PP and the nature of CR.

1. *Problems with the notion of "Current Relevance"*

When PP is described in terms of CR, the description goes like: PP is used where "in some way or other (not necessarily in its results) the action is relevant to something observable at the present" (Palmer, 1965: 73-74), or, used for "past events considered as causes of the present effects or results, — or more precisely, considered for their 'current relevance'" (Huddleston, 1984: 159). These statements can be paraphrased in this way: PP is used when the speaker takes a past situation as currently relevant with the present.

This interpretation is misleading, however. Consider (1), for example.

- (1) a. I have broken my leg, so I can't go with them.
- b. I broke my leg yesterday so I can't go with them.

(Huddleston, 160-161)

If we say the past event in (1a) is currently relevant with the the present (the speaker's inability), then we should say the past event in (1b) equally relevant. As you see, CR, if understood as a property ascribed to a described past event, cannot tell us when PP should not be used. Palmer makes the same point about the notion of CR: "An explanation simply in terms of results or current relevance (...) would not exclude **They've come last Monday*, meaning that they came on Monday and are still here" (1965: 75).

Let us assume that, to avoid this difficulty, CR correlates with a particular period of time (so-called "extended now" or "inclusive past") and thus PP and past-indicating expressions are incompatible, as Palmer pointed out: "Current Relevance may be indicated only if the period of time that is stated is one that includes the present" (*ibid.*) Still, we meet a similar difficulty. Consider (2) where the simple past (henceforth, SP) is used.

(2) (A talk between a host and a guest at a dinner)

'Cigar, Hecht?'

'No, thanks, Fielding. I say, do you mind if I...?'

'I can recommend the cigars. Young Havelake sent them from Havana. His father's ambassador there, you know.'

(MQ)

In (2) there is no specification of time excluding the present, and we can say that the past situation of sending the cigars is relevant with the present in a way (at least, the cigars are found to be recommended in the present situation). Admitting that SP is not incompatible with CR of the past situation in such a sense as Twadell puts: "per se Modification I" neither affirms nor denies that the earlier event or state is linked with the current situation" (1960: 6), we still have a question unanswered: why is PP unacceptable in this example?

It will be clear that these difficulties arise from describing the use of PP, resorting to properties of *what is mentioned* (i. e. if the past situation is relevant to the present or not, or, if the period of time includes the present or not). Through the following sections I suggest that PP, and CR as a characteristic of PP, should be more appropriately described in terms of the act of mentioning than of what is mentioned. In the next section we will see what is meant by the description in terms of the act of mentioning.

2. "Definite" and "Indefinite" presentation

Some linguists have noted a contrast between PP and SP in referring to a past situation (see (3)-(5) below), and regarded the contrast as a case of natural strategies for talking about something: i) "start a conversation *indefinitely*" (Leech, 1971: 37), i. e., use PP for a past situation referred to for the first time, then, ii) "progress to a *definite* reference once a frame of reference has been established" (*ibid.*), i. e., use SP for a past situation that the hearer is already familiar with (see also; Declerck 1991, Quirk et al. 1985).

¹⁾ Twadell's 'Modification I' refers to the English simple past.

- (3) I've visited the ESA headquarters. It was fascinating. (Declerck)
 (4) --I'm throwing up my job. --So I've heard.
 --When did you hear about it? (Declerck)
 (5) 'That (=to give a help) is not always easy.'
 'I have heard of you, Mr. Holmes. I heard from Major Predergast
 how you saved him (...).' (ASH)

Such a view on the use of the two forms is close to what we are seeking: the contrast between them involves how to present the information. Let us look more closely at the definiteness of presentation; we will first see "definite" presentation and then "indefinite" one.

3. *Definite Presentation: For Addition*

What has to be emphasized first here is that: whether or not "a frame of reference has been established" (i.e., familiar with the hearer) is, fundamentally, the matter for the speaker's way of talking, rather than the status of what is talked about (i.e., if it has actually been mentioned or not, or, if it is actually inferable or not). To make this clearer, consider the following conversation between colleagues (cf. Huddleston, 1984: 250).

- (6) A: I'm going to see the Deputy Vice-chancellor this afternoon.
 B: Which one?

The speaker B's reply shows that there are more than one deputy vice-chancellors and that B cannot identify nor infer which one is intended (i.e., no frame of reference has been actually established). Then, should the speaker A have used *a* instead of *the* since the referent of NP is not entitled to be expressed by the definite NP? No. There may be misunderstanding on the hearer's knowledge but there is no misuse of the expression. The speaker A just has treated it as established.

Now we can ask the next question: when does the speaker make definite presentation? For what does he/she treat some information as established?

A possible answer is that: when or because the speaker intends to add something else to what is (treated as) established²⁾. If there is nothing to add to it, is there any need to present or mention what has (actually or not) been established?

There is a suggestive remark on this sort of use of SP ((3)-(5)), where an aspect of definite presentation—inviting additional information—is made explicit: SP is often used “*to give further details* about the situation in question (Declerck 1991: 104f, my italics).

To make it clear that sentences containing SP can refer to a situation as established for additional information, look at these questions in (7) where the speaker asks the hearer to give information, as follows:

- (7) a. --I'm throwing up my job. --So I've heard.
 --When did you hear about it? (= (4))
 b. --Some idiot has put diesel in the tank instead of petrol. Which
 of you did that? --I did. (Declerck)
 c. Who gave you this tie? (I can see your new tie) (Leech)
 d. This cake tastes wonderful. Did you bake it yourself? (Declerck)

All these questions presuppose a piece of information on the past situation (previously mentioned in (7a-b), but not in (7c-d)) for further information to be added to. It will be clear that SP is used for the presupposed past act, accompanied with specification of range of information to be given (e. g., *when, which of you, who, yourself* (or not)).

In contrast, an interrogative containing PP usually does not function pure-

²⁾ This statement holds if the speaker intends to be informative, where a main-task is smooth transmission of information (on another task of attracting attention and balancing the two factors, see Beaugrande & Dressler (1981)). The pattern of 'from the actually established (or obviously inferable) to the new information' gives the hearer an easy access; since the established context for the new information to be added is always needed by the hearer, if not given, it takes effort to find one. This can be fully understood from Sperber & Wilson (1986) and Lambrecht (1994).

ly as a request for information. See (8)-(10).

- (8) --I don't believe you. You always lie to me.
 --That's not true. When have I ever lied to you? (Declerck)
- (9) (...) and seizing the bird he threw it on the floor and then he stamped on it violently (...). 'Oh, Gabriel, what have you done?
 You've spoilt all the soft pretty colours.(...)' (RJ)
- (10) 'Well,' said our engineer ruefully,..., 'it has been a pretty business for me! I have lost my thumb, and I have lost a fifty-guinea fee, and what have I gained!
 'Experience!' said Holmes, laughing, (...)' (ASH)

These interrogatives do not convey requests for additional information (at least, in the same way as (7)): in (8) the act of lying is not presupposed (cf. *That's not true*), (9) the act in question is not asked to be given since it is already known to the interrogator (cf. *You've spoilt...*). To see how PP works in these interrogatives, we can say that PP is not available for the presupposed information, i. e., the one treated as established for further information to be added to.

This characterization explains naturally why PP is excluded or is hard to use even if the mentioned situation bears some effect on the present situation, or if a specific time of occurrence does not matter. Consider (11)-(13).

- (11) 'I can recommend the cigars. Young Havelake sent them from Havana.' (=2)
- (12) 'He left one thing behind him in the conservatory---an old cloth belt, navy blue, from a cheap overcoat by the look of it.(...)' (MQ)
- (13) 'How will you make contact with Mendel again?
 'I gave him the number of the Grosvenor Hotel and I'm there now. He's going to ring me as soon as he gets a chance and I'll join him wherever he is.' (CFD)

In (11) the latter utterance adds to the established reference (*cigars*) further information on the actor and the place of sending. The act of sending connects them, and thus SP is required. Utterance (12) gives further information on what was left and thus his act of leaving should be presented as presupposed. Similarly in (13) the act of giving is treated as presupposed to give the required information (how to contact).

To sum up, SP is used for the definite presentation, to present the past situation as established or presupposed for further information to be added to. On the other hand, PP does not seem to fit this function and thus can be said to serve as the indefinite presentation as opposed to the definite presentation. We will see what is conveyed by the indefinite presentation in the next section.

4. *Indefinite Presentation: For What?*

From the above examples ((3)-(5) and *has put* in (7b)), it is assured that PP can be used for the first mention, or "to introduce a topic into a conversation" (Declerck, 104f.). But this use is surely a sub-class since there are cases where PP cannot be said to introduce a topic or a frame of reference. Observe, for example, PP in (14b) and (14c), where a frame of 'finding' is already evoked by utterance (14a). We will see in this section such uses characteristic to PP but other than the use for introduction. And then we find a common property among the uses.

- (14) (Rigby, an inspector, has given Smiley an outline of a murder and let slip the finding of a weapon)

'(...) We've got enough clues (...); foot prints, time of the murder, indication of murderer's clothing, and even the weapon itself.'(a)

Smiley looked at him in surprise.

'You ve FOUND the weapon, then?'(b)

Rigby hesitated. 'Yes, we ve found it.(c)

There's hardly a soul knows this, sir, and I'll trouble you to

remember that. We found it the morning after the murder, four miles north of Carne (...)(d) (MQ)

What we notice in (14) is that question (14b) is quite different from ones seen above in (7); no further information is asked for, i. e. the question (14b) contains only established information (whether or not it is believed). What is asked here, therefore, is not further information at the level of the mentioned situation but information at the level of the act of mentioning (e. g., confirmation). Observe (15) where such information at the interactional level is explicitly asked for by the expression *Do you mean*.

- (15) 'Indeed! My mistress (*sic*) told me that you were likely to call. She left this morning with her husband, by the 5.15 train from Charing Cross, for the Continent.'
'What!' Sherlock Holmes staggered back, white with chagrin and surprise. 'Do you mean she has left England?' (ASH)

Obviously, the answer (14c) is also at this interactional level; this assertion does not contain any additional information, nor does the following utterances. Seemingly, Rigby uses SP only after he decides to inform Smiley of the weapon and to give him further information (cf. (14d)).

Consider some other examples where PP presents information unnecessary with regard to its content and, by this ratification, some information can be implicated at the interactional level.

- (16) You have done your best. I'll given you a new bike. (Dijk)
(17) (Jody repeatedly asks Billy to tell him about foaling)
'Tell me how it'll be.'
'Why, you've seen the cows calving. It's almost the same.(...)' (PR)
(18) (A client has just come to Holmes)
'Do you not find that with your short sight it is a little trying to

do much typewriting?’

‘I did at first, but now (...). You’ve heard about me, Mr Holmes, else how could you know all that?’ (ASH)

In (16) the speaker need not inform the hearer of his having done his best (he already knows about that) and does not intend to give further information about the past act, either. But the speaker’s act of saying itself is meaningful, say, to convince the hearer of his promise. Similarly in (17) Billy does not present Jody’s past act to inform Jody of it, nor to give further information about the act. The presentation of Jody’s act may serve to give an indirect frame (*calving*) for the next information (*foaling*), but it is only an indirect answer to Jody’s request (Billy’s impatience or reluctance could be implicated). In (18) the client not only need not inform Holmes of his own act, but also can not inform him of it since she does not know actually if he heard about her. The presentation serves as a reaction to Holms’ act of telling.

Now it will be clear that PP can not connect pieces of information about a past situation at the content level as SP does, and it is this incapacity that enables PP to function at another level. This view can be supported by an example from Slobin (1994: 121-2) of British children’s acquisition of PP, where the speaker (Mother) uses SP to describe what Tom did, and uses PP to interact with Benjamin (to drag him into the playgame).

(19) M (to T): You did all that writing, did you? Well you are a clever boy. Is it a monster? Did you draw a monster? I’m frightened.

(Tom pretends that his monster will bite Mother)

M: Oh, he bit me!

B: Don’t be silly!

M (to B): He’s drawn a monster, Benjamin, and it’s going to come and bite you. Here comes a monster coming to bite a Benjamin!

Notice that the mother need to interact with Benjamin because he has challenged their pretence, the established interactional situation.

Here are similar examples where PP is required to establish an interactional situation.

- (20) a. She suddenly flew into a rage: ‘If you’re another bloody tradesman
an you can get out. I’ve said I’ll pay and I will, (...)’
‘I’m not a creditor, Mrs Oriel. I ve come to offer you money.’
(CFD)
- b. ‘I have come for advice.
(ASH)
- c. ‘Come in. I’m making cofee.’
(AW)
‘I came to say I’m sorry. (...)’
- d. ‘I came to you, sir, because I heard of you from Mrs Etherege,
whose husband you found so easy when the police and every-
one had given him up for dead.’
(ASH)

In (20a) the speaker's presence itself has rejected by Mrs Oriel; his act of coming cannot be treated as established or presupposed, thus he uses PP. Similarly, (20b) shows the intended discourse has not been started, then PP sounds natural. Contrastingly, if the visitor has been accepted, he/she tends to use SP for his/her coming and give a main topic as in (20c). In (20d) which allows both readings that the speaker may have just come and just started her story, and that the speaker may have already established a discourse situation. If one takes the former reading, PP may sound better³⁾

We can take the above-mentioned use of PP for the first mention ((3)-(5)) as a sub-class of the situation-/discourse-establishing function; they seem to differ in size of what is established. Here is one more topic-introducing

3) Interestingly, in the context below which also allows both forms, if a difference is felt, it is whether the utterance is soon after the speaker's entrance (PP) or not (SP). Note that the judgement is not on the mentioned act (to buy):
(a friend of a patient visits him and puts a book on the side table)
I bought you a book about bees. Might interest you. (ASH)

PP :

(21) (On the phone)

'George, it's Peter,'--the voice was urgent, almost triumphant :

'George, she's bitten, I swear she has!'

'What happened?'

(CFD)

In (21) PP is used just to inform the hearer of some action of the woman and, by this, to establish a discourse. Note also the speaker does not have knowledge sure enough to make definite presentaiton.

Now let us look briefly at PP operating in arelatively small area---within a discourse.

(22) (A talk between a solicitor and the wife of the accused)

S: What exactly happened on the evening of October fourteenth?

W: Leonard came in at twenty-five minutes past nine and did not go out again. I have given him an alibi, have I not? (WFP)

(23) a. (After hearing his client's story)

'You have done wisely. But have you told me all?'

b. (After hearing his client's story)

'And you did very wisely. Your case is an exceedingly remarkable one.'

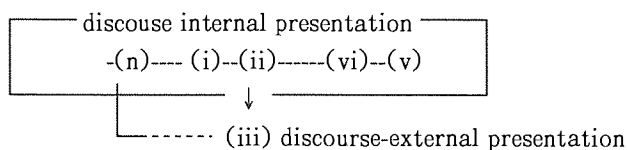
(ASH)

In (22) the last utterance presents the speaker's previous act of saying metalinguistically. Similarly, (23a) presents the speaker's assesment of the interlocuter's past acts including the act of saying, as we can see from the following question (*But have you told...*). Compare it with (23b) where SP, contrastringly, presents the speaker's assesment of what was told, followed by further evaluation. (24) shows more strikingly this use of PP to refer to the speaker's previous act of saying, indicating a shift from the level of what is presented to the level of the act of presenting. This shift is schematized in (25).

- (24) (A man talks about his experience of being almost crushed under the lowering ceilings)

(...) Already I was unable to stand erect because of the lowered ceilings (i), when my eyes caught something which brought a gush of hope back to my heart (ii). I have said (iii) that though the floor and ceiling were of iron, the walls were of wood (n). As I gave a last hurried glance around (iv), I saw a thin line of yellow light (...) (v). (ASH)

- (25)



To sum up, PP functions in various way but there is a general characteristic: 'indefinite' (or indirect) presentation of the past situation, that is, presenting the information in such a way that the information does not have direct connection with other information at the content level. By doing so, PP can function at another level from the one of information transmission---the level of interaction between the communicators: these uses have been observed i) as a reaction to speech act (14-18), ii) as a shift between discourse-internal and discourse-external (including establishment of a discourse topic) (21-24), as a shift to an interactional situation (i. e. situation establishment) (19-20).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have pointed out that the traditional description of the use of PP in terms of CR should be misleading in that it cannot be applied for explanations without resorting to properties of what is mentioned.

I have tried another way, that is, describing how PP and SP work in terms of the act of mentioning, inspired by the fact that PP/SP and indefinite/definite articles behave in a similar way. I have characterized the use of SP

as definite presentation: presentation of the past situation as established information/knowledge for further information to be added to. As opposed to it, PP was called indefinite presentation and how such presentation works has been examined. There is observed a striking difference between these two types of presentation: SP connects pieces of information at the information-content level, while PP works beyond this level, at the interactional level.

While at the former level the speaker's involvement is felt less since what is crucial is a connection between pieces of information itself, at the latter level the speaker's involvement is felt stronger since the presentation is a reaction to the situation involving the speaker. In this sense PP may indicate CR, as the involvement of the speaker's subjectivity.

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