

CHAPTER 2

THE SEMANTICS OF THE PRESENT PERFECT

1. PERFECTLY COMPOSITIONAL?

1.1. *The problem*

This chapter deals with the German perfect constructions by asking whether they can be given a compositional analysis, and if so, how. As mentioned at the beginning of the introductory chapter, I will focus on the present perfect - the idea behind this strategy is the following: as a by-product of the semantics of the present perfect combined with an account of the past tense and the future tense, the semantics of the past perfect and of the future perfect should fall automatically in place if the semantics of the present perfect has been grasped. Consider the present perfect clause in (1.1), repeated here from the preceding chapter.

- (1.1) Die Eule hat die Schule verlassen.
the owl has the school left

In principle, the task seems clear. The construction consists of the morphosyntactic items listed in (1.2),

- (1.2) verb stem + past part. morph. + $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{auxiliary } \textit{haben} \\ \text{auxiliary } \textit{sein} \end{array} \right]$ + present tense

and, thus, it seems obvious what needs to be done - namely, to see what the semantic contribution of each item is and then piece everything together. Viewed from a different angle, the task may also be described as follows: we have to see what semantic components we have to attribute to the present perfect construction in order to describe its semantics adequately; the next step would be to investigate how the semantic components are distributed over its morphosyntactic material.

Yet there is a strong disagreement in the literature on whether the present perfect can be given a compositional analysis at all. Most traditional grammarians and historical linguists as well as many modern theoretical linguists (e.g. Wunderlich (1970), Comrie (1985), Nerbonne (1985), Bierwisch (1996)) believe that the present perfect cannot be analyzed compositionally, but that it expresses the present perfect meaning only as a whole. However, according to general standards the null-hypothesis is that constructions are compositional. Several linguists have in fact tried to pursue compositional accounts to some extent at least. These accounts start out with the assumption that the construction corresponds to the combination of three components semantically - the verb, a component that expresses anteriority,

and the present tense. Such accounts were proposed, for instance, by Bäuerle (1977, 1979)²³, Janssen (1988), Fabricius-Hansen (1986, 1994), Ballweg (1989), Ehrich and Vater (1989), Ehrich (1992), Zeller (1994), Grewendorf (1995), and Klein (1998a). Even the compositional proposals differ, however, concerning both how the components are combined and the semantic contribution of each component. Ballweg (1989), for instance, suggests an analysis like (1.3a), where the combination of the participle morpheme and the auxiliary expresses the anteriority, called 'perfect'. Contrasting with this, Grewendorf (1995) proposes an analysis like (1.3b). According to him, the auxiliary and the present tense form a semantic unit; the auxiliary is semantically empty, and the past participle morpheme expresses completedness of the situation denoted by the verb.

- (1.3) a. V + [perfect PART + AUX] + PRES
 b. V + PART_{compl} + [AUX_Ø + PRES]

What Ballweg's and Grewendorf's accounts have in common is that they do not assign crucial content to the auxiliary. One of the reasons for this is that, as in many other languages, combinations of auxiliaries and participles or infinitives in German are semantically highly idiosyncratic as illustrated in (1.4).

- (1.4) Some combinations of auxiliaries and infinite verb forms in German

auxiliary	verb form	resulting meaning
<i>haben</i> ('have')	infinitive (+ <i>zu</i>)	modal, necessity
	past participle	perfect
<i>sein</i> ('be')	infinitive (+ <i>zu</i>)	modal, necessity/possibility, passive meaning
	past participle	(a) 'stative' passive, or (b) perfect, depending on the verb
<i>werden</i> ('become')	infinitive	(a) future (b) modal, supposition of the speaker
	past participle	'eventive' passive

Therefore, it seems difficult - if not impossible - to assign uniform denotations to the auxiliaries as such. In view of this situation, taking auxiliaries as semantically vacuous items does not seem to be the worst strategy. But it is not only the analysis of the auxiliaries contained in present perfect constructions that is problematic; the semantic analysis of the simple present tense and the semantic analysis of the past participle morpheme turn out to be difficult as well because no well-established analyses for either of these components seem available.

Thus far we have looked at the morphosyntactic components that the present perfect construction comprises. Let us now take a brief look at the main semantic characteristics of the construction and consider the question of what semantic components we might need in order to describe the semantics of the construction as a whole.

23 To be precise, Bäuerle assumes this for one reading of the present perfect; he assumes that the present perfect is ambiguous between a relative tense reading and an analytic past tense reading. For more on accounts of the present perfect in terms of ambiguity, see below.

1.2. Some characteristics of the present perfect

It is well-known that the present perfect can express some kind of anteriority that is similar to the anteriority expressed by the simple past tense. Thus, the sentences in (1.5) seem to have exactly the same meaning.

- (1.5) a. PRESENT PERFECT:
 Hans hat gestern einen Brief geschrieben.
 Hans has yesterday a letter written
 b. PAST TENSE:
 Hans schrieb gestern einen Brief.
 Hans wrote yesterday a letter

However, it is also well-known that the present perfect and the past tense cannot always be substituted by each other without a loss of acceptability or a change of meaning. There are several factors which have been described as affecting the possibility or impossibility of the exchange. Factors mentioned in the literature are, among others, geographic or dialectal effects, sound aesthetic effects, stylistic effects or information structural effects (i.e. for the emphasis in a newspaper report starting with *Abgelehnt hat der Bundestag...* ('declined has the parliament...'), and Hauser-Suida and Hoppe-Beugel (1972:63-78) argue that there are lexicalized expressions that require one or the other form and verbs that are deficient for one of the two forms.

(1.6) and (1.7) illustrate a particular difference between the present perfect and the past tense. The past tense can only be combined with past time adverbials (1.6), while the present perfect can be combined with past time as well as present time or future time adverbials (1.7).

- (1.6) a. PAST ADVERBIAL:
 Hans schrieb gestern den Brief.
 Hans wrote yesterday the letter
 b. PRESENT ADVERBIAL:
 *Hans schrieb jetzt den Brief.
 Hans wrote now the letter
 c. FUTURE ADVERBIAL:
 *Hans schrieb morgen den Brief.
 Hans wrote tomorrow the letter
- (1.7) a. PAST ADVERBIAL:
 Hans hat gestern den Brief geschrieben.
 Hans has yesterday the letter written
 b. PRESENT ADVERBIAL:
 Hans hat jetzt den Brief geschrieben.
 Hans has now the letter written
 c. FUTURE ADVERBIAL:
 Hans hat morgen den Brief geschrieben.
 Hans has tomorrow the letter written

(1.7a-c) can be paraphrased as "Hans wrote a letter yesterday," "Hans has finished writing the letter now," and "Hans will have finished writing the letter tomorrow," respectively. These examples indicate that positional temporal adverbials in present

perfect constructions - and in fact in all perfect constructions - differ from adverbials in simple tense clauses insofar as in principle, they can specify two different kinds of time intervals that are important for the interpretation of perfect constructions. One option is that they specify the situation time (TS) of the VP. The other option is that they specify the time from which the situation time of the VP is calculated. Roughly speaking, this is the time that is associated with the auxiliary and that can be located after the situation time of the VP. In the terminology introduced in chapter 1, the latter time is the tense time (TT). For presentational reasons this is illustrated with English past perfect clauses and their preferred readings in (1.8).

- (1.8) a. TS-SPECIFICATION:
 He had discovered a mouse at ten.
 = The discovering took place at ten.
 b. TT-SPECIFICATION:
 At ten, he had discovered a mouse.
 = He discovering took place before ten.

Preferences for one reading or the other can be triggered by several factors. In English the initial position of the adverbial or its position right after the subject support TT-specification as we have just seen in (1.8). This is in remarkable contrast to German, where the corresponding sentences do not trigger any of the readings particularly, cf. (1.9a, b).

- (1.9) a. TS- or TT-SPECIFICATION:
 Er hatte um zehn eine Maus entdeckt.
 he had at ten a mouse discovered
 b. TS- or TT-SPECIFICATION:
 Um zehn hatte er eine Maus entdeckt.
 at ten had he a mouse discovered

TS-specification is very strongly supported, however, when the adverbial is topicalized together with the (rest of the) VP as in (1.10). In fact, only TS-specification seems possible here.

- (1.10) TS-SPECIFICATION:
 [Um zehn eine Maus entdeckt] hatte er.
 [at ten a mouse discovered] had he

This suggests that the ambiguity of temporal adverbials in perfect constructions is a structural ambiguity. Moreover, strong accent on the auxiliary supports TT-specification (1.11b), while stress on the underlying VP, which is realized on the object noun phrase, supports TS-specification (1.11a).

- (1.11) a. TS-SPECIFICATION:
 weil er um 10 eine MAUS entdeckt hatte
 since he at 10 a MOUSE discovered had
 b. TT-SPECIFICATION:
 weil er um 10 eine Maus entdeckt HATTE
 since he at 10 a mouse discovered HAD

The following examples illustrate another property of the present perfect that is crucially concerned with the ways in which adverbials can relate to perfect constructions. In (1.12), the present perfect and the past tense are each combined with the adverbial *schon* ('already'). (1.12a), a case of preferred TT-specification, suggests that his meal is finished.²⁴ The past tense version in (1.12b), however, only suggests that he has already started eating.

- (1.12) a. Er hat schon gegessen.²⁵
 he has already eaten
 = He finished his meal.
 b. Er aß schon (, als sie hereinkam).
 he ate already (when she came-in)
 = He already started eating.

Since examples like (1.12a), but not (1.12b), seem to refer to completed eating-situations, they may suggest that the kind of anteriority expressed by the present perfect differs from the one expressed by the past tense. Thus, Grewendorf (1995), Ballweg (1989), Ehrich and Vater (1989) attribute some kind of completedness of the situation denoted by the verb to the perfect construction. Bäuerle (1977, 1979)²⁶, Comrie (1976), Fabricius-Hansen (1994), and Zeller (1994), however, argue that the present perfect in German expresses the same kind of anteriority as the past tense. Upon a closer examination, it seems clear that completedness of the situation cannot be required of present perfect constructions in general; the fact that the present perfect expresses something like anteriority does not mean that the whole situation denoted by the VP must be anterior. The examples in (1.13) illustrate that it is enough if there is an interval before the time of utterance where the sentence can be asserted to be true. In this respect the present perfect is similar to a past tense. For example, with respect to (a), we do not want to say that Martin's having a headache is over at the time of utterance. With (b), we do not want to claim that Ralf's knowing a lot about aspect is over. And similarly, (c) does not necessarily imply that the tiger has woken up.

- (1.13) a. (Ralf hat vorhin Martin getroffen.) Martin hat Kopfweg gehabt.
 (Ralf has earlier-today Martin met) Martin has headache had
 b. (Gestern habe ich mit Ralf gesprochen.) Ralf hat viel über Aspekt
 (Yesterday have I with Ralf talked) Ralf has much about aspect
 gewusst.
 known
 c. Der Tiger hat geschlafen.
 the tiger has slept

But what about the occurrences of present perfect constructions that can hardly be understood without assuming that the situation denoted by the verb is completed, such as sentences like (1.12a)? Of course, we are still left with the possibility that the present perfect is ambiguous between an 'aspectual reading' where it implies completedness and a 'tense reading' where it does not. In fact, several ambiguity

²⁴ At least some South German speakers seem to prefer the TS-specification reading here.

²⁵ Examples from Wolfgang Klein (pc).

²⁶ Bäuerle assumes that the present perfect is ambiguous between a relative tense reading and an analytic past tense reading.

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