

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MEANING EFFECTS OF THE PRESENT PERFECT

#### 1. THE PROBLEM

In the preceding chapter it was argued that perfect constructions have a uniform compositional semantics. It is well-known, however, that these constructions can exhibit a wide range of readings or meaning effects. In this chapter it will be argued that the variability of readings does not contradict the assumption of a uniform semantics. In fact, it will be shown that the particular semantics of the construction, taken together with some additional but independently motivated pragmatic principles, *predicts* that the construction displays the specific meaning effects it does.

From a theoretical point of view, the multiple meaning effects of the present perfect are especially important because some of them appear to show that the construction is a tense with the same meaning as the past tense. Other effects, however, appear to show that it is an aspect which can express - among other things - the completedness of the situation expressed by the VP. In some approaches, the effects of the present perfect are treated as different meanings of two homophonous constructions; other approaches treat them as different readings that are due to a genuine ambiguity, e.g. a scope ambiguity. Moreover, there are some approaches which focus only on some of the effects and disregard others. It is clear that neither of these views is compatible with the semantics proposed in chapter 2.

Hence, I will propose a quite different approach to the problem in this chapter: both the semantics and the syntax of perfect constructions is uniform, but certain pragmatic principles, which can be shown to play an important role in natural language independently, operate on the semantics. The semantics contains vagueness at certain points - e.g., where the contextual restrictions of quantifiers are concerned. These points of vagueness can be assigned content, and the various possibilities for assigning content lead to the wide range of effects mentioned above. In such an approach there is no need to assume ambiguities, nor is it necessary to add any stipulations with regard to the composition of the construction. Quite to the contrary: the occurrence of the effects follows automatically from the semantics of the present perfect construction and the pragmatic principles that operate on the semantics.

Section 2 introduces the meaning effects of the construction, which constitute a measure to what an account of the present perfect must be able to explain. Section 3 discusses some previous accounts of the effects and shows their shortcomings. Section 4 is concerned with pragmatic principles that are relevant in a theory of temporal interpretation. Sections 5 through 11 show how the semantics that was introduced in chapter 2 taken together with the pragmatic principles discussed in

section 4 predict the effects of the construction. Finally, section 12 summarizes the results of the chapter.

For reasons of space, this chapter is only concerned with present perfect clauses whose tense time is an environment of the time of utterance, i.e. with present perfect clauses that compete with past tense clauses insofar as both of them locate the situation time of their VP before the time of utterance. Taking some additional principles into account that are crucial to futurate interpretations of the present tense in present perfect constructions (e.g. the behavior of present and future adverbials that was discussed in chapter 2), the principles discussed in this chapter apply analogously in these cases. Wherever it appears desirable for presentational reasons, comparisons with the behavior of past perfect constructions in German or with the behavior of English present perfect constructions will be used.

## 2. THE EFFECTS OF THE PRESENT PERFECT

This section serves to introduce the most important meaning effects of present perfect constructions that will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter. Most of the effects are well-known and repeatedly discussed in the literature; others, however, have to my knowledge not been noted before.

*Present perfect and past tense can often be substituted by each other.* The simple past tense and the present perfect in German can often be used for describing a situation in the past without triggering any change of acceptability or meaning. (2.1) lists some illustrating examples.

- (2.1) a. Gestern rannte Lola.  
*yesterday ran Lola*  
 ('Yesterday, Lola ran.')
- b. Gestern ist Lola gerannt.  
*yesterday has Lola run*  
 ('Yesterday, Lola ran.')
- c. Martin verabredete sich gestern zum Tischtennispielen.  
*Martin made-an-appointment himself yesterday for-the tabletennis*
- d. Martin hat sich gestern zum Tischtennis verabredet.  
*Martin has SELF yesterday for-the tabletennis made-an-appointment*
- e. Heute morgen rief Ralf an. Er hatte starkes Kopfweg.  
*today morning called Ralf at. he had strong headache*
- f. Heute morgen hat Ralf angerufen. Er hat starkes Kopfweg gehabt.  
*today morning called Ralf at. he has strong headache had*

*Completedness effects.* The past tense sentence (2.2a) and the present perfect sentence (c) suggest that at a particular time in the past, Hans was already busy eating or was working in the garden. However, the present perfect sentences (b) and (d) seem to imply that Hans finished eating and working in the garden, respectively.<sup>55</sup>

- (2.2) a. Hans aß schon.  
*Hans ate already*

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<sup>55</sup> The examples are taken from Klein (1994) and Klein (1997), respectively.

- b. Hans hat schon gegessen.  
*Hans has already eaten*
- c. Hans hat im Garten gearbeitet und das Telefon nicht gehört.  
*Hans has in-the garden worked and the telephone not heard*
- d. Hans hat im Garten gearbeitet und ist jetzt müde.  
*Hans has in-the garden worked and is now tired*

*Unspecific present relevance.* The data in (2.3) - (2.6) show effects that are often described as 'present relevance' effects. However, the present relevance of the examples can appear in quite different flavors. Contrasting with the past tense clause in (2.3a), for example, the perfect clause in (2.3b) suggests unspecifically that the emptying of the houses is relevant now.<sup>56</sup>

- (2.3) a. Letzte Woche Mittwoch wurden die besetzten Häuser geräumt  
*last week Wednesday were the occupied houses emptied*
- b. Letzte Woche Mittwoch sind die besetzten Häuser geräumt worden.  
*last week Wednesday have the occupied houses emptied been*

*Present relevance: Cause and still existing or effective result ('perfect of result').* In (2.4b), the present perfect suggests more specifically that Kleve now consists of brickstone houses to a large extent. I.e. the result of the VP-situation is still given. The past tense in (2.4a), however, is easily compatible with a situation where Kleve's development in the direction of a town consisting of brickstone houses ended at some point after which other types of houses were built.<sup>57</sup>

- (2.4) a. Nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg wurde Kleve immer mehr zu einer  
*after the second worldwar became Kleve always more to a*  
Klinkerstadt. Von der weißen Stadt blieb so gut wie  
*brick-stone-town. from the white town remained as good as*  
gar nichts mehr übrig.  
*PARTICLE nothing more remaining*
- b. Nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg ist Kleve immer mehr zu einer  
*after the second worldwar has Kleve always more to a*  
Klinkerstadt geworden. Von der weißen Stadt ist so gut wie gar  
*brick-stone-town become. from the white town has as good as*  
gar nichts mehr übrig geblieben.  
*PARTICLE nothing more remaining remained*

*Present relevance: Einstein and Princeton.* (2.5) illustrates a phenomenon which the German present perfect, in contrast to the English present perfect, does not show. We will see later, however, that the contrast between the German and the English present perfect in this respect is quite interesting. The English example in (2.5a) strongly - and incorrectly - suggests that Einstein is still alive; since we know that Einstein is dead, (2.5a) appears infelicitous. However, the passivized sentence (2.5b) does not show this effect; (2.5b) just suggests that Princeton is still in existence, which is right. But the corresponding German data in (2.5c) and (2.5d) do not show this contrast, or at most very weakly.

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Herweg (1990:203).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Ehrich (1992:90f).

- (2.5) a. #Einstein has visited Princeton.  
 b. Princeton has been visited by Einstein.<sup>58</sup>  
 c. Einstein hat Princeton besucht.  
    *Einstein has Princeton visited*  
 d. Princeton wurde von Einstein besucht.  
    *Princeton was by Einstein visited*

*Present relevance and switches from stage-level to individual-level predicates: coughing and other diseases.* The examples in (2.6) are important to us in more than one respect. (2.6a) is an assertion about Hans, an individual which we will take to be still alive now. (2.6b-d), however, are assertions about Mozart and Goethe, two individuals which have been dead for quite a while now. (2.6a, b) are present perfect clauses with the verb *husten* ('cough'); they differ only with regard to the subject. Despite this subtle difference they behave quite differently. For the moment, let's focus on two of the effects of (2.6): contrasting with (2.6b), (2.6a) exhibits a present relevance effect. Ehrich's (1992) intuition about this is that the present relevance effect arise because of the present perfect and the semelfactive *Aktionsart* of the verb. This effect cannot arise in (2.6b), however, because a coughing by Mozart can hardly be relevant now. Because of this, Ehrich finds the sentence marked. But when a temporal adverbial is added as in (2.6c), the present relevance effect vanishes. Moreover, the effect does not arise with individual-level predicates or longterm properties at all as is shown in (2.6d).<sup>59</sup>

- (2.6) a. Hans hat gehustet.  
    *Hans has coughed*  
 b. #Mozart hat gehustet.  
    *Mozart has coughed*  
 c. Mozart hat an seinem 24. Geburtstag um 11 gehustet.  
    *Mozart has at his 24th birthday at 11 coughed*  
 d. Goethe hat in Weimar gelebt.  
    *Goethe has in Weimar lived*

But the markedness of (2.6b) does not necessarily occur: (2.6b) is fully acceptable when the stage-level predicate (cf. Kratzer (1989)) *husten*, which usually refers to a temporary property of individuals, is reinterpreted as an individual-level predicate - i.e. when Mozart's coughing is understood as a longterm property of the composer. Under this reading of (2.6b), *husten* seems to refer to a generic-habitual property of individuals. This effect does not arise in (2.6a). In other words, while (2.6a) can very well refer to a single coughing of Hans, (2.6b) strongly suggests that Mozart had some chronic lung disease.

*Switch from Individual-level to stage-level predicates (in past perfect clauses).* Interestingly, in past perfect sentences like (2.7), we discover the opposite effect - namely, that a typical individual-level predicate is reinterpreted as a stage-level predicate.

<sup>58</sup> These examples are briefly discussed in Declerck (1991:344f), for example. The observation seems to go back to Curme (1931) and Jespersen (1931).

<sup>59</sup> For (b) cf. Ehrich (1992), for (c) and (d) cf. Ehrich and Vater (1989).

- (2.7) a. Hans war intelligent gewesen.  
           *Hans had intelligent been*  
       b. Eduard war Schweizer gewesen.  
           *Eduard had Schweizer been*

*Indefinite readings* ('experiential perfect' cf. Comrie (1976:58f), 'existential perfect' cf. von Stechow (1999)). In contrast to past tense clauses as in (2.8a), present perfect clauses as in (2.8b) can have indefinite readings easily.

- (2.8) a. Martin aß Regenwürmer.  
           *Martin ate earthworms*  
           ≠ There is (at least) one time in the past (which is not specified) at which Martin ate earthworms.  
       b. Martin hat Regenwürmer gegessen.  
           *Martin has earthworms eaten*  
           = There is (at least) one time in the past (which is not specified) at which Martin ate earthworms.

While the present perfect in some of the sentences listed above - i.e. in the ones in (2.1) - behaves exactly like the past tense, it shows aspectual effects in others. This is the case with the completedness effects in (2.2) and perhaps (according to a wider and more vague view of aspect) with the present relevance effects in (2.3) through (2.6). Moreover, it often shows effects that are neither of a tenselike nor of an aspectual nature; this applies to the lifetime effect in (2.5), to the stage-level to individual-level switch in (2.6), to the individual-level to stage-level switch in (2.7), and to the indefinite readings in (2.8). In the remainder of this chapter, we will be concerned with the question of how the special effects of the present perfect can be accounted for. Section 3 provides a brief survey of some previous attempts to explain the occurrence and distribution of the effects and points out why these accounts fail. Section 4 sketches the basic ideas and the architecture of my own account. In the remainder of the chapter, these will then be applied to the special effects of the construction.

### 3. PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

In view of the observations mentioned above, it is not surprising that there is an extended discussion in the literature on whether the German present perfect is a tense or an aspect semantically, ambiguous between a temporal and an aspectual reading, or consisting of a temporal and an aspectual component. This section aims to present, at least briefly, various accounts of the present perfect under the perspective of how they account for the meaning effects of the construction - or how they could account for them. The accounts are grouped according to their basic assumptions concerning the semantics of the present perfect. Since there are so many accounts on the market, it is neither possible nor necessary to discuss each of them in detail. Hence, for each type of approach, I will focus on one or two typical recent analyses. The interested reader is referred to the literature that presents discussions of other or more pieces of literature on the construction, Thieroff (1992:159ff) in particular. As we will see, all of the accounts have serious shortcomings, so that from section 4 on we will have to look for an alternative approach.

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