The present perfect puzzle: Syntactic and register-based competition

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Since Klein (1992), the *present perfect puzzle* – the compatibility of positional past tense adverbs with the English simple past but not its present perfect, (1a), – has been a perennial issue for present perfect accounts, made more puzzling by the compatibility of these adverbs in both constructions in German, (1b), and Dutch (e.g. Klein n.d.; IJbema 2002).

(1)   a. John (*has) left his wife yesterday.   b. Hans hat gestern   seine Frau verlassen.
                                                                    John has yesterday his   wife left.PTCP

(Klein n.d.)

The current paper proposes a novel competition-based approach to present perfects (cf. Schaden 2009; Pancheva & von Stechow 2004).

Firstly, I propose to distinguish between temporally present ([-PAST]) present perfect and temporally past ([+PAST]) present perfects (cf. e.g. Löbner 2002; IJbema 2002). Both of these variants are possible in German and Dutch, whilst only the former is possible in English. Assuming a Minimalist generative framework, I propose that [-PAST] and [+PAST] present perfects result from the competing heads which can realise perfect auxiliaries: those in [-PAST] present perfects realise Asp_{Perf}, whilst those in [+PAST] present perfects realise T_{Past} (see also IJbema 2002, Author 2019). I implement this idea in a novel theoretical way and show that this can be seen as an instance of *syntactic competition*, i.e. different syntactic heads compete to realise the auxiliary.

Whilst a parallel account has been argued for frequently, it has been fiercely opposed elsewhere (e.g. Giorgi & Pianesi 1997; Pancheva & von Stechow 2004; Schaden 2009). Secondly, I thus propose that the core troublesome datapoints raised in previous accounts concerning the relative distribution of the present perfect and simple past can be resolved through assuming *register-based competition*. More specifically, following Roeper (1999)'s theory of Universal bilingualism, I argue that intra-speaker linguistic variation is a result of different, competing mini-grammars based on different registers, which house different tense forms (cf. e.g. Hennig 2000: 57-61), as illustrated in (2).

(2)
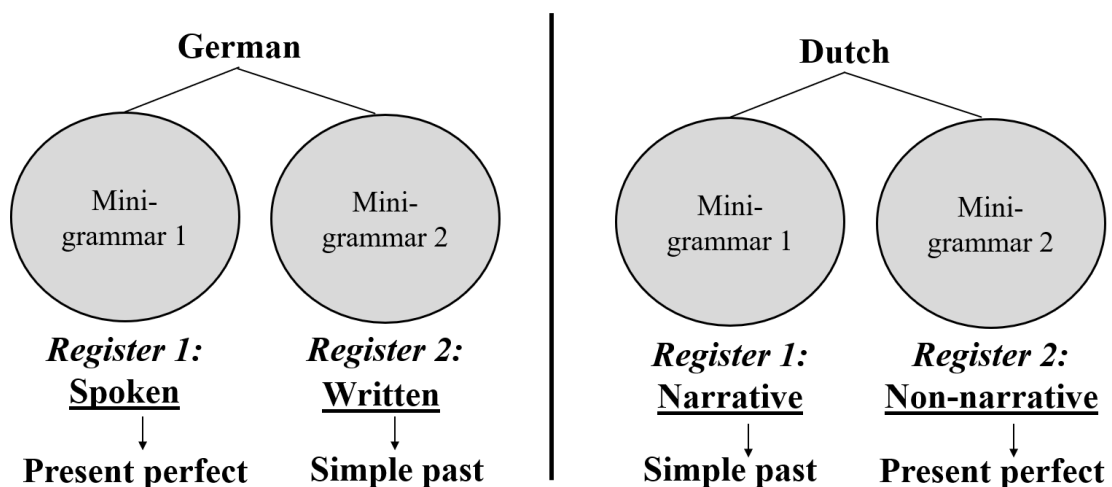
Amongst others, this can explain why the simple past and present perfect apparently have the same semantic value as each other in German and Dutch: the assumption that they co-exist in the same grammar is illusionary and they in fact belong to distinct register-based grammars.

Selected references. • Giorgi, A., & F. Pianesi. 1997. *Tense and Aspect*. • Hennig, M. (2000). *Tempus und Temporalität in geschriebenen und gesprochenen Texten*. • IJbema, A. 2002. Grammaticalization and infinitival complements in Dutch. PhD dissertation. • Klein, W. 1992. "The present perfect puzzle." *Language*, *68*(3), 525–552. • Klein, W. n. d. "The present perfect puzzle." Manuscript, MPG. • Löbner, S. 2002. "Is the German Perfekt a perfect perfect?" In: G. Katz et al. (Eds.) *Sinn & Bedeutung VI*. • Pancheva, R., & A. von Stechow. 2004. On the present perfect puzzle. In K. Moulton & M. Wolf (Eds.) *Proceedings of NELS 34*, 469–484. • Roeper, T. (1999). Universal bilingualism. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, *2*(3), 169-186. • Schaden, G. 2009. "Present perfects compete." *Linguist and Philosophy*, *32*, 115–141. •