

From narrowed current relevance towards extended current relevance¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to verify how current relevance of the English present perfect is interpreted extendedly through specific example sentences with the deceased individuals as their subjects. These examples suggest that the extended current relevance can be (a) the present relevance from any participant involved in the event in question, (b) situational current relevance, (c) resultative current relevance, (d) indirect resultative current relevance, (e) context current relevance or (f) writer's current relevance. These readings of current relevance contribute to the explanation why Chomsky's example "Einstein has visited Princeton." can be grammatical even if Einstein is not alive. This development is also considered an important indicator that the present perfect is moving towards the past-oriented semantics from a grammaticalization perspective.

Key Words: the present perfect, narrowed current relevance, extended current relevance, grammaticalization, past-oriented semantics

1. INTRODUCTION

The present perfect, defined as "a compound tense expressing two temporal relations" (Huddleston *et al.*, 2002, p.140), is one of the most complicated issues regarding tense and aspect in present-day English. Most linguists agree that the present perfect is generally used to report a "past event with current relevance" (see, for example, Leech, 1994; Quirk *et al.*, 1985). However, linguists differ with one another regarding the definition of "current relevance." Some see the present perfect as characterized by narrowed current relevance, while others see it as characterized by extended current relevance. What follows will attempt to clarify the differences between the two viewpoints and will attempt to demonstrate that these different views reflect changes in the ways in which the present perfect has been used over time.

The present perfect differs from the preterite in regard to current relevance, an inevitable relevance to the present moment of utterance, which is frequently described as the fundamental

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difference in semantics between the two verb forms. Such meaning difference can be easily demonstrated by examples (1) and (2), with sentence (1) implying that the sister is still alive whereas sentence (2) implies that the sister is now dead.

- (1) His sister has been an invalid all her life (i.e. 'She is still alive.'). (Leech, 1994, p.40)
(2) His sister was an invalid all her life (i.e. 'She is now dead.'). (ibid.)

Similarly, Chomsky (1971, p. 212) offers example (3). According to Chomsky, (3) presupposes that Einstein has not died. In other words, (3) is grammatical only when Einstein is still alive. In this research, such strict and intentionally narrowed interpretation regarding current relevance is called "narrowed current relevance." The narrowed current relevance is a symbol of the present perfect at the stage where "present" is overwhelmingly a semantic focus.

- (3) Einstein has visited Princeton. (Chomsky, 1971, p. 212)

Narrowed current relevance was accepted universally for many years. However, a number of linguists have argued that the use of the present perfect has evolved over time, and the narrowed current relevance view no longer reflects the ways in which the present perfect is actually used. Inoue (1979) refutes that even if Einstein is not alive, example (3) can possibly be grammatical provided that it is uttered in the following discourse contexts (4), (5) and (6).² Inoue argues that it is the repeatability of a situation that makes the usage of the present perfect possible. In (4), Princeton University's memorable occasions are repeatable; in (5), the Nobel Prize winners' visit to Princeton is also repeatable; and in (6), Jewish scholars' coming to the United States is also repeatable. There is no doubt that example (3) can be fully grammatical in some appropriate contexts and it is supposed that there are more possibilities in addition to (4), (5), and (6) that make (3) grammatically correct.

- (4) Talking about Princeton University having memorable occasions. (Inoue, 1979, p.574)
(5) Talking about the Nobel Prize winners visiting Princeton. (ibid.)
(6) Talking about Jewish scholars coming to the United States. (ibid.)

Extended interpretation of current relevance in (4), (5), and (6) in Inoue (1979) and other similar literature marks an important turning point in interpreting the meaning of current relevance, motivating the development of the present perfect into a past-oriented verb form by reanalysis. In this paper the developing process from narrowed current relevance to extended current relevance

² Inoue's claim is acceptable except for her conclusion of repeatability which I do not think is the element that triggers the acceptance of the example.

will be discreetly examined from diachronic (grammaticalization) and semantic (temporal) perspectives. Inoue's relatively loose interpretation of current relevance will be referred to as "extended current relevance" in this research.

2. GRAMMATICALIZATION PERSPECTIVE

Grammaticalization of the English present perfect can be characterized by an argument on the issue which is semantically focused on the present or the past. The semantic focus (on either the present or the past) varies at different stages of the present perfect evolution. In this research, it is advocated that the development of the English PP can be included in a four-step amendment to Elsness (1997), Bybee *et al.* (1994) and other literature. In our proposal, the first stage is featured by "present > past,"³ approximately equaling the PP in Old English in semantics; the second stage, roughly from the 14th century to the early 18th century, is characterized by "present < past," without strict semantic differentiation from the preterite; the third stage, lasting from the 18th century to the present time, refers to "present > past" semantically; the last stage, a suggested stage that present-day English is approaching, refers to "present < past" semantically. Historically the semantic focus lies on present, past, present and past in the order of these four stages respectively.

The present-day English PP seems to be moving from present-oriented stage three (present > past) to past-oriented stage four (present < past), as shown, for instance, in its co-occurrence with adverbials of definite past⁴. During this stage, changes have been carefully observed from different perspectives, such as changes in the superficial structure of its combination with adverbials of different temporal characteristics and a deep semantic movement towards the preterite. The research on two types of interpretation of current relevance that have been mentioned so far in this paper, narrowed current relevance and extended current relevance, is to be carried out with reference to this diachronic background of the English PP.

3. TEMPORAL INTERPRETATION OF CURRENT RELEVANCE

The narrowed interpretation of current relevance mentioned in Section 1 can be considered one of the main features of the PP at the third stage. It is first of all related to the subjects who are alive at the present, then to the physically visible results or visible consequent states of certain events at the present. Such narrowed current relevance can be easily observed in the following examples. In example (7), in Jespersen's opinion, the quotation "must have been written between 1859, when Macaulay died, and 1881, when Carlyle died" (Jespersen, 1931, pp. 66-67).

³ "Present>past" shows that the semantic weight on "present" overrides "past," while "present<past" shows that the semantic weight on "past" overpasses "present."

⁴ Refer to Fu (2009) for details regarding the so-called unusual co-occurrence examples of the present perfect with adverbials of definite past especially in British spoken English. In Fu (2009) these unusual examples are holistically analyzed from the following perspectives: grammaticalization perspective, extended current relevance, cross-linguistic perspective, pragmatic perspective, morphological perspective and temporal contrast.

- (7) Macaulay did not impress the very soul of English feeling as Mr. Carlyle, for example, has done. (Jespersen, 1931, pp. 66-67)

In example (8), Pickbourn claims that “we may say” [(8a)]; “but we cannot say” [(8b)] because “[w]e suppose Cicero, as it were, still existing, and speaking to us in his orations; but as the poems are lost, we cannot mention them in the same manner” (Pickbourn, 1789, pp. 33-34). To Pickbourn, the present existence of at least a relevant participant in the event in question seems to be a necessary condition in deciding whether to adopt the PP or not.

- (8) a. Cicero has written orations.
b. *Cicero has written poems. (Pickbourn, 1789, pp. 33-34)

Michaelis (1994) states that (9a) implies Neil Young is still engaged in musical activity while (9b) implies that Neil Young is no longer a singer or a musician. Michaelis’ interpretation is another example of narrowed current relevance, even referring to the present existence of the objects in a PP clause.⁵

- (9) a. I’ve been to a Neil Young concert.
b. I went to a Neil Young concert. (Michaelis, 1994)

In order to verify whether the above mentioned narrowed interpretation of current relevance in Jespersen (1931), Pickbourn (1789), and Michaelis (1994) is true and why it is (or is not) true, there is an urgent need to reconsider the definition of current relevance.

Current relevance has been frequently used as a key in analyzing the meaning of the canonical PP, especially distinguishing its meaning from the preterite at stage three where the English PP is characterized by “present > past.” The semantic focus on the present at this stage is thoroughly in agreement with the sense of current relevance. However, ironically no linguists have ever been successful in giving a satisfactory definition of current relevance taking its syntactic meaning and pragmatic meaning into consideration. This is due to a special bilateral quality: the PP only syntactically guarantees that the reported situation in the past bears current relevance while a specific interpretation of current relevance in a PP clause is totally subject to its context pragmatically.

Some experimental research has been done on the definition of current relevance. One important study of recent date is Declerck (2006) who created a “present time-sphere” including pre-present and post-present. In Fig 1, the present time-sphere is centered by t_0 ,

⁵ The viewpoint is certainly criticized by many native speakers as pointed out by Kashino (1999, p. 50) with no more details.

“[t]he temporal zero-point is the time from which all the temporal relations expressed by a tense ultimately take their starting point. It is usually speech time,” (Declerck, 2006, p. 97) with pre-present preceding t_0 and post-present succeeding t_0 on the time axis. A situation reported with current relevance is thus located within the present time-sphere as illustrated in Fig 1.

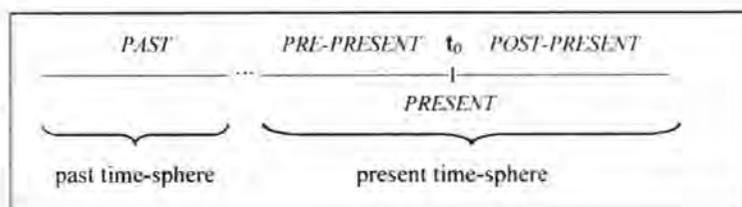


Fig 1 Linguistic conceptualization of the time line in English
(Declerck, 2006, p. 149)

As an attempt at a visual representation of current relevance, Fig 1 (Declerck, 2006, p. 149) is an original contribution to analysis of the PP. However, it is very difficult to imagine that there is an obvious interval between past time-sphere and present time-sphere. Situationally speaking, what is encoded in a PP clause must be in the past, i.e. be located in the past time-sphere. This is pointed out by Wada (2009) in the following examples.

- (10) a. I have visited Singapore once before. That was a long time ago.
b. The phone rang a minute ago. (Wada, 2009, p. 269)

Wada says:

“What seems problematic is that in case of an indefinite reading such as the experiential perfect in [(10a)], the situation time not only seems disconnected from t_0 , but also is situated farther in the past than the situation time of the past tense in [(10b)].” (Wada, 2009, p. 270)

Another reliable study on current relevance can be Palmer (1974) who defines that current relevance suggests that “in some way or other (not necessarily in its results) the action is relevant to something observable at the present” (Palmer, 1974, p. 50). In Palmer’s statement, the phrase “not necessary in its results” is very inspiring, yet no further information is supplied. The definition so far can be called a perfect syntactic current relevance interpretation. Palmer continues beyond the syntactic field to provide an ambiguous additional explanation of “nil results.” The so-called nil results are illustrated by the following (11a) and (11b), which ought to be analyzed at the pragmatic level. Unfortunately, Palmer does not make a clear-cut line between syntactic current relevance and pragmatic current relevance.

- (11) a. I’ve hit it twice, but it’s standing up.

b. I've written, but they haven't replied.

(Palmer, 1974, p. 50)

Syntactic current relevance refers to the confirmation that the past event is somewhat related to the present. The semantic scope that current relevance covers can be illustrated in the following figures. In Fig 2, current relevance is guaranteed to be valid from temporal point B1 (initial point of an event) to another temporal point B2 (final point of an event) on the time axis. Syntactically speaking, there is no more information on the aspectual quality between B1 and B2. Fig 2 is a temporal illustration of the traditional continuative perfect, a resultant state of the situation up to the preset, or habit up to the present.



Fig 2 Semantic Scope of Current Relevance of the Continuative Perfect

In Fig 3, current relevance covers a different temporal distance from Fig 2. The semantic scope takes up a coverage from B2 to NOW, B1 being cognitively neglected. The aspectual details between B2 and NOW are not provided syntactically. Fig 3 is a temporal demonstration of what has been called resultative perfect, experiential perfect, existential perfect or indefinite past. The distinction can be made according to the temporal distance between B2 and NOW. When B2 is relatively close to Now, the perfect illustrated might be resultative. On the other hand, when B2 is temporally far from Now the perfect present might be experiential or existential perfect use. In present-day English most verbs do not distinguish these two perfects by themselves, except for the verbs of “be” and “go.” According to Comrie,

a useful illustrative example in English is the distinction between *be* and *go* in sentences like *Bill has been to America* and *Bill has gone to America*, since English here makes an overt distinction between the experiential perfect and the perfect of result. (1976, pp.58-59)

Such distinctions in other languages such as Chinese and Japanese are always overt, since in Chinese there is an experiential perfect particle of “*guo*” and in Japanese there is also an experiential perfect particle of “*shita koto ga aru*.”



Fig 3 Semantic Scope of Current Relevance of The Non-continuative Perfect

Syntactic current relevance can be easily demonstrated by the above Fig 2 and Fig 3; however, the pragmatic current relevance seems to be more complicated and diversified thus requiring an extended interpretation of current relevance in Section 4.

4. EXTENDED CURRENT RELEVANCE

Diachronically speaking, present-day English is obviously on its way towards the fourth stage from the third stage. In other words, the present perfect is undergoing a semantic shift from a present-oriented sense to a past-oriented sense⁶. Under such circumstances, this paper aims to carry out a holistic research on the extended interpretation of current relevance in the PP, especially those PP clauses in written English with deceased individuals as their syntactic subjects⁷. In this research it is defended that the extended current relevance reading can be obtained from

- (a) the present relevance from any participant involved in the event in question;
- (b) situational current relevance;
- (c) resultative current relevance;
- (d) indirect resultative current relevance;
- (e) contextual current relevance;
- (f) writer's current relevance.

4.1 Current Relevance from Any Participant in the Event

Except for subject's current relevance which has already been discussed in the previous sections, other current relevance brought about by any participant in the event under discussion can also be possible, such as an object's relevance. Although Shakespeare was not alive (in 1999), example (12) is completely acceptable because "most of the best plays we know," the object in the situation of <Shakespeare write most of the best plays we know>, is a present topic. "Most of the best plays" written by Shakespeare are still available for us to touch, to read and to discuss. The object in the event in question is also possible to create current relevance, thus justifying the use of the PP in example (12).

- (12) Shakespeare has written most of the best plays we know. (Kashino, 1999, p. 167)

In example (13), Nancy Polette wrote the book entitled *Gifted Books, Gifted Readers: Literature Activities to Excite Young Minds* in 2000 when Albert Einstein was not alive. Current relevance of Albert Einstein's writing cannot be read from the subject of the PP clause. Current

⁶ Difference between the present perfect in American English and in British English is not developed in this paper. For references and discussion, see Quirk et al. (1985), Swan (2005), Biber et al. (1999) and Carter & McCarthy (2006).

⁷ Albert Einstein was born on March 14th, 1879 in Ulm, Germany, and died on April 18th, 1955 in Princeton Hospital (Ze'ev Rosenkranz, *The Einstein Scrapbook*, 2002, pp. 2-5). It is confirmed that all the PP clauses in this paper with Albert Einstein as their syntactic subject are all from books published later than 1955.

relevance of Einstein's writing in the past is instead triggered by the object, another participant in the event of writing. What Einstein wrote as shown in (13) can still be read in his book which was entitled *The World as I See it* and was published in 1935 (translated by Alan Harris). Current relevance can thus be read easily through the object (another participator except for the subject) of the event in question.

- (13) One of the world's great thinkers, Albert Einstein, has written, "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not, who can no longer wonder, can no longer feel amazement is as good as dead – a snuffed out candle."

(Nancy Polette, *Gifted Books, Gifted Readers: Literature Activities to Excite Young Minds*, 2000, p. 2)

The object's current relevance can also be found in example (14) where the writers pay close attention to the present value or influence of Einstein saying that "you cannot solve a problem at the same level of abstraction at which it was created." This proverb-like saying can still be effective and true at the moment of writing. With this in the authors' minds, even though Einstein was not alive, his famous saying remains valid still giving people some inspiration.

- (14) To create new images, organizations must see themselves in a larger context --- they must first consider, and then act upon, questions of purpose and "calling." As Albert Einstein has said, "you cannot solve a problem at the same level of abstraction at which it was created."

(Diana Kaplin Whitney, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 2003, pp. 181-182)

4.2 Situational Current Relevance

Situational current relevance refers to the current relevance that can be proved by the physical continuation of an event or a state up to the present moment in the real world in which we live. In example (15a) the house's state of being "empty" began at the time of "ages ago" and continues up to the present moment of utterance. The present moment of being physically empty is powerful and convincing proof of current relevance. (15b) is slightly different from (15a) as far as the situation type is concerned, <be empty for ages> in (15a) being a state and <sing in this choir ever since he was a boy> in (15b) being a habitual state. In example (15b) current relevance is proved by an indisputable present truth that Mr. Terry is still in this choir.

- (15) a. That house has been empty for ages.
b. Mr. Terry has sung in this choir ever since he was a boy. (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 192)

Such examples are usually so-called continuative perfect clauses in which current relevance can be supported by a situational or physical proof suggesting that the situation (usually a state or a habitual state) is still going on at the moment of speaking or writing in the real world. Such is also the case in example (16) where the present truth that Einstein is dead is sufficient support for current relevance.

- (16) As for this writing Albert Einstein has been dead for forty-five years, but in his absence he seems more present than ever. (Linda Anderson, *Creative writing*, 2006, p. 549)

4.3 Resultative Current Relevance

In both examples of (17) and (18) the direct results of the situations can be observed physically. Example (17) causes us to imagine a bleeding finger at the present moment; example (18) possibly shows us the broken window directly at the moment of speaking or writing.⁸ The resultative is “by far the most common sense” among four principal meanings of the present perfect (Leech, 2004, p. 40). This direct result use of the present perfect has been discussed so much that some linguists simply assert that resultative current relevance is the core meaning of the PP instead of current relevance.

- (17) I've cut my finger. (It's still bleeding.) (Palmer, 1974, p. 52)
(18) He's broken the window. (It hasn't been mended.) (ibid.)

Example (19), despite its subject, i.e. Albert Einstein who is not alive any longer at the time of writing in 2002, adopts the syntactic form of the PP due to an observable present result. This present state is a result of the event <Albert Einstein become a myth, a symbol, a paradigm of scientific revolution>.

- (19) In these pages, the reader is given a view, admittedly limited, of one of the most universal symbols of the twentieth century, one of the greatest intellects of all ages. Albert Einstein has become a myth, a symbol, a paradigm of scientific revolution. But the personal papers of Einstein which are stored at The Hebrew University's Jewish National & University library reveal that there is much that is hidden behind the myth.
(Ze'ev Rosenkranz, *The Einstein Scrapbook*, 2002, p. xiii)

4.4 Indirect Resultative Current Relevance

In Leech (1994), the PP clause (20) implies a conventional result that “the taxi is now here.”

⁸ These interpretations are only typical examples, and there are some other possible interpretations regarding examples (19) and (20).

which ought to be regarded as only one of the possibilities. This can be proved by example (22) where another present consequence that the taxi is not here is also possible. In this research, it is called indirect resultative current relevance which suggests a resultative state of a series of events in the context. Indirect resultative is more concretely exemplified than Declerck's definition of "not an immediate and automatic result" (Declerck, 2006, p. 302). In other words, in example (22) the present consequence expresses the result of a two-phased situation <the taxi arrive and leave>. The same can be true of examples (21) and (23), where (21) shows one typical result that "I'm clean." and (23) expresses another possible result of the multi-phased situation <I have a bath, but after that slog in the garden>. This indirect resultative current relevance also works well with Palmer's "nil result" in the sentences in (11) where the conventional results are excluded intentionally by the relevant contexts.

- (20) The taxi has arrived (i.e. 'The taxi is now here'). (Leech, 1994, p. 39)
- (21) I've had / taken a bath ('I'm now clean'). (ibid.)
- (22) Yes, it has arrived and left, I'm afraid. (Elsness, 1997, p. 68)
- (23) I have had a bath, but after that slog in the garden I need another one. (ibid.)

4.5 Contextual Current Relevance

In example (24) written in 1991 with the late Albert Einstein as its subject, current relevance of the PP clause "But Albert Einstein has been deified by the scientific community and society at large" can be easily read from the context. The context of "the enormity of Einstein's intellect" is a key to current relevance, where the powerful present influence of Einstein's intellect is still being studied and discussed.⁹ Context is another way of providing an extended interpretation of current relevance.

- (24) HOW CAN one grasp the enormity of Einstein's intellect? All great scientists seem remote, extra human even. But Albert Einstein has been deified by the scientific community and society at large. In the guise of a superbrain, a mind that commanded the most complex and abstract aspects of physical science, he is portrayed as with out [*sic*] equal among scientists. (1991, BNC)

4.6 Writer's Current Relevance

Writer's current relevance deals with an important fact that the presenter of a situation plays a key role in connecting a past event with the present moment perceptively, overriding what is physically true in the real world.

⁹ In example (24) current relevance can also be obtained from the semantic subject of the event "deifying" as "the scientific community and society at large" bears strong present influence:

The writer-biased extended current relevance can be illustrated by example (25) with a debating point on the temporal adverbial “modern times.” “Modern times” in example (25) acts like a trigger that both Einstein’s lifetime and the time of writing this sentence are ambiguously included in “modern times.” This vague definition tactically supplies us with current relevance of Einstein describing how his work was affected by the philosophy of David Hume and Ernest Mach.

- (25) For example, the most distinguished physicist of modern times, Albert Einstein, has described how his work was affected by the philosophy of David Hume and Ernest Mach.
(John Cunningham Wood, *J. A. Schumpeter II*, 1991, p. 189)

5. SUMMARY

The present-oriented meaning of the PP is characterized by strict interpretation of current relevance exemplified by Jespersen (1931), Leech (1994), and Pickbourn (1789) at Stage Three of the PP evolution. Present-day English is undergoing a semantic switch from a present-oriented sense towards a past-oriented sense. The shift is marked by some criticisms by Inoue (1969) and others, accompanying an extended interpretation of current relevance. The problems mentioned in Section 1 can be solved by extended current relevance law, an amendment of traditionally narrowed interpretation of current relevance. The evolution from narrowed current relevance to extended current relevance comes into use with a grammaticalization background that English PP is developing from Stage Three to Stage Four in the evolution model.

The extended interpretation of current relevance illustrated in previous parts can easily explain those examples that cannot be dealt with by narrowed current relevance, indicating that current relevance of the PP is more relatively loosely employed than before. In many cases in Section 4, the extended current relevance simply plays a role of background for a reported situation with a gradual outstanding of the preterite semantically.

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DATA

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