

The temporal interpretation of the present perfective in creoles and North-Slavic — Two different solutions to the same problem

Studies on (English-based) creoles indicate that zero verb marking yields a different temporal interpretation according to actionality (e.g. Holm 2000). Indeed, our spoken corpus data of the Surinamese creole language Sranan show that zero-marked dynamic verbs can refer to (recent) past-time, perfect, historical-present or non-counterfactual conditional situations, but not to actual present-time events. With zero-marked stative verbs, however, a present reading is default. We argue that this variety of uses can only be accounted for if zero is analyzed as a present perfective marker. Whereas its perfectivity is acknowledged in standard descriptions (e.g. Winford 2000), an analysis in terms of ‘presentness’ is less straightforward. Yet we defend our account by contrasting the uses of zero with those of (what we regard as) the actual past-tense marker *ben*. Given its present perfective meaning, using zero entails that a situation is viewed and reported in its entirety at the time of speaking. For events, which are bounded and typically heterogeneous, this configuration is problematic, since it is hard to fully view and simultaneously report an event that is taking place in the present (Langacker 2001: 263). This is why zero cannot be used in present-time eventive contexts, despite its basic ‘presentness’, and events designated by means of zero-marked verbs are typically deferred to a past time sphere. We call this puzzling situation the ‘present perfective paradox’ (Malchukov 2009).

This ‘present perfective paradox’ is also relevant for a group of languages that is quite different from English-based creoles: North-Slavic languages (*in casu*, Russian, Polish and Czech). Based on existing descriptions (e.g. Forsyth 1970; Dickey 2000) and native speaker elicitations, we show that present imperfective verbs typically refer to present-time situations, whereas present-time reference is all but excluded for perfective verbs in the present tense (barring some exceptional performative expressions). The present perfective can occasionally be used to refer to habits and narrative and non-counterfactual conditional events, but its most important function (especially in northeastern Slavic) is to yield future-time reference. We again claim that this range of uses results from the infelicitous combination of ‘presentness’ with perfectivity. In North-Slavic, this problem is typically resolved by deferring present perfective events to the future time sphere.

Thus, we relate the seemingly very distinct patterns of use of the present tenses in English-based creoles and North-Slavic to the same phenomenon: the ‘present perfective paradox’. The fact that this paradox is resolved differently in the two language groups is due to differences between (the histories of) their aspecto-temporal paradigms: while Slavic languages reinforced the *praesens pro futuro* use they inherited from Common Slavic, creoles adopted the past interpretation of (equivalents of) zero from their West-African substrate languages.

We conclude our presentation by offering some examples from English, Japanese and Lingala to demonstrate that the relevance of the ‘present perfective paradox’ is not limited to creoles and Slavic, but rather extends to many genetically and geographically divergent languages.

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