

Current relevance and focus marking in French and Spanish perfects

Present perfects (i.e. grammatical item expressing a past event relevant to the time of speech) can express past actions as evidenced by their ability to freely combine with localizing temporal expressions, as seen in French (1a). In other languages like Peninsular Spanish where the simple past expresses past tense, the combination of the present perfect with past temporal adverbs is infelicitous (1b). In the literature, such inconsistencies remain puzzling and have been the topic of long debate.

1. a. *Jean est arrivé hier.*
Jean is arrived yesterday
'Jean arrived yesterday.' (Schaden 2009: 117)
- b. **Juan ha llegado ayer.*
Juan has arrived yesterday
'Juan arrived yesterday.' (Schaden 2009: 117)

Various explanations have been proposed to account for the variation evidenced in (1a-b) (Harris 1982; Fleischman 1983; Bybee et al. 1994). The idea is that the present perfect loses its relevance to speech time (i.e. current relevance (CR)) and weakens over time as a result of frequent language use. Additionally, Schwenter (1994) argues that as CR erodes, the present perfect/simple past opposition is no longer constrained by an aspectual opposition in Peninsular Spanish since the present perfect is shown to be felicitous with past time adverbials not referring to the current moment (i.e. 'two weeks ago'). Thus, co-occurrence of a past time adverbial and a present perfect is evidence that the perfect is "perfectivizing". While these past studies have contributed to our understanding of the perfect to perfective shift, they ignore the mechanisms underlying CR erosion.

First, I argue that past definitions of CR weakening are unsatisfactory and must be revised based on reassessment of Schwenter's (1994) claims that CR weakening is propelling the perfectivizing perfect. Second, I refine the mechanism underlying CR weakening by analyzing the present to perfective shift in French. I examine data extracted from 17th – 20th century texts via the online database ARTFL.¹ From these texts, I select present perfects co-occurring with the past temporal adverb *hier* 'yesterday'. Of these, only 38 tokens evidencing marked word order (auxiliary + *hier* 'yesterday' + past participle) contribute to the analysis.

Drawing upon inference patterns (i.e. persistence, evidential and topic negotiation) established in Nishiyama and Koenig (2010), Peninsular Spanish present perfects + past time adverbials are not instances of wholly past events since CR is always pragmatically inferred as persistence and/or topic negotiation. Thus, the weakening CR definition begs for refinement. Crucially, historical evidence from French shows that temporal adverbs

¹ <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ARTFL.html>

do not necessarily serve to locate events in time but rather function as pragmatic devices. Specifically, the temporal adverb *hier* ‘yesterday’ moves from its canonical right periphery (i.e. postverbal) to a pre-participle position because it can function as a preposed focal element. Thus, the focal contrast highlights the salience of the event and shifts the focus from the entailed current relevance reading to the time of the event. In sum, weakening of CR is revised; it is a shift in focus from the perfect state to the time of the event, facilitated by the presence of a temporal adverb.

References:

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