Towards a unified view of the present perfect.
A comparative study on Catalan, English and Gĩkũyũ

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In this talk, I examine the properties of the Present Perfect (henceforth PrP) across different languages. In particular, I present a comparative study of Catalan, English and Gĩkũyũ, a Bantu language that has ‘graded tenses’. The main question explored is how we can account in a uniform way for the cross-linguistic pattern found in Catalan and in English. I examine one of the most striking differences between the uses of the PrP in Catalan and English, namely, a hodiernal reading of the PrP present in Catalan but not in English. Unlike Catalan, English exhibits the Present Perfect Puzzle (Klein 1992), cf. (1) and (2). In Catalan, the location of the event modified by punctual time adverbials cannot go beyond the limits of the day of speaking in PrP sentences, because the compound verbal form stands in a complementary distribution with the periphrastic past form, and the latter verbal form is used to describe events located before the day that contains the utterance time. There is a claim in the literature that the PrP in Catalan is ambiguous between a hodiernal past and a perfect interpretation (Curell 1990, Curell 2003, Curell & Coll 2007; Pérez Saldanya 2002), but the former temporal schema cannot explain the impossibility of modifying PrP sentences by past time adverbials, see (3). I also provide empirical support against the external 24-hour Rule (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997; Brugger 2001; a.o.) and show that this constraint is mainly dependent on the presence of explicit temporal modification, see (4). I claim that the main property of the PrP in Catalan is not that it has an extra reading that English does not possess, but rather that hodiernal is a subtype of the existential PrP that allows, in addition, for a temporal modification of the event by punctual time adverbials. I adopt a PTS theory (Dowty 1979; McCoard 1978; Iatridou et al.’s 2001) and assume a split between the PTS and the reference time (Pancheva & von Stechow 2004) to account for the hodiernal reading of the Catalan PrP. I apply the typological relation of overlapping between the PTS and the reference time to show that the perfect time interval in Catalan requires a delimited temporal interval that can overlap with the reference time. I suggest that such a temporal relation is connected to the progressive meaning of the present tense. The Catalan present can be used to report an ongoing event but the English present has a habitual interpretation for almost all types of eventualities, apart for states, see (5). In Catalan, the event time can intersect with the utterance time. This semantics of the present tense is inherited in the PrP, where the PTS intersects with the reference time. This temporal relation of overlap is made explicit via the presence of time adverbials which restrict the location of the event time on a fixed position that does not necessarily include the utterance time, i.e., punctual time adverbials or time adverbials headed by a demonstrative. I also examine a type of hodiernal reading found in Gĩkũyũ, a language typologically not related to either Catalan or English. Gĩkũyũ has a specific prefix (i.e., kũũ), which places the eventuality on the day surrounding the utterance time, see (6). As in Catalan, within this temporal interval, the location of the eventuality can be fixed on the time axis by punctual time adverbials. I follow Johnson’s (1980) and Hewson & Nurse’s (2005) insights and consider the option of analysing this prefix as a lexical specification of an extended now.
Selected references


