

Modelling “the perfect”, a category between tense and aspect

(according to Anna Kibort, member of the Surrey Morphology Group)

The perfect

- **semantic category** which involves any dissociation of the temporal location of the situation from the reference point ($R \neq E$)
- the dissociation is grammaticalised as **one category** (Perfect Tense)
- **neutralises** the meaning distinction between $E < R$ and $R < E$
- category between canonical tense and canonical aspect, **overlapping** both

Reichenbach’s “relative tense theory”

- used to model grammaticalised tense values
- **critics**: Reichenbach’s own interpretation of his system was **inconsistent**
- his primitives are adequate to **model tense meanings** and provide a **suitable foundation** for a formal framework to model tense

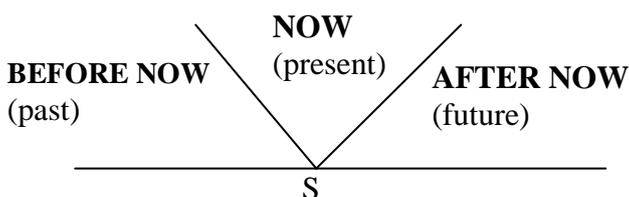
Preliminary observations concerning the perfect

- The perfect is:
- no canonical aspect**
 - tells nothing directly about the internal temporal organisation of the situation
 - a tense**
 - grammaticalises the location in time
 - a systematic extension** of the basic tense meanings
 - adds the dimension of $R \neq E$
 - a separate category** between tense and aspect
 - the whole dimension of the perfect within tense can be isolated
 - its meaning is not purely deictic but captures a certain way of viewing a situation already located in time

Modelling tense meanings

Time and Tense

- time can be represented as a straight line
- past presented conventionally to the left and the future to the right



unspecified:

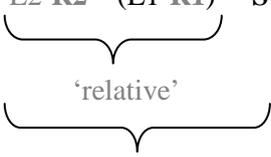
- time line bounded to left or right or not?
- representation of the flow of the time
 - S moves along a stationary time line
 - time flows past a stationary reference point S

The R(eference) point

- the relative position of just two points on the time line (S and E) is not sufficient to account for all the different tense meanings found in language
→ **third point** in time, labelled with R
- R indicates a psychological or imaginary temporal location
→ temporal reference point for the clause
→ **relevant to all tenses !**
- it may, but does not have to coincide with the basic orientation point S

set of absolute tenses

past		E-R	S		- primary deictic centre at S
present			S-E-R		- special case of a relative
future			S	E-R	tense system
past of the past	E2-R2	(E1-R1)	S		



 'relative'
 „absolute“

set of relative tenses

anterior		E	R		- deictic centre at any moment
simultaneous			R-E		on the time line
posterior			R	E	- disregards the speech time S
anterior of anterior	E2	(E1)	R		

posterior: looking at E from an earlier point of view; looking forward

simple: simultaneous

anterior: looking at E from a later point; looking backward

- It's the position of **R relative to S** which makes the speaker view the situation as “past”, “present” or “future”!

All possible tense meanings that involve **one deictic centre (S)** include **three simple tense meanings** (where R=E):

R-E	S			simple past
				<i>I saw him (yesterday)</i>
				<i>she was crying (for an hour)</i>
	S-R-E			simple present
				<i>the kettle is boiling</i>
				<i>I live here</i>
	S	R-E		simple future
				he will finish it (tomorrow)
				she still be doing it (tomorrow)

- tense meanings are conceived of as independent of aspectual meanings
- temporal locations of events are expressed
- the names of the tense meanings do not necessarily correspond to particular grammatical tenses
(*the five anterior and posterior tense meanings can be looked up on page 1396*)

The perfect (R≠E)

the semantic category of the perfect:

- all anterior (E<R) and posterior (E>R) tense meanings share the property R≠E
- in absolute tense meanings it is typically used to express **events that took place before the temporal reference point but which have an effect on or are in some way still relevant to that point** or even **persistent situations**

uses of the Present Perfect in English:

1.) existential/experiential perfect; indefinite anterior

I have seen John. **E** **S-R**

2.) perfect of result

John has left.

3.) perfect of recent past; hot news perfect

I've just spoken to John.

4.) universal perfect; perfect of persistent situation

I have lived here for ten years. **R** **S-E**

Reichenbach's (mis)interpretations of his system

critical errors:

- any one logical tense meaning, defined as a particular configuration of the points (S,E,R) must correspond to a particular grammaticalised tense in language
 - languages combine tense meanings into clusters and thus we grammaticalise fewer temporal distinctions that are logically possible
- aspectual distinctions are added by various symbols (bars, boxes, zigzags etc.)
 - impossible to capture all distinctions consistently
- the account of the “universal perfect” is unsatisfactory
 - it mixes up temporal and aspectual properties
- he did not apply his interpretation of the primitives and their configurations consistently
- he failed to differentiate between absolute tense meanings in simple or main clauses and relative tense meanings in subordinate clauses

Tenses as grammaticalisations of tense distinctions

- not all of the possible tense meanings are found grammaticalised as tenses in any particular language
- neutralisations of various temporal distinctions in one grammatical tense in a language
- tense meanings are often grammaticalised in combination with other distinctions

English:

- grammaticalises the whole category of the perfect as a distinct tense
- it neutralises the distinction between $E < R$ and $R < E$

Brazilian Portuguese:

- highly restrictive Present Perfect Tense
- grammaticalises exclusively the “universal perfect” meaning
- cannot be used to express typical experiential/resultative meanings (e.g.: with already or still)

Polish:

- does not have a distinct Perfect tense
- it grammaticalises the split within the Perfect using simple Past vs. simple Present tense

Yup’ik (Alaskan):

- has a relative tense system
- grammaticalises only the relation between R and E
- deictic centre is always assumed to be at R
- uses the relations $E < R$ and $R < E$ for “displaced experience

Secondary tenses and tense combinations

primary tense meanings:

- locate an event E with respect to the primary deictic centre S

secondary tense meanings:

- locate an event E2 with respect to the deictic centre R1 which is the reference point for an implied event E1

► Conclusion

Forms of tenses in languages result from **grammaticalisation choices** over possible tense values which may involve neutralisations of different temporal distinctions, often in combination with additional distinctions like aspectuality, modality and other.