

The perfect in context: A corpus study

Recently several scholars have argued that the interpretation of the English present perfect requires pragmatic inferences (Borillo *et al.* 2003; Portner 2003; Nishiyama and Koenig 2004), but these approaches do not specify precisely what rules speakers use to perform these pragmatic inferences. In this paper we present the results of a corpus study of over 600 perfect examples, from a diverse range of genres (newspaper articles, oral conversations, literary narratives, non-fictional written discussions), which shed light on the nature of the required contextual inferences. We show that all the required inferences belong to one of a few inference patterns and that the theories presented in Borillo *et al.* (2003) and Portner (2003) can account for only some of the patterns; on the other hand, Nishiyama and Koenig's (2004) theory can model all of them.

The study shows that in most perfect examples (74%, see Table 1 and see examples (1) - (2)), readers need draw only trivial inferences, namely that the state either described or entailed by the verb and its arguments persists until the present (the presumption of persistence default rule, (McDermott 1982)). The study shows also that the inferences drawn in the other 26% of examples fall into a handful of inference patterns. (i) *Speech-act perfects*. The author uses a perfect to communicate that the complement of performative verbs such as, *say* or *promise*, presently holds or is likely to hold in the future; see (3). The default inference rule at play here is that if X say Y, Y is (normally) true as per the speech act's sincerity conditions (Searle 1969; Searle and Vanderveken 1985). (ii) *Topic negotiation*. The speaker uses a perfect at the beginning of a conversation to set up a topic; see (4). Here, the speaker relies on the default rule that if a speaker wants to know whether an addressee knows *Y* (by asking, e.g., whether the addressee has had recent experience with *Y*), the speaker wants to talk about *Y*. (iii) *Existence proof*. The author uses a perfect because the occurrence of an event is evidence for the truth of a claim (s)he made; see (5) where flying 1,500 missions serves as proof that the U.S. forces are busy. (iv) *Elaboration*. The author uses a perfect to further explain something that is stated in the preceding or following context; see (6) where closing at 2 p.m. entails, given one's knowledge of the stock market, that the trading session will be cut short.

- (1) ..., he has been a member of her household ever since. (⊢ He is a member of her household.)
- (2) Yeltsin's health has become a major issue in the closing days of Russia's presidential race. (⊢ Yeltsin's health is a major issue in the closing days of Russia's presidential race.)
- (3) Sumitomo has said its losses from Mr. Hamanaka's trading stand at \$1.8 billion. (⊢ Its losses from Mr. Hamanaka's trading stand at \$1.8 billion.)
- (4) Have you done a lot of camping recently? (⊢ I want to talk about camping with you.)
- (5) U.S. Air Force fighter jets have flown an average of 1,500 missions a month over southern Iraq since 1992, in an effort to make sure Iraq doesn't violate a no-fly zone or attack its Shiite population. (⊢ Iraq still keeps U.S. forces busy, too.)
- (6) The Public Securities Association, an industry trade group, has recommended a 2 p.m. close. (⊢ There is an abbreviated trading session slated for today in advance of the July Fourth holiday on Monday.)

Finally, we show that while examples of type (iii) and (iv) can be explained by Portner (2003), Borillo *et al.* (2003) and Nishiyama and Koenig (2004), type (ii) (and to a lesser extent type (i)) cannot be explained by the former two since these perfects are conversation openers and serve to establish a topic rather than relating a past event to an already established topic, as Portner and Borillo *et al.*'s theories of the perfect would have it.

Table 1: Percentages of lexically entailed, continuative, existential, and resultative perfect examples in each corpus¹

	Lexically entailed	Continuative	Existential	Resultative	Others	Total
Newspaper1 ²	21	22	2	15	1	61
Newspaper 2 ³	58	60	15	18	0	151
Discussion ⁴	78	51	11	9	6	155
Conversation ⁵	29	36	15	21	1	102
Narrative ⁶	42	52	15	27	2	64
Total	227 (37.52%)	221 (36.52%)	58 (9.58%)	90 (14.87%)	10 (1.65%)	605

¹ See Michaelis (1998) for definitions of the uses of the perfect mentioned in Table 1.

² *Reuters Finacial News, 1996. 07.01*

³ *Wall Street Journal, 1996. 07.01*

⁴ CQ Researchers

⁵ Switch Board Corpus

⁶ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*; I. Bernard Cohen, *Howard Aiken: Portrait of a Computer Pioneer*; Willa Cather, *O! Pioneer!*

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