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The Complexity of the English present perfect and its repercussions for a non-native grammar

Abstract

It is frequently assumed that the English present perfect (also known as the perfect or the HAVE-perfect) is a linguistically and cognitively complex category (cf. Radden and Dirven 2007). The aim of this talk is to assess the repercussions this complexity might have for the distribution of this verb form across non-native varieties of English.

The discussion is organised as follows: First, I will elaborate on the argument that the English present perfect is a linguistically and cognitively complex category, while relying on the following criteria: (i) morphological make-up of the verb form, (ii) its semantics and (iii) its order of acquisition by non-native speakers. I will then proceed to present my data drawn from the preliminary version of the *Hamburg Corpus of Non-Native Englishes* (Davydova i.prog.), a collection of recordings of spontaneous speech obtained from Hindi, German and Russian speakers of English exhibiting various degrees of proficiency in the target language. The major advantage of this type of data is that it allows researchers to control for the influence from the respective source language and for the level of mastery of English exhibited by the non-native speaker. This corpus does not represent a longitudinal study; it comprises “synchronic snapshots” of data, which nevertheless enable us to trace the trajectory of the development of non-native English grammar. Additionally, I use the data obtained from the London-Lund Corpus (LLC) of Spoken English (Svartvik 1990), which ensures a methodologically sound design for this empirical work, serving as a yardstick for the comparison of the non-native data.

My analysis reveals (quite unexpectedly) that the L1 does not exert a strong influence on the occurrence of the present perfect in a non-native grammar of English. In other words, the presence of a construction similar to that of the English perfect in the respective native tongue does not affect the results significantly. What is, however, of considerable importance for the appearance of the HAVE-perfect in the distributional analyses is the speaker's degree of proficiency in English.

Relying on the distributional and multivariate evidence, I argue that the semantic and structural as well as cognitive complexity of the English present perfect present a plausible explanation for the fact that only the most advanced learners of English develop a full command of this language category.

References

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