Crosslinguistic differences on the Present Perfect Puzzle: an experimental approach

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Introduction: Perfect/Past in English

Variation between **PERFECT** and **PAST** forms responds to constraints not clearly understood. (1) and (2) are both possible:

1) Mary ate breakfast at that café.

(Perfective) **Past** $E,R < S$

2) Mary has eaten breakfast at that café.

(Present) **Perfect** $E < R,S$

Introduction: Perfect/Past in English

The **present perfect puzzle**: "the Present Perfect does not go with an adverbial referring to the past" (Klein 1992: 526), so the Simple Past has to be used instead:

3) Mary (#has) left at 8am.

R=S restricts past-time adverbs

Lack of crosslinguistic coverage

- However, **most research has been done in English** (e.g., McCawley 1981, Michaelis 1994, Portner 2003, Nishyama & Koenig (2010).

- French, Dutch, German PERFECT: compatible with past time adverbials (e.g., de Swart 2007).
  - Marie est partie à 8 heures.   [French]
  - Maria is om 8 uur weggegaan.   [Dutch]
  - Maria ist um 8 Uhr abgefahren.   [German]

Parallel corpora work (van der Klis et al. 2021) Spanish: constraint on prehodiernal past

- Events delimited by a prehodiernal temporal adverbial are expressed with the **PERFECT** in French (and German and Dutch), but require the **PAST** in Spanish.

a. Il a perdu son oncle, il y a quelque mois. [French]

d. Perdió a su tío hace algunos meses. [Spanish]

e. He lost his uncle some months ago. [English]

examples from Camus, *L'étranger* (1942)

Parallel corpora work (van der Klis et al. 2021) English: constraint on past events

- **PERFECT** seems to be compatible with deictic adverbs referring to 'today' in Spanish, but **PAST** in English.

   a. Aujourd'hui maman est morte.   [French]

   b. Hoy mamá ha muerto.   [Spanish]

   c. Mother died today.   [English]

examples from Camus, *L'étranger (*1942)

English: deixis

Does English never allow temporal adverbials with the Present Perfect?

5) Mary *#has left* / *left* **at 8am**.

6) Mary *has left* / *left* **this morning**

• English seems to allow ***deictic* temporal adverbials** (Hitzeman 1995) to combine with Present Perfect.

The (crosslinguistic) present perfect puzzle:
An acceptability judgment task

Method: acceptability judgments

- 8 contexts that conveyed **bounded events** (all **achievements**).
- **Three independent variables** with two levels each (2x2x2):
  - **Grammatical Marker**: PERFECT / PAST
  - **Temporal proximity**:
    - **+T :** adverbials relate to day of utterance by being included in it (e.g. *this morning*) or including it (e.g. *this month*).
    - **-T:** adverbs do not include/are included in day of speech (e.g. *last month*).
  - **Deixis**:
    - **+D:** temporal reference of adverb is deictic in nature (e.g. *yesterday*)
    - **-D:** adverbs that can be placed on a timeline independently from speakers' center of reference (e.g. *in 2004*)
- **Three languages**: Netherlands Dutch / Peninsular Spanish / UK English

Method: acceptability judgments

- Total of 64 stimuli (+96 fillers)

- Latin Square design.

- 75% of stimuli followed by comprehension questions.

- 160 subjects per language:
  - Dutch: The Netherlands - all provinces (mostly Utrecht)
  - Spanish: Spain- all regions (no differences, mostly Madrid)
  - English: UK- all regions (no differences, mostly greater London)

- Rating on a 5-point Likert scale

Sample stimulus

Peter and Theresa are planning to go to a concert next weekend. Peter offers to go get the tickets later today, but Theresa tells him:

+T, +D: "I *purchased* / *have purchased* mine **this morning**

+T, -D: "I *purchased* / *have purchased* mine **at midnight**

-T, + D: "I *purchased* / *have purchased* mine **last month**

**-T, -D:**   "I *purchased* / *have purchased* mine **in November**

It was cheaper that way".

Data analysis & Results

- All participants performed at above 75% in comprehension questions.

- Linear mixed model analysis; *lme4* package (Bates et al. 2015), in R.
  - Model selection by Likelihood Ratio Tests.
  - Post hoc tests in *multcomp* package (Hothorn et al. 2008).
  - p-values corrected by Tukey.

- **Fixed effects**: Temporal Proximity*Deixis*Marker.

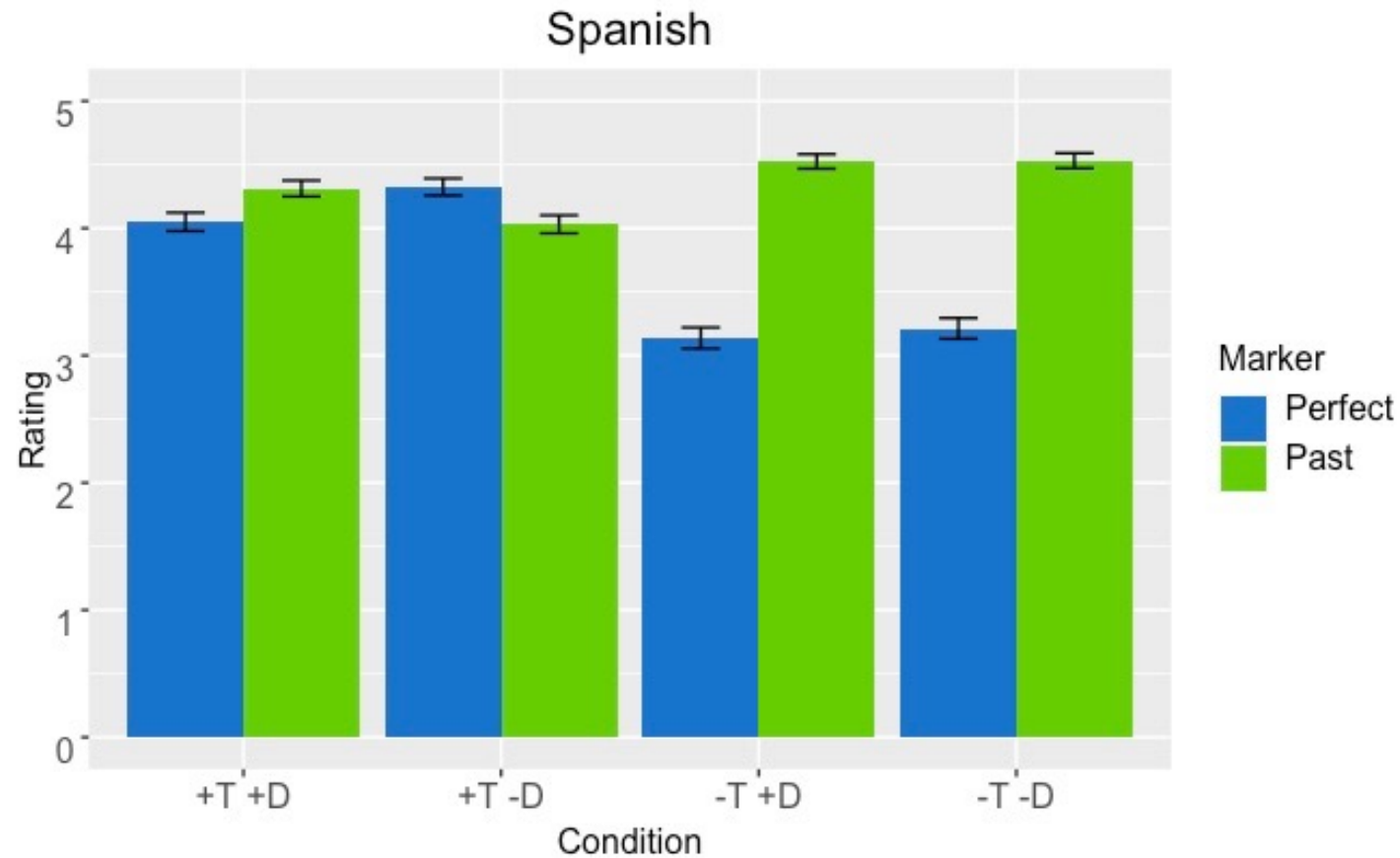- **Random effects**: random intercepts for subject and item.

Dutch

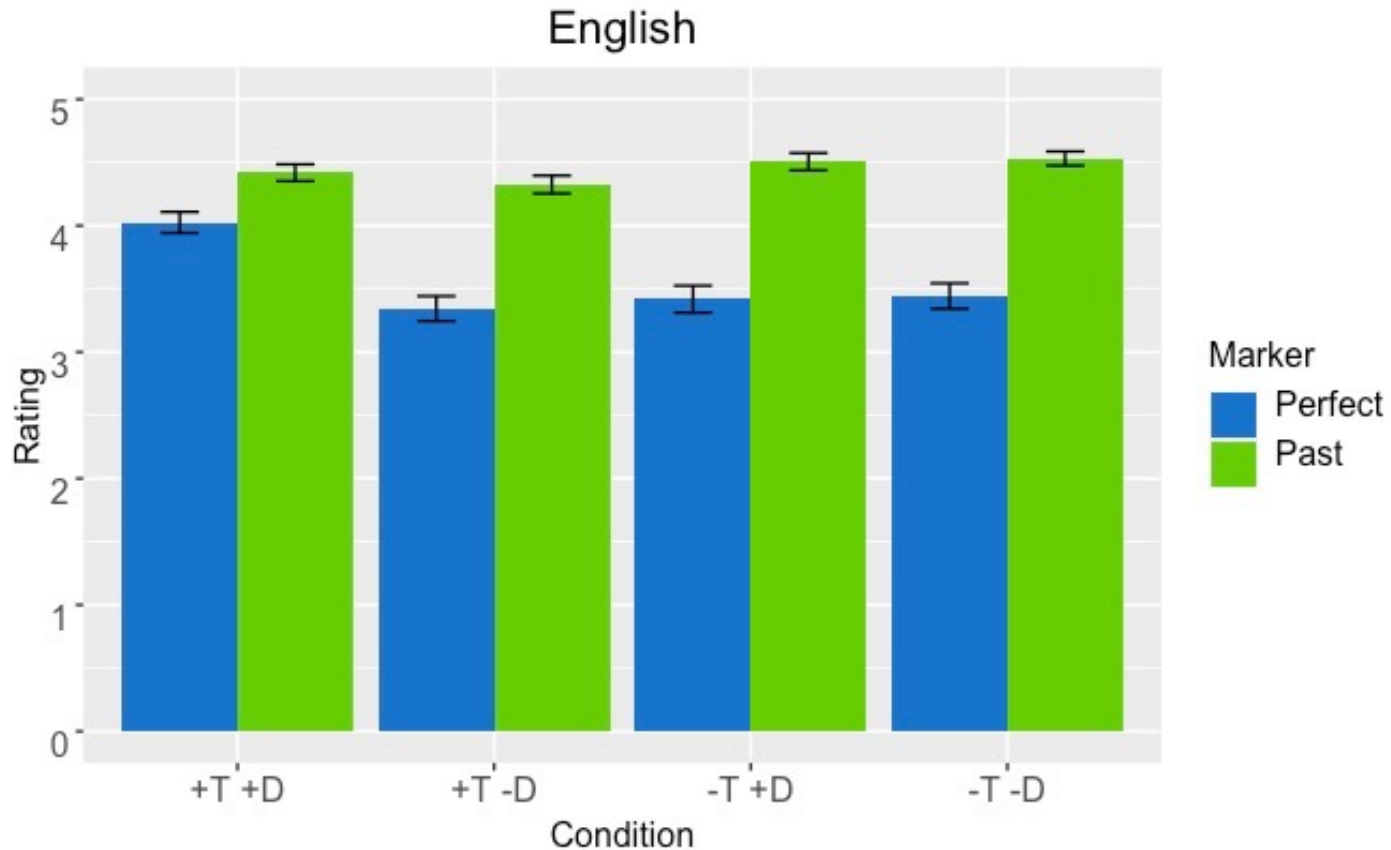Main effect of marker: **PERFECT** > **PAST** **in all conditions**
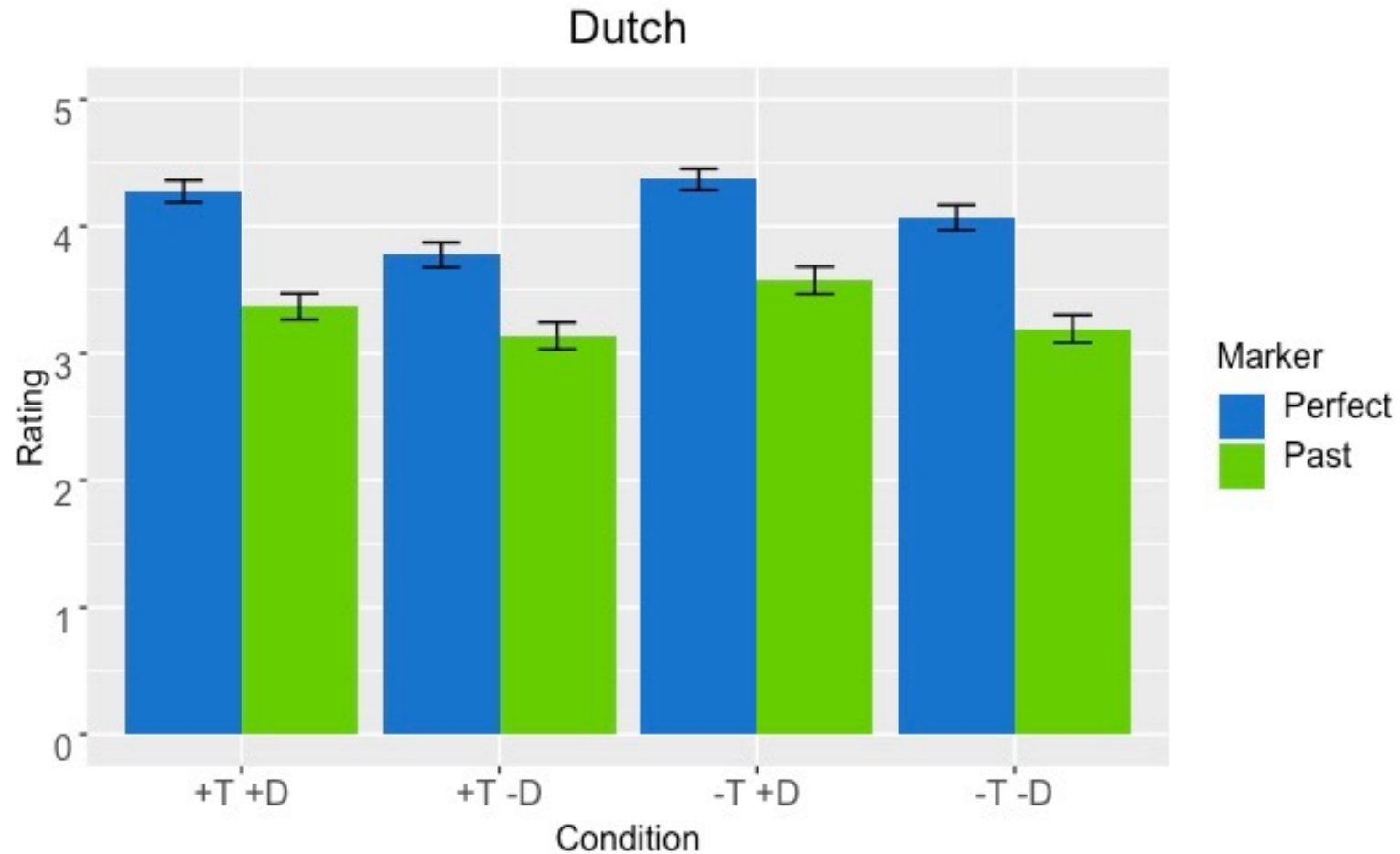
Spanish

- Significant T*Marker interaction: PAST is better than PERFECT only in –T, but **they are not different in +T**. No effect of deixis.

English

- Significant T*D*Marker interaction: PAST is better than PERFECT in all conditions, but **there is a less categorical difference in +T, +D.**

English: within +T +D

- if we subdivide +T,+D adverbials, when the adverb includes the day of utterance (e.g., *this month)* the difference is still significant, but **when it is included in the day of utterance (e.g., *this morning*), the difference disappears**.

English +T, +D
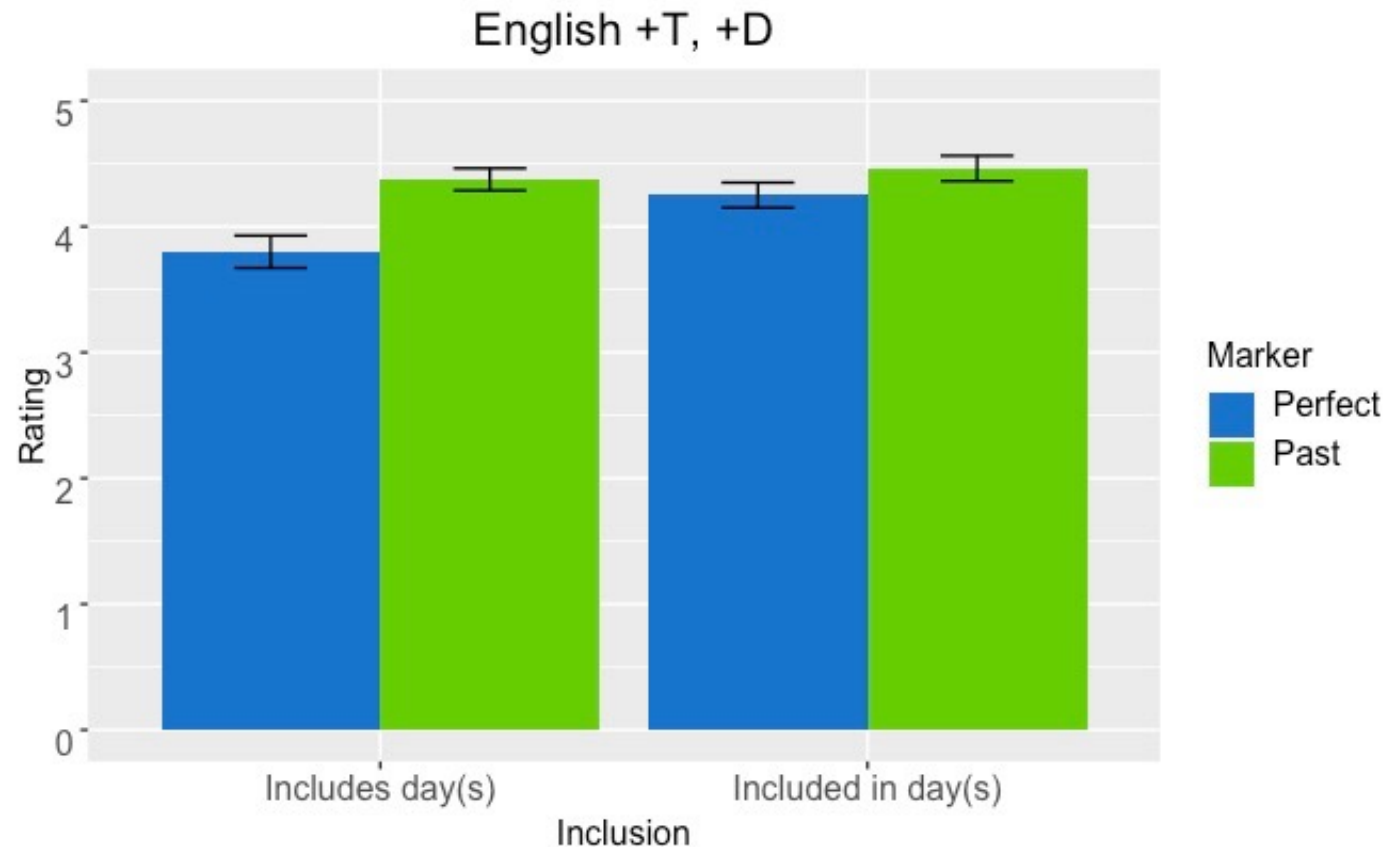
Summary

- 🇳🇱 **Dutch**: PERFECT is allowed to refer to past events unconstrainedly. PAST, in turn, is dispreferred for this purpose.

- 🇪🇸 **Spanish**: PERFECT is accepted when the **event is clearly linked to the day of utterance**, but there is no preference for this marker (contra Schwenter 1994, Azpiazu 2013 i.a.), since the PAST can also be used.

- 🇬🇧 **English**: PAST is preferred across conditions over the PERFECT but this latter marker is more accepted with **deictic hodiernal adverbials**, especially when the adverb is **included in the day of utterance** (e.g., *this morning*).

Conclusions

- We produced a more **fine-grained typology** of the elements that need to be included in a **crosslinguistically valid semantics** of the PERFECT.

- **Hodiernality and deixis** (and considerations about 'proper' hodiernality vs. 'extended' hodiernality) **play a role in** PERFECT-PAST **crosslinguistic variation.**

- We are working on the semantic analysis!

Selected references

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Thank you for your attention!