Towards a typology of perfect and related categories

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Generalities

Perfect (also referred to as anterior) – one of the most intricate representatives of the verbal grammatical domain.
Especially problematic are:

- the meaning of perfect
- its relations to other verbal categories (both typologically and language-internally)
- and its grammatical evolution (sources, diachronic development, post-perfect meanings).
Still, perfect is one of the most widespread verbal grams: according to Dahl 1985 and Bybee et al. 1994, at least one third of the world’s languages are likely to have perfect markers. Importantly, perfect can be considered as a characteristic feature of the European linguistic area (Dahl 2000), among others.
Outline

I. Semantics of perfect
II. Structural and areal types of perfect
III. The status of perfect in the verbal system
IV. Diachronic development of perfect
I. Semantics of perfect

- How to specify perfect value of a verbal form?

- Usually, a simpler notion of **resultative** (Nedjalkov et al. 1974, Coseriu 1976, Nedjalkov (ed.) 1988, Wiemer & Giger 2005, etc.) is relied on.

- Resultative is one of the basic (= primary) aspectual values specifying, for a telic process, that its resultative state takes place (= includes the topic time, in Klein 1994’s terminology).
Resultative vs. perfect: similarities and differences

- *The door is open*
  - (present object) resultative from ‘to open’

- *The door has been opened*
  - (passive present) perfect from ‘to open’
Resultative vs. perfect: similarities

- Similar discourse functions, namely:
  - both cannot mark main story line predicates in the narrative;
  - both cannot be used with “exact time” expressions of the type at 5 o’clock, last year, etc.
Resultative vs. perfect: differences

- However, resultative and perfect differ in many aspects.
- Basically, perfect can be conceptualized as an “advanced” and “eroded” resultative.
Resultative vs. perfect: differences

- Different syntactic and semantic properties, namely:
  - actionality restrictions: resultatives can be formed only from telic processes, perfects do not have specific restrictions (cf. Engl. have known / sung / walked)
The notion of ‘result’ is substituted by a much looser notion of ‘current relevance’ (Comrie 1985 et al.)
  - which is sometimes argued to form a scale (Dahl, Hedin 2000)

consequences of a past situation in the present,

(any?) relation of a past situation to the current state of affairs (Michaelis 1998),

or even a mere “participation of the subject” in the situation (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997)
Resultative vs. perfect: other attempts

- A purely “temporal” approach to perfect (Declerck 1991, Klein 1992, 1994, partly also Bybee et al. 1994, etc.) seems less felicitous, especially within the formal-logical treatment that analyzes perfect only as a kind of relative tense
  - expressing situation prior to the moment of speech
  - and/or holding at somewhat mystical “extended now” interval (according to McCoard 1978).
Resultative vs. perfect: argument structure differences

- Resultative verbal form is a one-place stative predicate
  - which denotes a resultant state ascribed either to the subject or to the object of the core situation (neither to both!).

- Perfect, on the contrary, retains all the arguments of the core situation.
Resultative vs. perfect: argument structure differences

Thus, Standard Russian
izba zaperta ‘the hut is / has been barred’
is ambiguous:
RES. lzba vsë eščë zaperta [*Ivanom]
‘the hut is/remains still barred [*by John]’
PASS.PF. lzba [*vsë eščë] zaperta Ivanom
‘the hut has been [*still] barred by John’

Cf. North Russian perfect:
PF. a) Ivan\textsubscript{nom} izbu\textsubscript{acc} zaperši\textsubscript{conv.act} 
b) U Ivana\textsubscript{obl} izbu\textsubscript{acc} zaperto\textsubscript{part.pass.neut} 
‘John has barred the hut’
Resultative vs. perfect

- The degree of “perfectness” is gradually decreasing from resultative to (aoristic/perfective) past
- Hence the problems with an unambiguous qualification of many language-specific perfect-like forms
- (Lithuanian perfect may be among these problematic cases)
Resultative vs. perfect

- Thus, even the resultative perfect (= perfect of result) is not identical to the resultative in the strict sense.
- Moreover, the perfect forms are, as a rule, polysemous and express a lot of other values (including those which are rather far from resultative domain).
Perfect: polysemy

- The study of this polysemy usually relies on the seminal paper McCawley 1981 on English perfect, where four types of perfect uses are distinguished:
  - ‘resultative perfect’
  - ‘experiential perfect’ (with the focus on subject’s properties)
  - ‘continuous perfect’ (core situation is extended to the MoS)
  - ‘immediate perfect’ (with the focus on short temporal distance)
Perfect: polysemy

- These four uses can be referred to as “McCawley’s cluster”.
- Typologically, they all relate to different semantic domains.
- Still, their synchronic combination with resultative value is not unique (though is likely to be rather a European areal phenomenon).
Perfect: polysemy

Nevertheless, when perfect is defined as something similar to “McCawley’s cluster” (as, e.g., in Dahl 1985), it is a gross confusion of a possible language-specific cluster with a universal cross-linguistic gram type.

Cross-linguistically, what we call ‘perfect’ need not by any means have immediate, or experiential values, etc.
Perfect: polysemy

- NB: There are other widespread types of clusterization, for example, evidential perfect (= perfect with evidential uses), typical for many linguistic areas, such as Balkan, Caucasian, Baltic, a.o.
- Non-European perfects: are there semantic differences due to differences in structural types and lexical sources?
II. Structural and areal types of perfect

1) **Stative** perfect, involving perfective (passive) participle with an auxiliary (‘esse’ or ‘habere’)

2) **Terminative** perfect, involving constructions with ‘finire’
Stative perfect

- Mostly “European” phenomenon, both ‘esse’-based (Ital. è uscito, North Rus. on uexavši) and ‘habere’-based (Ital. ha chiuso la casa / ha risposto).

- NB: North Russian type u nego izbu zaperto
  - not identical to Standard Russian resultative constructions of the type u nego sdelany uroki ≈ ‘he has his homework done / as for him, his homework is done’
  - cf. u nego syn nagražděn medal’ju ≈ ‘as for him, his son has been awarded a medal’ ≠ ‘he has awarded…’

- The original semantics is the expression of state, the original construction is the resultative one, gradually evolving towards a perfect (and beyond).
Stative perfect

- NB: The problem of “auxiliary choice” within an analytic participial construction:
  - only ‘esse’ (Finnish, North Russian),
  - only ‘habere’ (English, Spanish, Greek),
  - diachronically unstable lexically-based distribution (“split auxiliary system”, as in Italian, French, German),
  - coexistence of several perfect constructions (Macedonian, Lithuanian)

- The rules of lexical distribution may be very complex and unstable (Sorace 2000, Aranovich 2007, Sičinava 2008); the relation of this group of facts to a notorious “unaccusativity hypothesis” is not proven.
Terminative perfect

- One of the most common types outside Europe, including Africa, Oceania, South-East Asia, etc. (cf. Bybee et al. 1994, Howard 2000).
- The original semantics is a reference to the “post-terminal” phase of the situation.
Terminative perfect

- The similar iconic pattern is exploited by **locative constructions with preposition ‘after’** expressing perfect:
  - in Irish (as well as in Irish English) and in colloquial Czech (*jsem už po snídani* ‘I have already had my breakfast’, litt. ‘I am after breakfast’)
Structural and areal types of perfect

Stative and terminative perfect may differ both in their semantics and in the details of their diachronic development.
III. The status of perfect in the verbal system

- An old problem: is perfect an aspect (Maslov), a tense (Jespersen, Klein) or both (Comrie)?
- If it as an aspect, how is it related to other aspectual grams in the language?
- In particular, can Modern Russian be said to have a special perfect aspect, apart from perfective and imperfective? – (Cf. Beedham 1988, Gavrilova 1998, Knjazev 2002 and 2007 etc. for discussion.)
Perfect and tense/aspect

- If perfect is considered a tense, does it express a present (Jespersen) or a past (Michaelis) time-reference? Or does it have a special “complex” temporal reference (Comrie)?
- The problem may also rely in the fact that, structurally, resultative perfect (still) tends to the present, while, semantically, it (already) tends to the past.
Perfect and tense/aspect

Perfect is a specific aspectual gram. The problem of its temporal reference depends on whether perfect-based “temporal paradigm” is to be recognized at all.
Perfect and tense/aspect

- The problem of “perfect tenses” of traditional grammatical descriptions: are past perfect (= pluperfect) and future perfect real instances of perfect?

- It is often so from the formal point of view, but semantically the question is much more debatable, especially for pluperfect (cf. Comrie 1985, Salkie 1989, Squartini 1999, Plungian 2001 etc.).
Perfect and pluperfect

- Typologically, pluperfect (usually going back to past-resultative forms) may belong to the semantic domain of "discontinuous past" (Plungian 2001, Plungian & van der Auwera 2006),
- where it is driven by diachronic evolution separating it from present-resultative forms, evolving differently.
Perfect and pluperfect

- The more the semantic asymmetry, the less strong is the motivation for a unified category of “tensed” perfect with a temporal past-and-present paradigm.
- In addition, there are quite a few languages which do have a pluperfect but lack a dedicated (present) perfect – like Latin, Standard Rumanian, Yiddish, etc.
Perfect and passive

- Passive ≈ syntactic promotion of object
- Object resultative ≈ profiling object-related resulting state
- Close functional correspondence, explaining a greater frequency of the passive (or passive-based) resultative/perfect in the world’s languages (cf. Comrie 1981)
Perfect and passive: Russian

- Standard Russian resultative is predominantly passive
- Cf. dver’ sloma-n-a / otkry-t-a ‘the door is broken / open’, etc.
- Intransitive verbs like upast’ ‘fall’ display virtually no dedicated resultative forms, except a number of “pseudopassives” of the type vljublën ‘enamored’, rasterjan ‘confused’, etc. (Trubinskij 2001, Knjazev 2002).
Perfect and passive: Russian

- Standard Russian resultative is predominantly passive
- NB: The opposite does not hold, because Standard Russian (participle-based) passive may be both stative and dynamic (= non-resultative)
- However, according to the modern norm, mostly in the past
Perfect and passive: Russian

- Past passive in Russian:
  \[ Dver’ byla otkryta \] ‘the door was opened / open’
  (both readings out of the context)
  \[ Dver’ byla \underline{bystro} otkryta \] ‘the door was opened quickly’ (only non-resultative reading)

- Present participle-based passive in Russian:
  \[ Dver’ [\underline{bystro}] otkryta \] ‘the door is [*quickly] open / *opened’ (only resultative reading)
Скажи-ка, дядя, ведь не даром Москва, спалённая пожаром, французу отдана?
(the first lines of Lermontov’s “Borodino”, 1837)

отдана = ‘was given away’, not ‘is given’!
(past) dynamic passive, not present resultative
IV. Diachronic development of perfect

- A particular diachronic instability of perfect
- From a diachronic point of view, perfect is rather an intermediate area somewhere between several more clear-cut semantic domains
- Within perfect continuum, different stages can be distinguished, depending on how far from the resultative prototype the given perfect form is
- Cf., for example, the situation in Lithuanian – vs. Finnish, Swedish – vs. Spanish, English, Dutch, Italian – vs. German, Serbian, etc.
Main possible scenarios of perfect evolution

A. “Extended perfect”

B. “Dedicated perfect”

C. “Weak perfect”
A. “Extended perfect”

- Resultative > perfect > (perfective) past with resultative uses (Russian, Polish, Rumanian, Hungarian, Yiddish)

- If a language already has an “old” aoristic (non-resultative) past:
  - either it disappears (as in Russian or Swiss German)
  - or it may be retained in some residual uses, variously related to the forms of a “new” extended perfect (as in French, German or Serbian linguistic continua)
“Extended perfect”

- The scenario A may also yield a recurrent “new” resultative, taking over some functions of the extended perfect.

- This is what is called “a perfect cycle” (as attested in early Romance, North Russian, etc.): two or more perfects, successively.
“Extended perfect”: the perfect cycle

- Classical Latin: *litteram scrīpsit* ‘wrote/has written’ [Ext.Pf–1]
- Late Latin / Early Romance: *litteram scrīpsit* ‘wrote’ [Aor.] ~ *litteram scrīptam habet* ‘has written’ [Res.Pf.]
- Modern Romance: *habet scrīptum* ‘wrote/has written’ [Ext.Pf–2]
“Extended perfect”

NB 1: Several perfect forms may compete also beyond the scenario A: the most familiar example is Macedonian, cf. Fici Giusti 1995, Graves 2000.

NB 2: Sičinava 2008 points out the relation of scenario A to a “split auxiliation” strategy.
B. “Dedicated perfect”

- Evolving away from the resultative prototype, the perfect forms specialize in a single value belonging to the “perfect cluster” –
  - for example, in the experiential one (Vostrikova 2009),
  - or in the immediate one (Fleischman 1989, Schwenter 1994),
- but most often, in the evidential one.
“Dedicated perfect”

- Evidential perfect (or perfect-based evidential)
  - may both retain and lose the original resultative value
- In the latter case, we are left with an evidential past.
- The evolution is extremely typical for all “Great Evidential Belt” languages, as well as for Baltic area (Tatevosov 2001, Wiemer 2006, and many others).
C. “Weak perfect”

- Original resultative perfect neither evolves towards perfective past nor develops special dedicated uses,
- but simply disappears (or gets marginalized to a great extent), the resultative uses being taken over by an “old” (perfective) past.
- One of the less studied scenarios: a case of “failed grammaticalization”? 
“Weak perfect”

Languages which tend towards scenario C:
- most probably, Modern Greek, Portuguese.

In American English, perfect uses are narrowed down mostly to experiential contexts
- according to Michaelis 1998, constructions like Harry’s left “sound British”
- Jim Miller points out the increase of “new resultatives” of the type I have my leg broken also in colloquial British English, where scenario B seems to prevail


Selected bibliography


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To conclude

- All known types of perfect instantiate synchronically vague and diachronically unstable phenomena.
- There are (practically) no specimens of “pure”, or “prototypical” perfect.
- Every language-specific case has its individual aberrations: studying perfect means describing ways of this aberration.
Nobody is perfect…