On the Semantics of the English Resultative Present Perfect

Csaba Czeglédi

The paper discusses some issues and misunderstandings in the interpretation of what Huddleston and Pullum (2002) call 'the resultative perfect'. It is shown, in particular, how and when Leech (1971) was right about the meaning of the English present perfect, when he thought he wasn't (and how he wasn't when he thought he was).

Key words: aspect, implicature, indefinite past event, people's mental models of the world and of other minds, resultative perfect

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with the interpretation of sentences like

(1)   She has broken her leg. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:145)

We shall be interested in how what is often called the 'resultative meaning' associated with sentences like (1) is expressed and understood. The aspects of the grammatical structure of (1) that interest us now will be informally called 'the present perfect', following more or less generally accepted practice in the description of English. One of several different specific questions that arise in this connection is how much of the resultative meaning attributed to sentences like (1) is a matter of their grammatical structure. Another is this: If not all of it, where does the rest come from? Perhaps it is not premature at this point to informally indicate two of the general conclusions of this short essay. We will see, on the one hand, that very little of the resultative meaning of sentences in the present perfect is a matter of their grammar, contrary to what is almost universally claimed and accepted. In fact, in an important sense, none of the resultative meaning of sentences like (1) is a matter of grammar. Second, in answer to the second specific question informally formulated above, we shall conclude that most, perhaps all, of the resultative meaning of such sentences is the contribution of an interaction between partly cognitive and partly communicative principles, which lie beyond the domain of grammar, conventionally understood. We will see how the interpretation of sentences like (1) involves domains of knowledge in speakers' and hearers' minds beyond their

knowledge of language. Perhaps surprisingly, and contrary to the almost universally held belief, that will lead to the conclusion that little, if any, of the 'resultative meaning of the present perfect' is linguistic meaning at all, in the narrow and now conventional sense of the term *linguistic*.

2 The "Resultative Perfect"

In one form or another, all authoritative descriptive grammars of English recognize what is sometimes called the "resultative perfect" as a variant or use of the present perfect. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002:143) observe, "grammars commonly distinguish four major uses of the present perfect: the **continuative**, the **experiential** (or 'existential') perfect, the **resultative** perfect, and the perfect of **recent past**… [which] can be thought of as a classification of the main ways in which the concept of a time-span up to now can be involved in the use and interpretation of the present perfect—or as different ways in which the past situation may have 'current relevance'."

(1) above is claimed to be one of "the clearest cases of the resultative perfect…, where the situation is one that inherently involves a change of state: breaking a leg yields a resultant state where the leg is broken" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:143). As Huddleston and Pullum (ibid.) note "the connection with the present in this resultative use is that the resultant state still obtains now."

Now, what does it mean to claim or assume that there is such a thing as the resultative (present) perfect in English? Or, what does it mean to say that (1) is a particularly clear case of the resultative (present) perfect, which describes a past situation with current relevance, where the "current relevance" is the present result of the past event, which "still obtains now"? Notice that the descriptive statements of the sort just quoted carry an important contrastive implication, without which they are entirely uninteresting. This contrastive implication, which is just as simple as it is important, is that the descriptive statements in question identify specific distinctive properties of the (resultative) present perfect. If they did not, they would not only be without any interest at all but they would be misleading. For example, if the claim that the (resultative) present perfect expresses the "current relevance" or present result of a past event is meant without the implication that this is something specific and distinctive about the present perfect, meaning that it does not apply to any other type of report of a past event, such as a sentence in the past tense, for instance, then it would be no more interesting than, say, pointing out about rodents that they have four legs, which is an exceptionally banal statement, as it is one of several non-distinctive predictable properties they share with all other terrestrial mammals. Therefore, to introduce the 'resultative perfect' as a subcategory in English grammar must imply denying that there is such a thing as 'the resultative past', for instance, not only for it to be minimally interesting but also in order that the grammar and use of English is not given a misleading representation.

Having clarified the conceptually and logically necessary contrastive implications of the notion of the 'resultative perfect', let us move on to another logical consequence of the foregoing, which is in part an empirical matter, therefore crucial in the description of English. This is a very simple point—the implication just discussed has to be correct. If it is not, the notion of the 'resultative perfect', in the conventional sense, becomes practically meaningless and all accompanying claims are not only misleading but quite simply wrong. As just noted, for it to be interesting, meaningful, and correct, the notion of the 'resultative perfect' must imply the denial of the existence of the 'resultative past'. What this means is that we should be unable to construct (or find) an English sentence which describes a past event in the past tense, where the event or situation described has 'current relevance' in the form of a resultant state which "still obtains now." Fatally for the notion of the 'resultative perfect' and all accompanying claims, it is not at all difficult to find or construct such an English sentence. Indeed, there are an infinite number of them. Consider, for example, (2) below.

(2)   She **broke** her leg yesterday.

What does (2) mean? How does it compare with the meaning of (1)? When we answer these questions, have we also answered the question about what a speaker of English understands when they hear or read (1) or (2)? These are not easy questions at all. It may not seem straightforward, for instance, that the best answer to the latter is very likely in the negative, as we shall see later. It is sometimes easier to say what a sentence does not mean. Take (1), for instance. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002:145) observe, "*She has broken her leg* does not mean "Her leg is broken", but this is the likely implicature." That is correct, indeed, (1) does not directly say anything about the condition of "her leg" at the time the event is reported. Instead, (1) merely reports a past event. That is what it "means." If there is anything else a speaker-hearer understands in addition to the concept of the past event reported, that must come from a different source, as it is not, strictly speaking, part of the meaning of the sentence. The sentence is not a statement about the present state of "her leg" but a statement about what has happened. If, upon hearing or reading (1), a speaker-hearer can construct thoughts not only about the past state of the world but also about the present state of "her leg," they must make use of knowledge beyond and different from their knowledge of grammar. Immediately, serious questions arise about what that knowledge is and how it is used in constructing thoughts about "the present state of the world," including the state of "her leg," and questions about how that domain of knowledge interacts with a speaker's knowledge of grammar. We shall address some of these questions later.

To return to the meaning of (1) and (2) and the "likely implicature" they somehow involve, it is clear that the implicature 'Her leg is broken' is identical in both. It may be less clear how that implicature is mentally constructed by speakers of English and how the meaning of (1) or (2) contributes to that

process, questions to which we shall return directly. But it should be obvious now, as a matter of logical consequence, that the conventional notion of the 'resultative (present) perfect' is incoherent and that any claim about the meaning or interpretation of sentences like (1) formulated in terms of that notion is untenable (or utterly insipid). Nevertheless, as noted above, all major descriptions of English, including Huddleston and Pullum (2002), make such claims about what is sometimes called the "resultative use" of the present perfect (ibid., p. 143). These claims about the present perfect or its use are made in a variety of different styles and they sometimes vary in strength, but their core content, formulated in (3) below, is more or less identical. Call it the Resultative (Present) Perfect Rule (RPR).

(3)   *Resultative Perfect Rule (RPR)*
          The resultative present perfect expresses the present result of a past event.

Some aspects of the ambiguity of such a rule or claim have already been exposed above. Let us clarify that ambiguity in more explicit terms now in order to see first, how and why RPR is hopelessly equivocal and second, how it is simply wrong on the most interesting, perhaps generally intended, reading.

     As any similar rule formulated in informal natural language terms, RPR may be assigned either a conditional or a biconditional reading. In fact, RPR corresponds to two different conditional readings and a third, biconditional reading. These may be spelled out as in (4a-c) below.

(4)   a. $\forall x\, P(x) \supset R(x)$ — conditional, correct (but not very interesting)
      b. $\forall x\, R(x) \supset P(x)$ — conditional, wrong (cf. (2))
      c. $\forall x\, P(x) \leftrightarrow R(x)$ — biconditional = '(4a) & (4b)', wrong (cf. (2))

Where P = 'Present Perfect', R = 'present Result', and x is a variable over sentences which report a past event.

     In English translation, (4a) could be paraphrased as something like this: For any English sentence, if it is in the present perfect (and if it contains the "right sort of verb," a condition to which we shall return below), it will express the present result of the past event that is reported in it. (1) above is such an English sentence. Notice that (4a) says nothing about the interpretation of any other type of sentence which reports a past event, such as, for example, a sentence like (2) in the past tense. Therefore, on this reading, RPR would not be a terribly exciting rule of English, as it would be unable to distinguish between the meaning of (1) and the meaning of (2). Indeed, it is rarely assigned such a flimsy and uninspiring interpretation in grammars. But it sometimes is, as in Greenbaum and Quirk (1990:52), where it is said that "the use of the present perfect for recent events **may imply** that the result of the event still applies" (emphasis mine). This is a rare example of a completely vacuous rule. It does

not mean anything at all, since to say that something "may" be the case implies saying that it may or may not be the case, and that much is 100% predictable about any aspect of the meaning of any sentence.

(4b) is a more interesting alternative reading that can be assigned to RPR. RPR on this reading means that the present result of a past event can only be expressed in a sentence which reports that past event in the present perfect. As (2) above shows, this is not true. On the last possible reading, (4c), RPR is read as a logical biconditional, meaning that an English sentence which reports a past event is understood as implying that its present result still obtains if and only if that sentence is in the present perfect. This precludes that any such sentence in the past tense have such an implication. Again, as (2) testifies, that is not correct. To summarize, RPR is correct only on a pedestrian and practically meaningless reading, and it is wrong on both remaining alternative interpretations, of which the biconditional reading is clearly of most interest and, perhaps, the one that is generally intended, but flawed, in descriptions of English.

3 Predicates that allow a resultative reading

Let us return now to a condition noted above, which is rarely made clear in connection with the resultative interpretation of sentences that report a past event—either in the present perfect, as in (1), or in the past tense, as in (2). The condition in question has to do with the predicate of such reports and the type of event reported. As Quirk et al. (1985:193) note, "the… connotation, that the result of the action still obtains, applies to dynamic conclusive verbs…, ie verbs whose meaning implies the accomplishment of a change of state." What Quirk et al. call dynamic conclusive verbs are otherwise known as predicates denoting accomplishments, such as e.g. *dismantle, run a mile, walk to school, paint a picture, grow up,* etc., and achievements, such as e.g. *arrive, recognize, find, win, stop, start, resume, be born*, or *break a leg*, etc., in Vendler's (1967) typology of events. These two subcategories of events share some important properties—they inherently bring about a change of state, which is their 'result', when the event is completed, reaching its culmination point (cf. Kiefer 1994, 2009, Vendler 1967).

Note that accomplishments and achievements are not categories of language but subcategories of eventualities in speakers' models of the world. This implies that speakers do construct models of the world, which include theories of events, among other things, perhaps very much like Vendler's (1967), a reasonable assumption. A speaker with a theory of eventualities will understand that every time an accomplishment or achievement, such as someone breaking a leg, occurs and is completed, reaching its culmination point, the world will have changed as a consequence of the completion of the event. In our example, there will be a broken leg. To know such things is not a matter of speakers' knowledge of English syntax but a matter of what we know about the bones in our legs and other parts of the body, how such bony parts break when they do, etc. Such elements of knowledge can then feed our innate logical faculty which allows us

to draw all sorts of inferences from them, none of which is a matter of language or syntax either (cf. Crain and Khlentzos 2008).

Grammar cannot express such things as the present result of a past event. Whenever such "elements of meaning" are understood, they are inferred in part from what we know about the world and in part from ideas conveyed by a sentence, such as the idea of a completed event, a matter of syntax, more specifically, a matter of aspect. The latter is indeed a matter of language. But whatever we know about our legs and the bones in them is not. In English, for instance, a sentence is always marked for its aspect. The two examples above, (1) and (2), are both perfective, which means that the events they report are described as completed. Therefore, not surprisingly, both imply that the resultant state, 'Her leg is broken', brought about by the completion of the achievement reported obtains following the completion of the events. How such resultant states are or are not interpreted as 'relevant to the present' is a more complex matter. We turn to that directly.

4 Understanding reports of past events

How speakers of a language intend and understand reports of past events is as much, or more, a matter of principles of cognition and communication as it is a matter of knowledge of language. As pointed out above, understanding the 'present relevance' of the result of a past event is not a matter of syntax at all. None of that is surprising. Indeed, it would be surprising if the division of labor among cognitive faculties in the human mind were different. It would indeed be surprising, for example, to find that such notions as the 'result of a past event' or its 'present relevance' were somehow coded in the grammar of a language. If this were the case, we would expect that it may be coded in different ways in different languages, or that it is perhaps not coded at all in the language of some community and therefore members of that community cannot communicate such ideas, or that the English present perfect is the realization of some language universal designed for the expression of that notion, with counterparts to be found in all languages. None of that seems to be true. In fact, you do not need to talk about past events at all in order to understand how some of them may or may not have brought about changes in the world, some of which are perhaps relevant to the present. You do not even need any language to understand such matters. Many animals appear to know such things without any language or the ability to communicate with one another verbally.

It is much more plausible to assume that a speaker's knowledge of language interacts with other language-independent cognitive domains in the computation of such complex ideas as the 'present relevance of a past event'. Two such domains stand out as particularly relevant for the understanding of the notions we are discussing, in addition to a person's knowledge of language—their model of the world and their (largely) implicit knowledge of the principles of communication.

Assume, then, that a speaker (S) reports (1) to a hearer (H). Both S and H possess a model of the world (SM and HM, respectively), which includes a theory of events along the lines of Vendler (1967). This much, or this little, immediately accounts for how both S and H understand the resulting state (RS) brought about by the past event reported in (1), or in (2), for that matter, as discussed above.

What remains to be explained is how sentences like (1), or (2), may be specifically intended by S to get H to understand RS and to get H to understand that that is S's specific intention or communicative goal. In order to account for this, we need to assume that S and H construct what Givón (2005:7) calls "mental models of other minds" and that such models are constantly updated, meaning that S and H regularly update their mutual assumptions about what the other knows (ibid., p. 104). Given S's model of HM, he expects H to infer RS brought about by the event reported in (1) or (2). Given H's model of SM, he too assumes that S would be justified in expecting H to infer RS. Given these conditions, H would be justified in inferring that that is indeed S's expectation or intention, i.e., for H to infer RS.

Given that both (1) and (2) report a past achievement that brings about a resultant state, the scenario sketched so far works for both. But (1) and (2) are slightly different. An important difference between them is that (1) reports an event as "news out of the blue," which is not necessarily the case in (2), though possible. To put it in terms of the system of assumptions sketched above, (1) is natural only if S assumes that HM does not contain a representation of the event reported in (1) prior to S actually saying (1) to H. In other words, for (1) to be natural, S must assume that, before it is actually reported, H cannot identify the representation of the event described in (1), as it is simply not there in HM.

(2) is slightly different. Whereas (1) is natural only under the conditions just discussed, (2) is natural in either of two different scenarios. One is very similar to the conditions just sketched for (1), modulo the contribution of the adverb *yesterday* to HM. The other is radically different from the conditions under which (1) is natural in that in this alternative scenario S assumes prior to his report about the past event that its representation is already there in HM. Once it is there, it can be identified as specific or unique, provided that the information about the event that is necessary for its identification is already available in HM or else it is supplied. This is precisely the alternative natural communicative goal S may specifically intend to achieve in (2)—supply H with that information, the time of the event reported.

All this is easy to misunderstand. It is indeed generally misunderstood as a choice determined by whether the time of a past event is or is not known. That is a serious misunderstanding on at least two different levels. First, note that it is pointless to talk about the knowledge of the time of a past event without specifying whose knowledge is meant. If it is S's knowledge, as is generally tacitly assumed, it is irrelevant. Regardless of what S knows about the event reported in (1) or (2), (1) is always a possible choice, even if S knows exactly

when the event occurred. What decides the choice between (1) and (2) is not what S knows about the event but what S assumes H knows about it. If this reminds some readers of the choice or contrast between definite and indefinite noun phrases, that is no coincidence. The choice or contrast between (1) and (2) is essentially of the same nature, as noted early by Leech (1971).

He very clearly points out that "with 'event verbs', the Present Perfect may refer to some **indefinite happening in the past**: …All my family *have had* measles" (Leech 1971:32, bold mine), where *indefinite* can be understood in the regular sense, meaning that S assumes that the event is not identifiable as specific or unique in HM.

Leech adds, "At first glance, it looks as if there is **no element of 'present involvement' in this use of the Present Perfect, any more than there is in the Simple Past**. But in fact, a more precise definition of the indefinite past use must indicate that a period of time leading up to the present is involved here… the 'indefinite past' definition must be revised, and more exactly formulated as 'at-least-once-in-a-period-up-to-the-present'. This longer wording… adds nothing material to the more concise label 'indefinite past'" (Leech 1971:32, emphases mine).

He is absolutely right about the first point. Take our examples, (1) and (2). Indeed, the resultant state brought about by the event reported in them is no more relevant to the present in (1) than it is in (2). His second remark about "the indefinite past", however, is a misunderstanding. What is decisive here is not the indefiniteness of "the past" or of some past time but the indefiniteness of the event, which turns on S's assumptions about its identifiability in HM. His final, somewhat self-critical remark is justified. The "longer wording" of "a-period-up-to-the-present" adds nothing of interest, as such a period is simply called "past."

5 Some concluding remarks

Steven Pinker's book on "The Language Instinct" opens thus: "I have never met a person who is not interested in language. I wrote this book to try to satisfy that curiosity" (Pinker 1994:7). The grammatical structure of neither of these two opening statements is surprising or unnatural. The present perfect in the first is not unexpected. But the past tense in the second ought to be if the standard claims about the resultative perfect were right, on the only interesting implicitly contrastive reading which implies denying the existence of the "resultative past." Aside from citations like the present one, which are completely irrelevant for obvious reasons, the only way anyone can read the statements just quoted is by reading Pinker's book in which they were printed, the result of the action reported in the second statement in the past tense. Note, in addition, that the time of writing or completing the book is not specified, nor does it matter at all from the reader's perspective. These properties of the meaning associated with the second statement under discussion combined with RPR would dictate that the

sentence ought to be formulated in the present perfect. That it is not shows that RPR is flawed. Notice, however, that the structure of both sentences is consistent with what Leech (1971) suggested early on—the "resultative" present perfect occurs in the description of indefinite past events. Any other aspect of meaning that users of English understand, including the 'present relevance' of some resultant state, is a matter of "pragmatic inference," which involves interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive domains in the human mind, including speaker-hearers' mental models of the world and of "other minds."

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