

The present perfective paradox across languages

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This talk starts from the observation that, in many genetically and geographically unrelated languages, there is a remarkable restriction on the use of the present tense to refer to dynamic or perfective situations that are happening at the time of speaking – a phenomenon called the ‘present perfective paradox’ (Malchukov 2009; De Wit 2017). With stative and imperfective situations, on the other hand, there are no such alignment problems. Russian, for instance, is a case in point: the so-called present tense can be used with imperfective verbs to refer to the present; with perfective verbs present-tense morphology typically yields a future reading. In this presentation, I will analyze the manifestation of this present perfective paradox in English, French, the English-based Surinamese creole language Sranan, and a variety of Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech, and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian), thereby adopting an epistemic approach to temporal and aspectual categories (e.g. Langacker 1991). The analysis starts from the assumption that there is a cognitive constraint on the alignment of bounded situations in their entirety with the time of speaking, and that this constraint is linguistically reflected in the fact that it is difficult to use present perfective constructions with dynamic verbs to report present-time events. On the basis of a detailed study of corpus data and native-speaker elicitations, I argue that languages have developed a variety of strategies to tackle this alignment problem. One type of solution is to assign a non-present interpretation to present perfective constructions: a future interpretation (‘prospective strategy’; found in, e.g., Russian), a past interpretation (‘retrospective strategy’; e.g., in many creole languages), or a habitual/generic interpretation (‘structural strategy’; e.g., in English). I will propose a variety of diachronic, contact-related, and cognitive explanations to account for which specific strategy is chosen and for the cross-linguistic variation in this respect.

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