

A Comparative Study on Aspect in English Present Perfect and Korean Past Tense Affix '-았-' -focused on Topic Time

Ji-Hye Lee, Mun-Koo Kang*

Dept. of English Education, Kongju National University, 56 Gongjudaehak-ro,
Gongju-si,
Chungcheongnam-do, 314-701, Republic of Korea
yjh2488@naver.com, kangmunkoo@hanmail.net

Abstract. Aspect is one of the verb's grammatical categories pertained to time. Aspect, which is distinct from Tense, denotes various approaches conveying the progress of contextual time. In terms of the history of studies on Tense, two theoretical approaches have been applied to explain the incoherence between Tense and Time. The first one is to express the past and the future in an ostensive way via establishing the context on the basis of the present. The other one is to adopt these three temporal variables. The approaches are applied to ascertain the feature and usage of present perfect tense of English language and prefinal ending '-았' of Korean language in this study. Not only the grammatical categories of two languages but also the similarity and difference between two languages are discussed according to the definition and classification of contextual time, reference time, and topic time. It would satisfy the curiosity about whether it is eligible to postulate that present perfect tense of English and prefinal ending '-았' of Korean share the same linguistic features. Conclusively, it would guide Korean English learners to clarify Tense via ratifying the definition of the three temporal forms from the perspective of Aspect.

Keywords: tense, aspect, present perfect, past tense, contextual time, reference time, topic time.

1 Introduction

Natural language which human owns has developed various means so that it could describe the space-time characteristics. However, the imbalance of treating space and time has been criticized. A speaker has few restrictions on recognizing and expressing space. But, in regard of time, it appears differently. A verb of each language includes temporal information necessarily. Tense and Aspect take the major roles in encoding the time information. Then, why does the imbalance of time occur more often than

* Corresponding Author: Department of English Education, Kongju National University,
56 Gongjudaehak-Ro, Gongju-Si, Chungcheongnam-Do, 314-701 South Korea
E-mail: kangmunkoo@hanamil.net

that of space? Space and time are considered as the basis of every person's recognition and experience. The reason time is more relevant to the structural organization of language than space is uncertain but many studies have been performed to clarify why each language has different means to express time.

Recognizing that each language has different means of expressing time, this study is performed so that it could define the universal concept of time and discover Tense established in the frame of time and Aspect, that is, the progress established by external world. Moreover, it would help Koreans to understand Tense precisely through describing the similarity and difference between each language's time expressions.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Aspect

The term, Aspect, was originated from Russian, *vid*, but it was translated in French. As every Slavic language, most of Russian verbs have two forms in a morphological way: perfective and imperfective. Many linguists accept the broad concept of Aspect. According to this, language can own various means of indicating the progress of the context, regardless of which status the context takes in terms of time. One of these means is what they call Aspect.

2.2 Features of Aspect

What linguists have focused on in their studies is how to define the situational progress and a variety of means describing the context more precisely. There exist many descriptions of Aspect in the prior studies, but they can be simplified as two features.

1. Recognizing the context as perfective, imperfective, or progressive.
2. Recognizing the context from external perspective or internal perspective.

2.3 English present perfect as Aspect

There have remained many suggestions regarding perfect as Aspect. This study aims at comparing English present perfect with Korean past tense, premising that each language tense form has different tense system. Accordingly, it is required that perfect is considered as Aspect regardless of discussing whether perfect is eligible to be considered as Aspect or Tense.

Givón (1981, 1984) is a linguist who tried to integrate Tense with Aspect in terms of the grammatical category of present perfect. He suggested that present perfect is pertinent to Tense features: time axis, sequentiality and precedence.

His point lies on the correlation among four factors of present perfect: perfectivity/accomplishment, lingering, current relevance, anteriority and counter-sequentiality. He, furthermore, suggested the following hypothesis to explain overlaps among four characteristics based on pragmatic inference, pointing out the fact that any features can be more distinct in the specific context.

1. Perfectivity > Anteriority : if an event is terminated before some time axis, that event must have preceded that time-axis.
2. Anteriority > Counter-sequentiality : if an event precedes another event in real time but follows it in narrative report, that first event must then be out-of-sequence.
3. Counter-sequentiality > Relevance : if an event occurs counter-sequentiality in narrative report, it
Must be relevant to a later point in time-later than its original time-point in the natural sequence.
4. Perfectivity > Current relevance : if an event is constructed as having a terminal boundary relative to some time-axis, then event must surely be relevant to that time-axis. (Givón 1984: 283-284)

3 Three Definition of Tense

3.1 Contextual Time Figure 1. Contextual time recognized by the speaker

The context of discourse verbalized is the notional projection of real-time situation. Here, the real context is comprehended via the spatiotemporal notion frame. On this frame, the contextual time is schematized, being adjacent to the time-axis indicating temporal progress. In this diagram, the totality of context can be schematized with the speaker's perspective located on the outside of the contextual domain. It is because the speaker's perspective can exist anywhere, if it is the outside of the contextual domain, as seen in the following diagram.

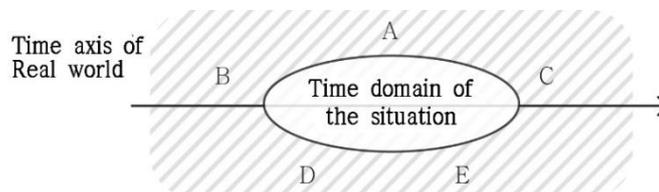


Fig. 1. Contextual time recognized by the speaker

The diagram above does not set the spatiotemporal status of the speaker's perspective so that the concept of totality is likely to be recognized in a vague way. If

human recognition is based on the spatiotemporal frame, the speaker's perspective cannot exist outside of it. Since it is impossible to recognize something outside of the spatiotemporal frame, it is plausible to schematize the speaker's perspective having specific status in the frame.

3.2 Reference Time

Reference time is the concept suggested by Reichenbach (1947); reference time is distinguished from contextual time in temporal terms. Reichenbach (1947) qualified reference time with many meanings. As the evaluation of his accomplishment depends on whether the significance of existence of reference time is accepted or not, the significance of reference time appears manifest in the system of Reichenbach's three tense system. From the perspective of perfect, the probability that one time-point prior to discourse could be related to another time-point in the past is sufficient. Dinsmore (1982: 217) suggests that this definition of perfect is reasonable, many linguists analyze it by similar means. For example, Jespersen (1924: 20) suggests that present perfect affords means of describing about the present, occurring in the past. Twaddell (1965), also, suggests that present perfect is providing the connection between the past and the present, and that past perfect is providing the connection between the past and the follow-up events. Both suggestions are similar to Reichenbach (1947)'s analysis. Reichenbach (1947) could not establish the standard of referential point, but he founded the fundamental of explaining the semantic difference which cannot be clarified only with the status of contextual time or discourse time.

- (1) a. Jane had arrived.
b. Jane will have arrived.
c. Jane has arrived.

3.3 Topic Time

Klein (1994) suggested that reference time would be the time when a speaker discusses previous events. His definition of Tense starts with the recognition that the concept of Tense suggested before promotes the disagreement between the form and the meaning. He pointed out that the verbal forms do not indicate the contextual end-point and the contextual start-points are combined with the future tense although they do not exist in the future in sentences. As seen in his points, Tense should be defined according to the moment the speaker mentions; it can precede the discourse, share the similarities, or follow it.

Topic time in English perfect is regarded as the time-point when a speaker decides the time-point of the event occurring subjectively. This time-point is described differently in every perfect tense, but in present perfect, it corresponds to the time-point of utterance. That is, present perfect treats the event occurring in the past from the present perspective, but simple past tense treats it restricted with the past. Therefore, the contextual time of simple past is just the mark of the simple context

and event of the past, not dealing with the speaker's perspective.

- (2) a. I called Jane yesterday.
b. I have called Jane this morning.
- (3) a. 어떤 남자가 바닥에 누워 있었다.
b. 밖에 꽃이 피었어.
c. 너 죽었어.

In the case of (2a), the time-point when speaker's judgment is specified precedes the utterance, relying on Klein(1994)'s suggestions. However, it is impossible to ascertain if the context includes the utterance time or not in this sentence. According to Comrie(1985)'s definition of Tense, simple past displays only its anteriority, not whether it has relevance to the present or the future in the sentence. Then, from the Korean point of view, the difference of between Klein(1994)'s definition and Comrie(1985)'s definition implies that they are not essentially different but they can be different depending on the prosperity and restriction of each verb. As two suggestions share the prerequisite condition that Tense does not clarify continuity of the real-time context in the sentence, whether it is plausible to consider the time-point which Tense form indicates as contextual time or topic time is the remaining task. In the case of (3b), only with the concept of topic time, it is difficult to consider the sentence describing the present status. It is because time that the speaker describes is likely to be in the past as the verbalized tense, not including the present. When it comes to this kind of sentence, the approach must accompany the concept of Aspect. If topic time is defined as the duration from the past to the present, it cannot be comprehended, either.

4 Conclusion

Aspect denotes the perspective on the context from the outside of time-axis. There are perfect Aspect and lexical semantic Aspect as basic unit of Aspect. Perfect Aspect conveys not the complete of the behavior but the total context. Lexical semantic Aspect conveys different intention depending on the lexical item, verb, used in a sentence.

According to the definition of Tense, the features and usage of English present perfect and Korean prefinal ending '-았-' have been approached in this study. It categorizes Tense as contextual time, reference time, and topic time, thereby comparing two concepts.

Premising that not only tense but also aspectual concept should be understood in comprehending time, the difference of usage and meaning of Tense in the utterance has been categorized. It is suggested that the decision of Tense depends on how the speaker recognizes the context rather than the existential status of the context.

References

1. Comrie, B.: Tense. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1985)
2. Dinsmore, J.: The Semantic Nature of Reichenbach's Tense System. *Glossa* 16, 216-308 (1982)
3. Givón, T.: Tense-Aspect-Modality: The Creole proto-type and beyond. In P. Hopper (ed), *Tense and Aspect: Between semantics and pragmatics*, 115-166. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (1981)
4. Givón, T.: *Syntax*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (1984)
5. Jespersen, O.: *The philosophy of Grammar*. London: Allen&Unwin (1924)
6. Klein, W.: *Time in Language*. London: Routledge (1994)
7. Reichenbach, H.: *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. NewYork: MacMillan Co. (1947)
8. Twaddell, W. F.: *The English Verb. Auxiliaries*. Providence, RI: Brown University Press. (1965)