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Notes on the inferential present perfect

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Abstract

This paper reports on in-progress research on the inferential present perfect in Swedish, as in *Tjuven har uppenbarligen hoppat ut genom fönstret*. ‘The thief obviously jumped (lit. has jumped) out of the window’.¹ The use is put in a typological perspective and characterised as a case of ‘covert modality packaging’ or ‘smuggled modality’. It is also suggested that its possible range of meanings can be investigated from the point of view of modal concord. Not only does the inferential present perfect co-occur with other modal expressions but it is also dependent on them in examples with explicit and definite past time reference.

Keywords: evidential, inferential, modal concord, present perfect, Swedish

1. The inferential present perfect in Swedish

The present perfect in Swedish is similar to that of English in presenting a past event as currently relevant. The four types discussed by Comrie (1976: 56 - 61), which he illustrates with English examples, are: the perfect of result, the experiential perfect, the perfect of persistent situation, and the perfect of recent past. Swedish also has these uses:

- (1) *Jag har borstat tänderna.*
‘I have brushed my teeth.’ (Perfect of result)
- (2) *Jag har varit i Paris.*
‘I have been to Paris.’ (Experiential perfect)
- (3) *Jag har bott i Landskrona i sex år.*
‘I have been living in Landskrona for six years.’ (Perfect of persistent situation)
- (4) *Jag har precis kommit hem från jobbet.*
‘I have just come home from work.’ (Perfect of recent past)

The present perfect also occurs in inferential contexts both in English, as in (5) and (6) taken from Aijmer (1980: 136), and in Swedish, as in (7):

- (5) It has been raining (it has rained).
- (6) You have been eating garlic.
- (7) *Du har druckit igen! Jag känner lukten av alkohol.*
‘You have been drinking again! I smell the alcohol.’

The meaning here is close to ‘must have’. As Aijmer (1980: 137) explains, “the speaker cannot himself have witnessed the event, but he infers on the basis of the indications remaining at the present time that it was raining (the hearer was eating garlic etc.).” The traces of the past event in (5) - (7) are observable and easily interpretable at the time of utterance,

and the degree of reasoning on part of the speaker is low. However, in contrast to English, the use in Swedish extends to a range of evidential and epistemic contexts. A typical setting is a police investigation, as in (Thorell 1973: 125):

- (8) *Polisen tror att mördaren inte [har]sett flotten i mörkret.² Han har burit kroppen ner till stranden och det har varit hans avsikt att . . .*
 ‘The police believe that the murderer did not see (lit. has not seen) the raft in the dark. He must have carried (lit. has carried) the body to the beach and it must have been (lit. has been) his intention to . . .’

A further difference between Swedish and English relates to the possibility of explicit past time reference. The English present perfect is infelicitous when combined with a definite past time adverbial, as in:

- (9) * It has rained yesterday.

In section 5 we shall see that matters are more complex, but for now let us assume that both primary (non-modal) and modal uses of the English present perfect are restricted to examples where no definite point in the past is referred to explicitly. As for Swedish, this constraint applies to the primary uses. Thus, in a non-modal context it is not possible to say:

- (10) * *Jag har borstat tänderna igår.*
 *‘I have brushed my teeth yesterday.’

However, there are examples showing that the Swedish present perfect, in its modal use, under certain conditions is compatible with definite past time reference, as in (11) below (Kinnander 1973: 141, transl. Lindstedt 1983: 253):

- (11) *Under hela denna händelserika dag, den 11:e juli, har Andrée icke haft tid att göra mer än några korta anteckningar i sin dagbok.*
 ‘During all this eventful day, the 11th of July, Andrée did not have (lit. has not had) time to write more than a few short notes in his diary.’

Lindstedt (1983: 256) explains Kinnander’s example as follows:

Salomon August Andrée’s expedition by balloon to the North Pole in 1897 ended in disaster. The men’s bodies and their notebooks were not found until 1930. The sentence (originally from a book published in that year) is obviously an inference based on Andrée’s newly found notebook.

It must be noted, though, that native speakers differ in their readiness to accept sentences with definite past time adverbials, as we shall see in section 4.

The modal character of the present perfect is a well-known feature of not only Swedish but also the other Scandinavian languages. It has been observed by, for example, Thulstrup (1948), Haugen (1972), Kinnander (1973), Thorell (1973), Vannebo (1978), Lockwood (1977), Lindstedt (1983), Fretheim (1983), Glismann (1986), Davidsen-Nielsen (1990), Korell (1991), Giorgi and Pianesi (1997), Rothstein (2008), and Larsson (2009). Haugen observes the use in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese, and Icelandic. He states (1972: 136):

It is characteristic of all the Scandinavian languages, that while their main rule of timelessness in the perfect is the same as that of English, they differ by permitting a past time designation, which allows the expression of an inferential nuance.

Consider the following examples culled from the literature (translations unaltered):

- Norwegian** (Haugen 1982: 157)
- (12) *Hun har sett sin bror igår.*
 ‘She must (no doubt; I suspect) have seen her brother yesterday.’
- Danish** (Davidsen-Nielsen 1990: 167)
- (13) *Han har været fuld, da vi mødte ham i går. Jeg troede han var syg.*
 ‘He must have been drunk when we met him yesterday. I thought he was ill.’
- Faroese** (Lockwood 1977: 132)
- (14) *Baðir vóru afastir í einum bandi, og hann, ið fyrr er farin, hevur tikið hin við sær.*
 ‘Both were roped together, and (I suppose) he who first slipped off would pull the other one with him.’
- Icelandic** (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997: 119)
- (15) *Jón hefur farið klukkan fjögur.*
 ‘John has left at four.’

Kinnander (1973) remains the most comprehensive investigation. He supplies many examples from Swedish and observes the use in contexts such as investigations, historical evidence, inference from reasoning, literary evidence, second-hand information, and legal parlance. In addition to (11) above, consider (16) and (17) (Kinnander 1973: 129-130):

- (16) *På försommaren 1814 har Stagnelius säkerligen återvänt till hemmet i Kalmar.*
 ‘In the early summer of 1814 Stagnelius certainly returned (lit. has returned) to his home in Kalmar.’
- (17) *Bernadotte har troligen anlänt till Wien omkring den 8-9 oktober, några dagar före det efterlängttade fredsslutet med Österrike.*
 ‘Bernadotte probably arrived (lit. has arrived) in Vienna around 8—9 October, a couple of days before the longed-for peace with Austria.’

Kinnander (1973: 130) explains that in (17):

[. . .] the present perfect indicates what is reasonable to assume (N.B. *troligen* ‘probably’) according to evidence. Of course, the author could have written *anlände troligen* ‘probably arrived’, but the present perfect marks the character of the statement as a judgment from the author’s present standpoint.

2. Typological considerations

The inferential present perfect can be characterized as a case of ‘covert modality packaging’ or ‘smuggled modality’. That is, rather than being explicitly coded into the language in a grammatical way the present perfect is, as it were, hijacked to express evidential or epistemic notions. This covert strategy has been observed cross-linguistically. It is thus important to take a broad perspective and look at the phenomenon in the light of what

Izvorski (1997: 222) labels the ‘Perfect of Evidentiality’ (see also Plungian (2010: 42), and the references cited there, on “perfectoid evidential systems”). Izvorski (1997: 222) states:

In a number of languages from various language families, the morphology of the present perfect or a form historically derived from the present perfect, expresses a particular evidential category, one that indicates the availability of indirect evidence for the truth of a proposition [. . .].

In Swedish, the inferential present perfect is a pragmatic extension of the primary function as a perfect, but, as hinted at in the above quote, in some languages the perfect has developed into a grammaticalised evidential. This is one of the three possible paths of change for the category mentioned by Bybee and Dahl (1989: 73):

Three directions for further change are frequently attested (and a few others may be possible). One involves the development of evidential function in perfects, the other the development into a past or perfective marker, and the third the use of perfect categories to express remoteness distinctions.

That modal uses have been observed in both genetically and typologically distant languages, implies that universal pragmatic principles are at work. Comrie (1976: 110) remarks that the perfect and the inferential are similar in “that both categories present an event not in itself, but via its result”, and Lindstedt (1983: 255) succinctly points out that “semantically, inferentiality is current relevance the other way round, for causality is utilised in the opposite direction”. Thus, the relation between the perfect and the inferential is natural.

3. Modal concord

I suggest the possible range of meanings of the inferential present perfect can be investigated from the point of view of modal concord, which is the phenomenon where two modal markers interact to express the same modality. Modal concord (or its predecessor label ‘modal harmony’) was noted by Halliday (1970), Lyons (1977: 807-808), Bybee et al. (1994: 214-225), and Høye (1997). There are also more recent papers focused on this topic, such as Geurts and Huitink (2006), Zeijlstra (2008), Huitink (2012) and Larm (2012). Consider Huitink’s (2012: 404) examples below, where ‘must’ and ‘certainly’ in (18) harmoniously combine to express “what could also be expressed by using [19] or [20]” (Huitink 2012: 404):

(18) My eyes **must certainly** be deceiving me.

(19) My eyes **must** be deceiving me.

(20) My eyes are **certainly** deceiving me.

In addition to epistemic concord, as illustrated in (18) above, there are deontic and evidential modal concord, as in (21) and (22). Due to its contextual versatility ‘must’ can serve as an example also for the latter two types:

(21) Students **must obligatorily** register. (Zeijlstra 2008)

(22) **Evidently**, she **must** have talked to her mother about them [. . .] (Palmer 1990: 27)

Similar examples of modal concord could be given from Swedish.

This brings us to the main point of this section. As observed by Kinnander (1973) and Haugen (1972) the inferential present perfect in Swedish can, like English and Swedish modal auxiliaries, co-occur with evidential and epistemic expressions. In Haugen's wording (1972: 135), the inferential meaning is "reinforced by the adverbs or adjectives used, which indicate the author's degree of confidence in his inference". In my view, this collocability is a special case of modal concord, or, perhaps, 'modal reinforcement'. For example, note the evidential adverb *uppenbarligen* 'obviously' in (23) and the epistemic adverb *säkerligen* 'certainly' in (16), here repeated as (24). Example (25) illustrates a reportative context signalled by *enligt polisutredningen* 'according to the police investigation':

- (23) *Hon har uppenbarligen hoppat ut genom fönstret.*
'She obviously jumped (lit. has jumped) out of the window.'
- (24) *På försommaren 1814 har Stagnelius säkerligen återvänt till hemmet i Kalmar.*
'In the early summer of 1814 Stagnelius certainly returned (lit. has returned) to his home in Kalmar.'
(Kinnander 1973: 129)
- (25) *Tjuvarna har enligt polisutredningen kört fram till huset i bil.*
'According to the police investigation, the thieves drove (lit. have driven) all the way to the house by car.'
(Bank of Swedish, Press 76)

The wide range of collocability reflects the semantic flexibility of the inferential present perfect. Kinnander (1973: 134) lists the following adverbs or phrases:

Antagligen 'presumably'; 'probably', *förmodligen* 'presumably', *sannolikt* 'probably'; 'very likely', *troligen*; *troligtvis* 'very (most) likely'; 'probably', *synbarligen* 'obviously', *säkerligen* 'certainly'; 'no doubt', *måhända* 'maybe', *möjligen* 'possibly', *kanske* 'perhaps'; 'maybe', *således* 'consequently', *i själva verket* 'in reality', 'actually', *av allt att döma* 'to all appearances', *alla tecken tyda på* 'all signs indicate', *säkert är att* 'it is certain that', *ligger i öppen dag* 'it is evident', *framgår obestriddligt* 'is indisputably evident', *är knappast tvivel underkastat* 'is hardly subject to doubt', *synes visa* 'seems to show', *synes troligt av* 'seems likely from', *varav är troligt att* 'from which it is likely to', *det är troligt* 'it is likely', *det förefaller troligt* 'it seems likely', *vi ha vittnen att åberopa* 'we have witnesses to refer to', *tyckas vittna om att* 'seems to show that', *kunna vi sluta oss till* 'we can conclude', *kan slutas därav* 'can be concluded from'

Thus, the possible spectrum of meanings can be investigated from the point of view of modal concord or modal reinforcement.

4. Compatibility with definite past time adverbials

The inferential present perfect does not only co-occur with other modal expressions but is also, at least in some cases, dependent on them. The relevant aspect here is the compatibility with past time adverbials such as *igår* 'yesterday'. It seems that sentences with such adverbials are felicitous only when the modal meaning of the present perfect is reinforced by other modal expressions. As a postgraduate student I conducted a pilot study (Larm 1999), which indicated that native speakers tend to accept more readily sentences with a modal adverb than those without, as exemplified in (26) and (27).

- (26) *Pelle har förmodligen varit på bio igår.*
'Pelle presumably was (lit. has been) at the cinema yesterday.'

- (27) ?? *Pelle har varit på bio igår.*
 ‘Pelle was (lit. has been) at the cinema yesterday.’

It should be noted that some speakers rejected (26) as well, even with the context explained. However, these observations need to be tested with more methodological sophistication than was available to me as a student. A further issue that requires a more rigorous investigation is how acceptability ratings change depending on whether the inferential present perfect occurs (with the appropriate context explained):

- 1) without both a definite past time adverbial and a modal reinforcer:
Tjuven har hoppat ut genom fönstret.
 ‘The thief has jumped out of the window.’
- 2) without a definite past time adverbial but with a modal reinforcer:
Tjuven har tydligen hoppat ut genom fönstret.
 ‘The thief has apparently jumped out of the window.’
- 3) with a definite past time adverbial, but without a modal reinforcer:
 ?? *Tjuven har arresterats igår.*
 ‘(lit.) The thief has been arrested yesterday.’
- 4) with a definite past time adverbial and with a modal reinforcer:
Tjuven har tydligen arresterats igår.
 ‘(lit.) The thief has apparently been arrested yesterday.’

5. A brief note on English

I noted in the introduction that the inferential use in English is more restricted than in Swedish, and that it is, even in modal contexts, incompatible with past time adverbials. Haugen (1972) notes this difference and observes errors made by Scandinavian translators. He states (1972: 138):

Scandinavian has available to it a use of the perfect tense as a replacement of the preterite when a modal nuance of “inference” rather than “fact” is to be implied. In English this nuance must either be suppressed (“implied”) or else expressed by an explicitly inferential modal. The translator from Scandinavian to English needs to be aware of this difference.

Haugen is indeed right in pointing this out. It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that the use may be acceptable in some varieties of English. Ritz (2010) investigates the use of the present perfect in Australian police media reports, and presents examples of which some are similar to the Swedish ones in this paper. She also provides examples of what seems to be modal reinforcement. Note the ‘it appears’ and ‘allegedly’ in (28) and (29) ((Ritz 2010: 3405 and 3407).

- (28) It appears the deceased, who was the sole occupant of the first vehicle, has lost control of the car causing it to collide sideways with a tree.
- (29) Both offenders have then allegedly continued to kick the 35 year-old in the head.

The above sentences have past time reference albeit not expressed by time adverbials. Ritz also presents examples where a definite point in the past is stated, as in (Ritz 2010: 3407):

- (30) Police will further allege that at 4:15 pm on the same day the men have attended at an address in Winthrop.

6. A brief note on Japanese

The Japanese *te iru* form has four main uses: progressive, resultative, perfect and habitual (Shirai 2000: 333):

Progressive:

- (31) Ken ga utat-te i-ru.
Ken NOM sing-GER be-NPAST
'John is singing.'

Resultative state:

- (32) Mado ga ai-te i-ru.
window NOM open-GER be-NPAST
'The window is open.'

Perfect:

- (33) Ken wa hon o san-satsu kai-te i-ru.
Ken TOP book ACC three-CL write-GER be-NPAST
'Ken has written three books.'

Habitual:

- (34) Ken wa saikin kuruma de gakkoo e it-te i-ru.
Ken TOP lately car INST school DIR go-GER be-NPAST
'Ken is going to school by car these days.'

Some scholars also mention an evidential use. In the following example from Inoue (quoted in Binnick 1991: 388, glosses modified) the conveyed meaning is said to be that the speaker has obtained the information indirectly. If the speaker had had direct knowledge of John's being fired she would have used the past tense form. It should be noted, however, that the native speakers I have asked differ in their judgments.

- (35) John wa 1960-nen ni General Motors o yame-sase-rare-te i-ru.
John TOP 1960-year in General Motors ACC quit-CAUS-PASS-GER be-NPAST
'John was (lit. has been) laid off by General Motors in 1960.'

Teramura (1984: 132—35) discusses what he calls the "retrospective" use of *te iru* and provides the following examples (glosses and translations added by me):

- (36) Kasai Zenzoo wa Akutagawa jisatsu no yokunen, shoowa-3- nen 7 gatsu
Kasai Zenzoo TOP Akutagawa suicide GEN next year 1928 July
ni shin-de i-ru
in die-GER be-NPAST.
'Kasai Zenzoo died (lit. 'has died') in July, 1928, the year after Akutagawa's suicide.'

- (37) Sono hi no gozen kaigi wa hachiji ni hajimat-te i-ru.
that day GEN imperial conference TOP eight o'clock at start-GER be-NPAST
'On that day the imperial conference started (lit. 'has started') at eight o'clock in the morning.'

Teramura (1984: 135): observes the use in contexts such as detective stories; history of literature; studies on writers; records of sports, the game of go, and Japanese chess; and news commentary.

I have yet to investigate several questions concerning this use, the most important one being: Are the uses in (35) - (37) modal in the same sense as the inferential present perfect or do they express something else? If they are modal it would be worthwhile to systematically compare this use of *-te iru* in Japanese with the Swedish inferential present perfect.

7. Future research

Although the inferential present perfect in Scandinavian languages has been described, there still remains both theoretical and empirical work. I plan to investigate specific issues pertaining to the inferential present perfect, such as modal concord and the compatibility with definite past time adverbials, using both qualitative (native speaker intuitions) and quantitative (corpora) methods. Such an investigation would be important not just for the language-specific analysis of Swedish, but would also contribute to our general understanding as to what range of modal meanings can be expressed by contextual uses of perfects and resultatives.

¹ My interest in inferential uses of the present perfect goes back to my time as a postgraduate student at the University of Tokyo, where I wrote a master's thesis on this topic (Larm 1999), and, as mentioned in section 4, I also conducted a pilot study. The thesis was never published. My theoretical and methodological views have developed since then, but I have recycled some parts of the thesis.

² In Swedish, the auxiliary verb *ha* 'have' of the perfect construction can be omitted in subordinate clauses.

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