The role of pragmatic and formal criteria in the categorization of past participles in Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian

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Introduction

Since the ancient grammarians, the precise categorisation of the past participle has been an issue of debate. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that the past participle shows the structural and semantic features of both adjectives and verbs. The hybrid nature of the past participle is most apparent in constructions with the stative verb to be, as is illustrated with the following example sentence taken from Dutch:

(1) Het zwembad is gesloten.
    the swimming.pool is closed
    ‘The swimming pool is closed.’

The past participle gesloten ‘closed’ in this example can be analyzed as either an adjective within a copula construction or as a lexical verb within a passive construction (a.o. Wasow 1977). The dual structural analysis of the past participle is argued to correlate with a distinct semantic interpretation (a.o. ANS 1997). The adjectival analysis of the past participle highlights the present state the subject is in as a result of a process in the past that is denoted in the past participle (the resultative interpretation) whereas the verbal analysis focuses on the past process itself in the past participle (the processual interpretation). What is striking about the example sentence, is that the different structural analysis and semantic interpretation of the past participle has remained contextually unmarked in Dutch.

On ambiguous past participles in Dutch

In my current research, the question is addressed how both semantic interpretations of the past participle in Dutch should be accounted for in the absence of any contextual marker that indicates a choice for one or the other interpretation. This question is not only of methodological importance in my own ongoing study into the historical development of the perfect and passive construction (i.e. what interpretation should the past participle get in each historical attestation of the studied constructions, cf. Coussé 2008, forthc. a, b, c) but also contributes to the theoretic discussion into the precise semantic status of the past participle in general.

In Coussé (2008, submitted), the semantic interpretation of the past participle is argued to be fundamentally ambiguous unless additional material indicates a preference. This rather accommodating standpoint towards ambiguity should be understood in the light of the conversational maxims of quantity of Grice (1975):
• Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange
• Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

In accordance with both pragmatic principles, the precise interpretation of the past participle is only specified through additional contextual information when this information is relevant for the goal of the conversation. In the following example (2), the resultative interpretation has an increased salience by adding the durational adverb al jarenlang ‘for years now’ and in example (3) the processual interpretation of the past participle has gained in prominence by adding the past time adverb gisteren ‘yesterday’ and the agent of the process door het stadsbestuur ‘by the city council’:

(2) Het zwembad is al jarenlang gesloten.
the swimming.pool is all years.long closed
‘The swimming pool is closed for years now.’

(3) Het zwembad is gisteren door het stadsbestuur gesloten.
the swimming.pool is yesterday by the city.council closed
‘The swimming pool has been closed yesterday by the city council.’

The exact nature of the contextual disambiguation process is currently being uncovered in corpus research in collaboration with dr. Gert De Sutter of the University College Ghent. De Sutter (2005) has developed for his doctoral thesis a disambiguation algorithm that classifies past participles on a continuous scale that ranges between a salient resultative and a salient processual interpretation. Preliminary results of this gradual classification method on a new sample of past participles in constructions with zijn ‘to be’ show that the interpretation of past participles does not solely cluster at the extreme resultative or processual end of the continuum but also shows intermediate values. The essentially gradual nature of the contextual disambiguation the past participle in Dutch can be insightfully represented by means of a continuum:

![Continuum](resultative) salient unspecified salient processual

Apart from its immediate methodological application in my ongoing research into the historical development of the perfect and passive (Coussé 2008, forthc. a, b, c), the newly developed gradual perspective on the disambiguation of the past participle turns out to be interesting new input into the more general discussion on the precise semantic status of the past participle.

**Confrontation with Swedish and Norwegian**

One important question for future research is how the uncovered gradual contextual disambiguation of the past participle should be reconciled with the fact that past participles in some languages display a clearly distinct adjectival and verbal formal coding. The state of the art literature has hardly paid any systematic attention to the
question how such a strictly binary coding system for past participles interacts with the presence of gradual contextual disambiguation criteria in actual language use. Should we expect adjectival and verbal formal coding to correlate neatly with the contextual criteria that point towards a salient resultative or processual interpretation, or, do mismatches occur in actual language usage between formal coding and pragmatic disambiguation, and if so, what do these mismatches imply? Another question is how past participles would be formally coded that have remained unspecified in terms of contextual disambiguation criteria.

During a prior stay as a guest researcher at the University of Gothenburg (August-September 2009), I had the opportunity to discuss the above theoretical reflections with dr. Ida Larsson of the Department of Swedish, who has recently defended her doctoral dissertation (Larsson 2009) on the historical development of the perfect in Swedish. Larsson pointed out to me some peculiar formal features of the past participles in Swedish and Norwegian that might be fruitful to exam in the light of the gradual contextual disambiguation of the past participle uncovered for Dutch.

Swedish and Norwegian are known for coding past participles formally as either adjectives or verbs by means of agreement, particle incorporation and word order (cf. NRG 1997, SAG 1999). In the next example sentences, it is illustrated how the past participle of ‘to pack’ either shows adjectival agreement in number and gender with the singular eter subject of the stative verb ‘to be’ or remains invariable as an infinite verb:

(4) Swedish

Bilen är *packed* och klar.
the.car.SG.UT is packed.SG.UT and ready.SG.UT

‘The car is packed and ready.’

(5) Norwegian

Bilen er *pakket* // packet og klar
the.car.SG.UT is packed.SG.UT packed and ready.SG.UT

‘The car is packed and ready.’

Note that Swedish only allows for adjectival past participles in constructions with *to be* whereas the past participle in the Norwegian is both compatible with an adjectival and a verbal coding in parallel *to be* constructions. Larsson (2009: 29) summarizes the difference between both languages in their formal coding of the past participle as follows: “Norwegian past participles appear to have more verbal properties, or less adjectival properties, than Swedish participles do, since they often lack adjectival inflection, and since they do not require that particles incorporate.”

This short sketch of Swedish and Norwegian past participles alone already suggests a quite complex interaction of the formal coding of the participles as being either verbs or adjectives and their contextual interpretation. On the one hand, the verbal coding of past participles in Norwegian might point to a higher salience of the processual interpretation
of the past participle in constructions with *to be* than in Swedish. On the other hand, the variation between adjectival and verbal coding in Norwegian might function as an additional disambiguation device along with the contextual disambiguation, whereas Swedish consistently codes past participles as adjectives irrespective of the contextual disambiguation criteria in the discourse. Only empirical corpus research into the concurrence of the formal marking of the past participle and contextual criteria that help to disambiguate those past participles, will provide some definitive answers to these hypothetical reflections for both Swedish and Norwegian.

**Proposal guest research at the University of Gothenburg**

I propose a six-months stay at the University of Gothenburg in order to set up and conduct a corpus study of the past participle in constructions with *to be* in both Swedish and Norwegian.

In the first two weeks of the research, an exhaustive inventory will be made up of the formal and semantic features of the past participle in Swedish and Norwegian on the basis of the existing literature and intuitions from expert native speakers. Special attention will be devoted to the formal features of the past participle in Swedish and Norwegian dialects, as considerable geographical distribution in the patterning of agreement, particle incorporation and word order has been reported in Larsson (2009: 26).

In the following four weeks, a geographically balanced sample of past participles in constructions with *to be* will be collected from the Nordic Dialect Corpus and Database. This dialect corpus consists of spontaneous speech data from dialects of the North Germanic languages across all of the Nordic countries. The Swedish and Norwegian audio recordings that will form the basis of my empirical research are all transcribed orthographically at this point. I will be able to rely on the expertise of the members of the ScanDiaSyn network in Gothenburg (http://uit.no/scandiasyn/goteborg) in order to collect and interpret the dialect data effectively.

In the next four weeks, the collected sample of past participles will be analyzed for formal features (± agreement, ± particle incorporation, word order, etc.) and for the occurrence of contextual criteria that have been demonstrated to contribute to disambiguating past participles in Dutch (± agent, ± duration adverb, etc.). Moreover, the disambiguation algorithm that has been developed for Dutch past participles, will be applied in an adapted version on the Swedish and Norwegian corpus data. The results from the linguistic analysis will first be interpreted in a qualitative way before being subjected to statistical tests and models (such as the logic regression model) in order to determine correlations between formal features and pragmatic factors.

Finally, the results of the empirical study will be made available to the linguistic community in the form of presentations and publications. I would like to present this
work at a local linguistic event in Scandinavia (e.g. Scandinavian Conference on Linguistics, Conference for of the Scandinavian Association for Language and Cognition) and at an international conference (e.g. 12th International Pragmatics Conference in Manchester 2011, 12th International Conference on Cognitive Linguistics in Xi’an 2011). Moreover, I would like to publish two international journal articles that respectively focus on the geographical patterning of the formal and semantic properties of the past participle in Swedish and Norwegian (e.g. in Nordic Journal of Linguistics) and on the theoretical implications of the study on the semantic status of the past participle (e.g. Linguistics).

In addition to conducting the proposed case study (taking approximately three or four months), I would like to reserve the remainder of the suggested six months at the University of Gothenburg for working on my ongoing research on the historical development of the perfect and passive in Dutch.

References

Coussé, E. (forthc. a) The diachronic development of the have-perfect in Dutch. In: Diachronica.
Coussé, E. (forthc. b) Schematicization of the have-perfect and be-passive construction. In: Constructions.