The Discourse Functions of the English Present Perfect

The purpose of this study is to clarify the discourse functions of the English present perfect. The present perfect has a form *have* + *past participle*. Since Japanese grammar concerning time reference is different from English grammar, Japanese grammar has no grammatical form that corresponds exactly to the English perfect. In English we can understand whether the topic is located in past, present, or future time, judging from the form of the verb inflection in the matrix sentence. However, it is said that the present perfect conveys what a situation is now by saying what happened in the past, but more importantly, it communicates what the speaker feels now. It is necessary to know how to gain the proper information from the grammatical form so that the hearer can comprehend what the speaker intends to convey.

Although several studies have been made on the semantic meaning of the present perfect, there seems to be little agreement on the nature of the present perfect. ‘Current relevance’ is often taken up as the core concept of the present perfect, but it has not been explained conclusively. This paper is oriented to investigating the communicative effects of the present perfect and its discourse functions.

First, the time reference system of English is overviewed. The time reference systems vary with languages. English has an aspect, which is a verbal category mainly indicating the speaker’s view of the temporal structure of the situation the sentence describes, such as whether it is progressive or complete. In the present perfect sentence *have* serves as the tense auxiliary, and that past participle shows the speaker’s view that the past event is recognized as a definitive fact in his mind. The tense auxiliary *have* or *has* locates the sentence itself in present time, but at the same time, past participle describes the past event, so the present perfect partakes of past time and present time.

Next, current relevance is focused on. By considering previous studies, the current relevant situation sometimes includes the speaker’s expectation of what will happen in future time. We can say that current relevance connects future time as well as past time to present time. Artifacts were compiled from native informants on English and examined for meaning and use of the present perfect. The speaker’s interest is not on when the past event happened but on the fact that the situation which resulted from the past event has been held in a certain time up to now. The present
perfect sentence packages some information: it tells us what happened in past time, what is happening in present time, and what will happen in future time. A hearer gets a clue from the relevant circumstances of a speaker and himself, and understands the speaker’s intended feeling.

Lastly, illustrative sentences found in children’s picture book are scrutinized, in order to ascertain what discourse functions the present perfect sentences have. Two stories from “Frog and Toad Are Friends” written by Arnold Lobel are taken up as language materials. Since the stories are written in plain English and unfold through conversation between Frog and Toad, discourse can be analyzed in their utterances. The informant interpretations help us to grasp the nuances of meaning of the sentences, and communicative effects are clarified. In addition, the prosodic characteristics are examined by utilizing the audio book and we notice that the speaker’s stresses, tones and poses used in the present perfect sentences, help us interpret his feeling. I also utilize Concordance plot, which is a function of Antconc. Concordance plot demonstrates where the present perfect occurs and clusters during the course of stories. Data from this analysis suggest that the present perfect functions as a topicalization, and forms a turning point.

The present perfect is more than just a statement. It is no exaggeration to say that we have not fully understood it so far. It is true that have is not the modal auxiliary. However, since the form have + past participle profiles a certain duration in a speaker’s mind, a hearer can infer the speaker’s intimate feeling about the duration or the present situation. A hearer tries to confirm his interpretation of the speaker’s feeling, and the speaker tries to complement information to make the hearer understand his feeling. The present perfect exhibits a topic concerning the present situation and the interpretation of the present perfect sentences will prompt interactive conversation and build up a better understanding of the participants’ standpoint. This function of the present perfect should be paid more attention to.