

Presenting the ‘present’ – A comparative profile of the English Present (Tense)

Though the great wealth of published material no doubt corroborates Dahl’s (2000: 3) assertion that “it is natural that... ‘tense’ and ‘aspect’ should have attracted the attention of scholars earlier on”, the actual way in which this abiding academic interest is spread over the various individual tempo-aspectual categories appears to be somewhat less self-explanatory. For instance, while major linguistic studies have been dedicated to the analysis of what are traditionally labelled the ‘past’, the ‘perfect’ and the ‘future’, the ‘present’ has been treated much less thoroughly. That this should be so is hardly understandable if one considers the fact that the cognitive notion of ‘presentness’ represents a primary constituent of human temporal experience.

By explicitly focusing on the conceptual space of ‘presentness’ on the one hand and on the ‘absolute present tense’ (Declerck, 2006: 173) on the other, this paper sets out to compensate for the lack of in-depth studies devoted to the ‘present’ as realised in English, adopting a bidirectional meaning-form form-meaning approach, as propagated by Seiler (1995: 303), and building on the insights that have been put forward in cognitive, typological and language-specific research. As will be shown, it is the very intersection of these complementary approaches that provides the developing ground for an innovative analytical apparatus, defined as *meta-category*, that rests on universally valid parameters which make for its global cross-linguistic applicability, guaranteeing the commensurability of the terms employed as well as the overall comparability of the investigative results.

While the basic structure of the *meta-category* is thus derived from cognitive and linguistic regularities that abstract away from language-specific sources, the utilisation of this tool gets us down to the examination of concrete empirical data. Not only will the *meta-category* prove to constitute an excellent device for the systematisation of primary data gathered with the help of a questionnaire survey, but it will also allow for a principled inclusion of secondary data. The integration of these sources will result in an easily accessible graphical representation of the linguistic codification of ‘presentness’ in English, which, inventorying all appropriate tempo-aspectual markers and tracing their respective functions, will disclose a rather complex interplay of synthetic and periphrastic forms that will allow for an exact determination of the semantic space encompassed by the English Simple Present.

Finally, the thorough investigation into the expression of ‘presentness’ in English will be supplemented by a brief analogous consideration of a few other members of the Germanic language family, namely German, Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian, thereby introducing a distinctly comparativist perspective. Such a widening of focus will not only contribute new perspectives to the analysis of English by pinpointing areas in which the various object languages employ similar or different codification strategies, but it will also allow for a practical demonstration of the adequacy and versatility of the *meta-category*, showing it to provide an innovative and practicable framework with the potential to capture the notoriously elusive tempo-aspectual categories of all languages in a uniform and thus comparable way.

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