Another Piece of the Present Perfect Puzzle – Past Adverbials and the Present Perfect in Contemporary American English
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This talk will present the results of an acceptability judgment questionnaire study investigating the degree of perceived well-formedness of combinations of the Present Perfect (PrP) and a select number of time specifying adverbials (tsAdv) such as yesterday, two weeks ago and last Monday – terms that are traditionally considered illicit in this context (cf. e.g. Klein 1992; Declerck 2006).

The assertion that this co-occurrence is at least questionable is, of course, not unjustified. Since tsAdvs are terms that lexicalize temporal concepts that provide definite past reference, they seem ill-fitted to combine with a form that, in turn, prototypically provides a construal of past events as having relevance at speech time. Previous studies have shown, however, that combinations of the PrP and tsAdvs do indeed occur, albeit infrequently (e.g. Schlüter 2002). Their stable presence is noted across time (Hundt & Smith 2009) as well as variety (Werner 2013) and genre (see (1), (2) and (3)).

(1) Barton’s pair of Humvees have been airlifted into Limbe only yesterday. (COCA:1995: MAG: HarpersMag)
(2) The fun house has turned out its lights several hours ago and will not reopen until noon. (COCA:1992: FIC: VirginiaQRev)
(3) More than 10 years ago Salomaki et al. have demonstrated that epidural fentanyl provided better analgesia than intravenous fentanyl after thoracic surgery. (COCA: 2007: ACAD)

Rastall’s (1999: 81) assertion that these combinations “are not ‘errors' or the products of non-standard speakers”, is at least to some extent supported by the existence of such attested examples, but has yet to be explicitly put to the test. Also, little headway has been made regarding the circumstances that license these co-occurrences.

The present study is a step towards addressing this gap. A qualitative corpus study (using stratified sample sentences from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)) served as the basis for the identification of potentially relevant factors (ranging from ones traditionally perceived as central, like the Aktionsart of the verb phrase or the placement of the adverbial, to comparatively novel ones, like property ascription and explicit justification). Whether or not these factors bear out in the perception of native speakers of American English is tested on 222 participants in a contextual acceptability judgment comprising 36 target items modeled on examples from the COCA, balanced in Aktionsart, genre, placement and specificity of the tsAdv and PrP type. The filler items ranging in acceptability from probably seen as completely well-formed to very likely considered unacceptable serve as baseline items for the degree of perceived acceptability of the target items.

The study shows that, indeed, certain combinations of the PrP and tsAdvs are accepted as rather well-formed by native speakers of US American English. This the case especially if adverbs connected to prototypical uses of the PrP are equally present, or when addressees depend on the presence of the tsAdv for successful referent identification in restrictive relative clauses. A number of combined effects, such as the presence of an anchoring tsAdv at the beginning of a News cast have been identified as well. Whether this means that the PrP in US American English is developing into a past tense, as this form is wont to do (e.g. Van Gelderen 2011; Hengeveld 2011), where the constructions identified serve as bridging contexts, is discussed based on the data collected.

References


