



The grammaticalization of the *have* perfect in Dutch – a corpus study of contextual extension and semantic generalization

Evie Coussé

Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the grammaticalization of the *have* perfect in Dutch by means of a corpus study of historical legal texts dating from the middle of the thirteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century. The focus of the investigation is on the gradual extension of the *have* + past participle construction in contexts that were not attested before. The study of the status of the subject, the direct object and the past participle in the corpus shows that the construction is increasingly used in a wider array of contexts. Moreover, the corpus search indicates that meaning components of the *have* + past participle construction are lost in the process of contextual extension. More specifically, the construction is increasingly used in the background of the discourse in order to expand on events that happened before the time of reference.

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1. Introduction

Grammaticalization research has traditionally been interested in how grammatical function words develop out of lexical words (a.o. Meillet, 1912; Lehmann, 1995). A classical example of grammaticalization in this research tradition is the development of the perfect auxiliary *have* out of a lexical verb with the possessive meaning ‘have’ or ‘hold’ in the Germanic and Romance languages.¹ In recent approaches to grammaticalization, however, the research focus has shifted from isolated words to entire constructions, as is indicated by the present-day mainstream definition of grammaticalization:

As a term referring to a research framework, “grammaticalization” refers to that part of the study of language change that is concerned with such questions as how lexical items and constructions come in certain contexts to serve grammatical functions or how grammatical items develop new grammatical functions. (Hopper and Traugott, 2003, p. 1)

Given this broader view on grammaticalization, the historical roots of the *have* perfect are currently considered to lie in a construction with the possessive verb *have* and a past participle that functions as a complement to the direct object of the clause (a.o. Mitchell, 1985; Carey, 1994 for English; Oubouzar, 1974; Grønvik, 1986 for German; Kern, 1912; De Belder, 2005 for Dutch; Larsson, 2009 for Swedish; Vincent, 1982; Pinkster, 1987 for Romance). The semantic interpretation of this possessive construction is typically illustrated by means of the following present-day example (a.o. De Haan, 1991):

- (1) Peter **heeft** zijn haar sinds gisteren **kort geknipt**.
‘Peter has his hair cut short since yesterday.’

E-mail address: evie.cousse@gu.se

¹ Italicized *have* will be used throughout the article to refer to any reflex of the English verb *have* in Germanic and Romance languages, abstracting away from cross-linguistic and diachronic differences in realization.

The finite verb *have* in the example is a prototypical possessive verb, i.e. it expresses a relation between the human subject *Peter* and the concrete direct object *zijn haar* 'his hair' that are in each other's proximity and where the subject has active, physical control over the object (Langacker, 1978; Baron and Herslund, 2001). The past participle in the example designates the present end state that the direct object has reached as a result of the past process in the verb stem. The salience of this interpretation is highlighted by the time adverbial *sinds gisteren* 'since yesterday' that stresses the maintaining of the short state of *zijn haar* 'his hair' until the moment of speaking. This particular reading is referred to as the resultative interpretation (Nedjalkov and Jaxontov, 1988).

The resultative interpretation of the *have* + past participle construction is quite limited in compatible contexts of usage. First, the resultative interpretation of the past participle appears to be only compatible with discourse situations involving a process that leads up to a certain endpoint beyond which the process cannot continue (Nedjalkov and Jaxontov, 1988). Put differently, the end state that is profiled in the resultative interpretation of the past participle requires a telic discourse situation. Typically, the telicity of a discourse setting correlates with the Aktionsart in the main verb of the clause. In the verb typology of Vendler (1957), the resultative interpretation of the construction is compatible with achievements, that reach an inherent end point instantly (e.g. *ontploffen* 'to explode', *neerschieten* 'to shoot down'), and accomplishments, that require a longer process to arrive at the inherent end point (e.g. *bevriezen* 'to freeze', *sluiten* 'to close'). Next to limitations on the aspectual properties of the discourse situation, the resultative interpretation of the past participle also imposes certain requirements on the participants involved in the discourse. As a consequence of the resultative interpretation, the discourse needs to involve a direct object that undergoes the action or event in the verb stem and that is fully affected by the process at its end point.

The sketched resultative usage of the *have* + past participle construction is argued to be the historical source for the present-day *have* perfect. The perfect in Dutch is usually defined as expressing an event in the past which has continuing relevance for the present (a.o. ANS, 1997, Section 2.4.8.4). This semantic interpretation can be illustrated with the following example:

- (2) Peter **heeft** zijn haar gisteren **kort geknipt**.
'Peter cut his hair short yesterday'.

The finite verb *have* in this example expresses the more bleached abstract stative relation of the direct object *zijn haar* 'his hair' being within the 'sphere of influence' of the subject *Peter* (Langacker, 1978, p. 864). The past participle in the example profiles all the states within the process in the verb stem as it unfolds, not just the final state. In the literature, this interpretation is referred to as the processual interpretation of the past participle (a.o. Van der Wal, 1986, p. 126). The salience of this processual interpretation is highlighted by the time adverbial *gisteren* 'yesterday', that stresses the process in the past rather than the present result.

The processual interpretation of the past participle is less restricted in compatible contexts of usage than the resultative interpretation, which was only compatible with telic discourse situations that involve an undergoer participant. Since the processual interpretation of the past participle profiles all the states within the process in the verb stem, there is no compelling need to limit the discourse situation to telic situations (Nedjalkov and Jaxontov, 1988). Put differently, the perfect interpretation of the *have* + past participle construction is compatible with both atelic and telic past participles.² Furthermore, the processual interpretation of the past participle does not impose any restriction on discourse situations that involve an undergoer participant. Since the end state of the direct object is not profiled, this direct object does not necessarily have to be expressed in the discourse.

This short comparison of the meaning and contextual usage of the present-day *have* perfect and its source construction indicate that the modern *have* + past participle construction is compatible with much more contexts of usage. As a consequence, it can be hypothesized that the construction has been subject to contextual extension in the course of time. This hypothesis is corroborated by Hopper and Traugott (2003, p. 48) who indicate that "a rule change has occurred if (a) it has evidently spread from the individual and has been accepted by a group, and (b) the constraints of the former linguistic environment are no longer obligatory". Moreover, Carey (1994) and Larsson (2009) have presented some quantitative results that show that the *have* + past participle construction is increasingly used in a broader array of contexts in English and Swedish respectively.

Along with the expected contextual extension, it is hypothesized that the *have* + past participle construction undergoes meaning generalization in the course of time (cf. Bybee et al., 1994, p. 69). A comparison of the resultative interpretation with the perfect interpretation suggests that the latter expresses a more general meaning. The resultative interpretation, on the one hand, expresses the rather complex meaning that the direct object has reached a present state as the result of an action in the past. The perfect, on the other hand, refers primarily to a past action with only a general relevance to the present moment. The more general meaning of the *have* perfect implies that specific components of the resultative interpretation are bleached or lost along the process of grammaticalization.

In order to investigate the hypothesized contextual extension of the *have* perfect, an empirical study will be presented of the *have* + past participle construction and its contexts of usage using a corpus of Dutch historical texts spanning from the

² It should be noted that monovalent telic past participles with only an undergoer participant (e.g. *ontploffen* 'to explode', *bevriezen* 'to freeze') are excluded from the *have* + past participle construction. These monovalent telic past participles combine with the finite verb *zijn* 'to be' in standard Dutch in order to form a perfect (ANS, 1997, Section 2.3.2.8.iv).

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