Time in languages, languages in time

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1. Introduction

> *Of all the scientific intangibles*
> *that shape our lives,*
> *time is arguably the most elusive*
> *– and the most powerful.*
> (Langone 2000: 7, cited in Evans 2003)

Time, together with place, is one of the fundamental dimensions by which we define our 'space': linguistically, historically, socially, and culturally. As Evans (2004: 3) argues, "it seems almost impossible to conceive of what our world of experience might be like in the absence of time". Time appears to be a "natural" concept, as if "lying outside of society and beyond human control" (Warf 2008: 2) – recent scholarship across disciplines, however, reveals that, despite its seeming objectivity, it is very much a social construction and "every society develops different ways of dealing with and perceiving" time (ibid.). The topic of time and the various means languages have and use to express various time relations and concepts have always fascinated linguists. An important area of research covers, for example, metaphors (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999), and more broadly, what Evans (2004: 5) calls "the linguistic problem of time", i.e. "why do we use language pertaining to motion through three-dimensional space […] in order to think and talk about time?"

Arguably, time is primarily encoded lexico-grammatically through verbs – however, tense and aspect systems vary enormously across languages (see, e.g., Ayoun et al. 2018, Ebeling & Hasselgård 2015). Time can furthermore be encoded as part of the lexical meaning of verbs. But other word classes, too, express time and temporal relations, notably adverbs and prepositions. The word *time* itself is one of the most frequent nouns in English and its sheer frequency means it is part of numerous patterns, phrases, and constructions expressing a variety of temporal meanings. Linguistic expressions of time contribute to structuring our experience of the world by locating events on a time scale. In addition, temporality may be part of discourse organization, representing not only the temporal order of events but also the internal, consecutive, ordering of arguments or other portions of a text (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 263).

One way of looking at time in language, is therefore, through examining language structures, patterns and lexis expressing and encoding time. However, language itself is substantially influenced by time. Language change throughout time is one of its inherent characteristics – "all synchronic states are the result of a long chain of diachronic developments, the construction of complete explanations for linguistic structures requires attention to the diachronic dimension" (Bybee 2010: 945).

The cross-linguistic study of time expressions is fascinating because it can give "important insights into the conceptualisation of time" (Evans 2004: 5), but it is also interesting in itself. Although "all natural languages we know of have developed a rich repertoire of means to express temporality" (Klein 1994: 1), it is well known that languages vary substantially in the means of expressing time that they have available to them. The difference may be grammatical, such as the lack of grammatical tense in Chinese and of a grammaticalized progressive aspect in German and the Scandinavian languages. Or it may be lexical, as seen in Johansson's (2007: 46) case study of the Norwegian word *døgn* (meaning the 24 hours between one midnight and the next) and its English, German and French correspondences in the absence of an equivalent word. It may also be that two or more languages possess similar inventories of lexico-grammatical expressions of time, but select differently from them in certain situations, or that superficially similar lexico-grammatical categories express different temporal meanings, as in the case of the French 'passé composé' and the German 'Perfekt' on the one hand, and the English present perfect on the other (de Swart 2007).

Furthermore, languages and cultures may divide up the semantic space of 'time' differently. One example is lexical expressions of times of the day: according to Johansson (2007: 42), the English *morning* ends later than its Norwegian cognate *morgen*. Moreover, approximate references to times and periods may have different meanings: how long does an English 'moment' last in comparison with corresponding expressions in other languages? How come two weeks may be referred to as fourteen days in Norwegian (*fjorten dager*) but as fifteen (*quinze jours*) in French? And how do translators cope with such apparent mismatches between systems and preferences?

The present volume brings together a collection of articles on languages and time, most of which build upon papers presented at the ICAME40 preconference contrastive workshop, which took place in Neuchâtel in 2019 and was convened by the editors of this volume. The theme of the workshop was 'Time in Languages, Languages in Time'. The contents of the book reflect these dual perspectives, with Part 1 containing three papers dealing with aspects of language change over time, and Parts 2 and 3 containing eight papers contrasting various temporal expressions in two or more languages. The call for papers encouraged a phraseological

perspective on temporal expressions, and this is visible in several of the chapters which deal with multi-word units of various kinds: collocations, colligations, binomials and n-grams.

All the contributions are based on or driven by multilingual corpus data from both parallel and comparable corpora. The languages represented include English in comparison with one or more of the following: Czech, French, German, Mandarin, Norwegian and Swedish. The parallel corpora, containing original and translated texts as they do, allow the study of translation practices as well as the systematic cross-linguistic comparison of words, phrases and grammatical features. This is apparent in Levin and Ström-Herold's chapter, for example, which is concerned with translation correspondences across the three languages English, German and Swedish but also pays due attention to the comparison of binomials that are found in originals in all three languages. Similarly, Grisot and Sun's study of the translation of verb phrases between languages with and without tense marking shows how the examination of translation correspondences "may serve as a guide to the interpretation of meaning" (Johansson 2007: 30). The studies based on comparable corpora, on the other hand, need to establish the basis for comparison on something other than translation correspondence, such as frequency data and lexical similarity (as in Ebeling's chapter), syntactic function (as in Hasselgård's chapter), or extraction methods, as in the chapter by Malá et al. This paper also explicitly discusses the problem of identifying comparable multi-word units in typologically distant languages and of the potential contribution of n-gram-based approaches to contrastive linguistic studies (see also Granger 2014, Čermáková & Chlumská 2017).

The chapters display a range of methodological approaches, both corpus-based and corpus-driven. Several methodological challenges are addressed and solutions proposed. The results of the various studies testify to the existence of robust systematic correspondences between languages in certain cases, and the lack of such correspondences in others. They also testify to the pervasiveness and great diversity of temporal expressions across time, languages and genres and to the many referential and pragmatic functions that they serve.

2. Languages in time

Part 1 of the book, 'Languages in time', opens with an interdisciplinary chapter, grounded in both corpus linguistics and history research, by Tony McEnery, Helen Baker and Václav Brezina. In a study that has grown even more topical since it was first proposed, they approach the issue of slavery in Britain in the 19th century through a corpus-based investigation of historical news articles, posing the question of how to explore concepts and their change over time in large corpora. Their approach involves a novel

method called 'Usage Fluctuation Analysis' (McEnery et al. 2019), which uses collocation to locate diachronic shifts in the discussion of the concept. They also address the important question of how to deal with historical data of poor (technical) quality.

Next, Anna Čermáková takes a diachronic and contrastive perspective on binomials involving kinship terms in English and Czech children's literature. Discussing the gradual diachronic reversal of the male → female order in binomial kinship terms, and more specifically the phrase *father and mother*, Čermáková proposes that this change is linked to a more general development in the discourse, namely the shift towards greater informality.

Mats Johansson and Lene Nordrum report on a study entitled 'Tracing processes in auxiliarization – time-sufficiency verbs from a Norwegian-Swedish-English contrastive perspective'. They assume that participant-external sufficiency, as exhibited by the semi-auxiliary *rekke*, is a modal category, which can be described in terms of a semantic map of modality (van der Auwera & Plungian 1998). A central proposal is that *rekke* is undergoing grammaticalization from a concrete spatial verb ('reach') towards one that contains a component of time-sufficiency and participant-internal possibility. The grammaticalization process involves a relation between semantic and syntactic development that makes *rekke* a (semi-)auxiliary with multi-layered modal interpretation.

3. Expressing and translating time

Part 2, 'Expressing and translating time', comprises four chapters. Cristina Grisot and Juan Sun's paper, 'Translating verbal tenses between tensed and tenseless languages: a contrastive study of multilingual corpora', contrasts languages that have markedly different ways of grammatically encoding time through tense and aspect. That is, they study translations of English and French verbal tenses into Mandarin Chinese and conversely, Mandarin verb phrases translated into English and French. They find, for example, that English and French present-time verbal tenses are most frequently translated by linguistically non-marked VPs in Mandarin, past-time verbal tenses by aspectual, temporal markers and linguistically non-marked VPs, and future-time verbal tenses by temporal markers.

Magnus Levin and Jenny Ström Herold's chapter is entitled 'From language to language, from time to time: echoic binomials from an English-German-Swedish perspective'. This data-driven study finds that echoic time binomials are equally common in English and German but much more frequent in Swedish originals, largely due to the frequency of Noun-Preposition-Noun constructions such as *timme efter timme* ('hour after hour'). When translations of time binomials in their material are not echoic,

meanings still tend to be expressed by related recurring phraseological patterns, e.g., *line by line > en rad i taget* ('a line at a time'); i.e., recurrent temporal meanings tend to be expressed by recurrent patterns.

Thomas Egan and Siri Fürst Skogmo investigate the coding of points in time and brief intervals of time by English *moment* and its closest Norwegian correspondence *øyeblikk* ('wink of an eye') in their chapter 'Just a moment – brief times in English and Norwegian'. Both lexemes are commonly found to encode time intervals, but *moment* is almost twice as likely as *øyeblikk* to refer to a point in time. According to the authors, this suggests that *moment* is somewhat more polysemous than its Norwegian counterpart. The translations corroborate this conclusion: *øyeblikk* is more likely to be translated as *moment* than vice versa.

Using two comparable corpora of present-day European French and British English political speeches and discussions, Diana M. Lewis investigates '*Then* and *now* in English and French: parallel patterns?' *Then, now*, and their French counterparts *alors* and *maintenant*, exemplify a cross-linguistic tendency for temporal adverbs to grammaticalize into markers of rhetorical relations, although all are used in both temporal and argumentative senses. The adverbs are more frequent in the discussions than in the speeches in both languages, but the genre difference is greater in French. In spite of great cross-linguistic similarities, the French and English adverbs seem to be at different stages of grammaticalization, with *maintenant* being less frequent and less grammaticalized than *now*. By contrast, *alors* occurs in a wider range of rhetorical contexts, and looks more bleached and grammaticalized than *then*.

4. Time in languages and genres

Part 3 of the volume, 'Time in languages and genres' comprises four chapters, each of which focuses on language comparison within a specific genre. First in this section, Hilde Hasselgård studies time adverbials in English and Norwegian news discourse. The comparison concerns the syntactic realizations, semantic types and positions of the adverbials. It also includes the lexical realizations of time adverbials in both languages, partly through the lens of lexical priming (Hoey 2005). The distribution of syntactic and semantic types of time adverbials is similar between the languages, but there are differences in adverbial placement, particularly in clause-medial position, where English is more restrictive than Norwegian. The lexical comparison shows that the languages sometimes differ in the ways similar meanings are realized. Furthermore, the lexical priming of some frequent lexical items reveals language-specific, lexeme-specific and possibly register-specific patterns.

A highly specialized register is examined in Signe Oksefjell Ebeling's chapter 'Minutes of action! A contrastive analysis of time

expressions in English and Norwegian football match reports'. The cognates *minutes* and *minutter*, which are very frequent in this register, are used as a starting point for identifying patterns by means of n-grams and collocations. Zooming in on the patterns *on # minutes* and *etter # minutter* ('after # minutes'), Ebeling finds that the English expression clearly prefers final position while the Norwegian expression has a slight preference for initial position. Furthermore, English has a clear preference for the past tense in clauses containing this expression, while Norwegian also makes some use of the (historic) present tense. However, both patterns are typically associated with the achievements of players, often involving a goal scored.

Sylvi Rørvik studies tense usage in academic writing in the chapter 'Cross-disciplinary and cross-linguistic uses of tensed verb phrases in the methods sections of master's theses'. Her corpus consists of the methods sections of 150 master's theses in English and Norwegian within the three disciplines of chemistry, linguistics, and sociology, all submitted at Norwegian universities. The cross-disciplinary differences are found to be greater than the cross-linguistic ones: in both languages, present tense verb phrases are most frequent in linguistics, less frequent in sociology, and least frequent in chemistry. However, the cross-disciplinary differences are greater in Norwegian than in English, which may indicate that those who write in Norwegian are better at tailoring their use of tense to the conventions of their discipline.

In their study 'The expression of time in English and Czech children's literature: A contrastive phraseological perspective' Markéta Malá, Denisa Šebestová and Jiří Milička are facing a cross-linguistic methodological challenge: how to identify comparable multi-word units in typologically distant languages, in their case Czech (a highly inflectional language with a relatively free word order) and English (a predominantly analytical language with a more fixed word order). It is suggested that this challenge can be at least partially overcome with the help of the tool Engrammer (http://milicka.cz/en/engrammer/), which enables the exploration of unordered n-grams (i.e. n-grams with positional mobility). A good number of idiomatic (i.e. relatively fixed) time expressions are noted in both languages, but Czech employs a wider range of these – often stylistically marked ones – than English. The results indicate that time plays an important role in structuring the text in children's fiction in both languages. Even though the formal means of expressing time may differ between the languages, register appears to influence substantially the way time is framed in children's literature.

Being "[deeply] rooted in the structural organisation of language" (Klein 1994: 1), time is encountered across the linguistic system: lexically, phraseologically, morpho-syntactically and linearly. The present volume shows that languages differ in the ways in which they employ the various resources for expressing time. The differences may be systemic, e.g. regarding whether or not aspect and tense are grammaticalized in a language,

or conventional, e.g. regarding the frequency and collocational patterns of (extended) lexical items referring to time, or textual norms for the choice of tense forms in specific contexts. Moreover, the passing of time changes the way in which certain concepts are interpreted – changes which may not follow the same path in different languages. The contrastive perspective of this volume corroborates the claim that multilingual corpora can "increase our knowledge of language-specific, typological and cultural differences, as well as of universal features" (Aijmer & Altenberg 1996: 12). The language comparison throws "special features of the languages compared into relief, including preferred ways of expressing similar meanings" (Johansson 2012: 64). It is hoped that the following chapters will not only provide insight into the topics studied but also serve as a source of inspiration for further explorations of the fundamental category of time across registers, languages and time.

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