Ted talking to his kids:

The Present Perfect in English and Dutch in 'How I Met Your Mother'

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Abstract: Recent studies have tried to compare and understand the use of the present perfect (PP) in English and the *voltooid tegenwoordige tijd* (VTT) in Dutch (e.g., De Swart, 2007; Le Bruyn, Van der Klis, & De Swart, 2019; Ritz, 2012; Van der Klis, Le Bruyn, & De Swart, 2018). Most of these studies made use of literary translations to observe the difference between English and Dutch. A reoccurring statement in the existing literature is that the use of the PP and VTT is restricted in narrative discourse because English and Dutch do not allow for temporal relationships between eventualities. De Swart (2007), for example, states that it is not possible to tell a story in the PP or VTT. These conclusions were drawn on literary corpus research, however, instead of on spoken language. I propose that the use of the VTT in narrative discourse is broader than previously assumed, and that this can be observed from a study on 'spoken language' in the form of film script (lines from the series *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM)). A frequency count of the PPs and VTTs in two episodes of HIMYM revealed that the distribution of the VTT compared to the PP is bigger overall, but more importantly, it is bigger in narrative discourse. This shows that the differences between English and Dutch are not as clear-cut as existing literature makes it seem. The uses of the PP and VTT in spoken language have to be taken into account to fully understand the use of the PP and VTT.

Key words: present perfect, voltooid tegenwoordige tijd, Dutch, English, spoken language

1. Introduction

The present perfect is a construction consisting of an auxiliary verb and a past participle in both English (*I have eaten*) and in Dutch (*Ik heb gegeten*). The uses of this present perfect (PP) and *voltooid tegenwoordige tijd* (VTT) are different in the two languages despite their similar form. Recent studies have tried to compare and

understand the use of the PP and the VTT, and generally suggest that the VTT has a broader distribution than the PP (e.g., De Swart, 2007; Le Bruyn, Van der Klis, & De Swart, 2019; Ritz, 2012; Van der Klis, Le Bruyn, & De Swart, 2018). The current study adds to the understanding of the differences between the PP and the VTT by analysing the use of the two constructions in the comedy television series *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM). The findings of existing literature will be discussed first, before elaborating on the present study.

De Swart (2007) argued that the cross-linguistic differences of the PP across four languages are due to different discourse level properties instead of semantics. She compared the uses of the PP in four languages: French, German, English, and Dutch, in translations of the French novel *L'étranger*. The story of this novel was mostly written in *passé composé* (PC) rather than the "traditional literary tense" *passé simple* (PS) (de Swart, 2007, p. 2282). Translations of this novel can thus nicely show how the PC gets translated into German, English, and Dutch, and what the differences between these languages are regarding the PP. De Swart (2007) hypothesised that a temporal relation can be established between two eventualities with the French PC, but that this is not possible for the English PP and Dutch VTT. The PP and VTT should therefore not be as compatible with narrative discourse as the PC (also see Ritz, 2012, p. 20). It was furthermore hypothesised that the distribution of the PP is even more restricted than the VTT, because the PP does not "allow locating adverbials" (p. 2291). Her predictions were confirmed when analysing the translations of the novel, which can be observed from example (1) and (2).

1. a. Aujourd'hui, maman **est morte** (PC). Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'**ai reçu** un télégramme de l'asile (PC): (...)   p. 9

    b. Mother **died** today (SP). Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I **had** a telegram from the home (SP): (...)   p. 9

    c. Vandaag **is** moeder **gestorven** (VTT). Of misschien gisteren, ik weet het niet. Ik **ontving** een telegram uit het gesticht (OVT): (...)   p. 63

    d. Heute **ist** Mama **gestorben** (Perf). Vielleicht auch gestern, ich weiß nicht. I **habe** ein Telegramm vom Heim **bekommen** (Perf).   p. 7

    (de Swart, 2007, p. 2291)

2. a. Je me **suis réveillé** (PC) parce que j'avais (IMP) de plus en plus mal aux reins.   p. 21

    b. I **woke** (SP) up because the pain in my back was getting (PPROG) worse.   p. 17

c. Ik **werd** (OVT) wakker omdat mijn lendenen hoe langer hoe meer pijn
    begonnen (OVT) te doen.   p. 71

d. Ich **bin aufgewacht** (Perf), weil mein Kreuz immer mehr schmerzte (Prät).

                                                                              p. 17
                                                              (de Swart, 2007, p. 2292)

All three occurrences of the PC in (1a) and (2a) are translated with a simple past (SP) in English, and two of the three occurrences are translated with an *onvoltooid verleden tijd* (OVT) in Dutch. This does not only show that the PC is used more in narration than the PP or the VTT, but these examples also show the slightly less restricted use of the VTT. The examples above present the opening lines of *L'étranger*, and the first PC is translated with a VTT in Dutch. VTT might not be fully compatible with narration, but it seems to be the case that VTT is acceptable at the start of narrative discourse. The use of the PP is more restricted than the VTT, because it is not preferred at the start of the story. The German translations of the PC in (1d) and (2d) are like a mirror image to the French sentences and show the *perfekt* (Perf), because, as De Swart (2007) explains, the German Perf "has basically the same discourse semantics as the French PC" (p. 2291). The author concluded that narrative use of the PP is possible in French and German because these languages allow for eventualities to enter temporal relations with other events, but that this is not so much the case for Dutch and English. The uses of the PP and VTT are therefore more restricted, as confirmed by the translations of *L'étranger*. Van der Klis et al. (2018) conducted a research which supports the claims made by De Swart (2007). They also analysed *L'étranger* and looked at the distributions of the verb forms which were used to translate the PC into Italian, German, Dutch, Spanish, English and Greek. The authors suggest that cross-linguistic variation is due to a competition between the perfect and the perfective past, and that French occupies an extreme position in this competition which results in a broad distribution of the PC. The PC is often translated with the Dutch OVT instead of VTT, and the English PP is hardly ever used to translate the PC. This pattern is the same as shown in De Swart's paper: The PC is often translated with OVT in Dutch, and even more so translated with an SP in English. Thus, the use of the VTT and PP are more restricted in narrative discourse. The conclusions about Italian, German, Spanish, and Greek are not discussed in this paper as these beyond the scope of the current study.

Another cross-linguistic analysis on the PP in English and Dutch has been done by Le Bruyn et al. (2019). The authors compared the English and Dutch versions of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (HP). This text contains both dialogue and narrative discourse, which is not so much the case in *L'étranger*. This allows for a comparison between the PP in dialogue and in narration. Their analysis of the novel revealed that

the PP and VTT are not used a lot in narration, and that the VTT is more broadly distributed than the PP in dialogue. Along similar lines as De Swart (2007) and Van der Klis et al. (2018) proposed, Le Bruyn et al. (2019) conclude that the use of the perfect is "restricted to dialogue in both English and Dutch" (p. 5). Both *L'étranger* and HP seem to suggest that the VTT is not very compatible with narrative discourse.

The current study adds to this existing body of research by studying the use of the PP and VTT in spoken language instead of in literature. The following section elaborates on the research question and the hypotheses.

2. The present study

The three aforementioned studies have in common that they base their results on translated literary works. They did not find many instances of the VTT in narrative discourse, and it was therefore concluded that the use of the VTT is restricted in narration. This 'restriction' suggests that the use of VTT in narration is possible and grammatical nevertheless (as can also be observed from (1c)). Changing instances of OVT into VTT in example sentences from the previous literature reveals that this is indeed the case. (3a), (3b), (4a), and (5a) were taken from the existing literature. (4b) and (5b) are original translations for the current study.

3. a. *Ze **hadden** inderdaad een vrij gigantische hekel aan elkaar.*   Past
       they had indeed a fairly gigantic hatred at each other
       "Well, they did rather detest each other."

    b. *Ze **hebben** inderdaad een vrij gigantisch hekel aan elkaar **gehad**.*   Perfect
       they have indeed a fairly gigantic hatred at each other had
       "Well, they did have hatred towards each other."

                                                                    (Le Bruyn et al., 2019, p. 6)

4. a. *(…) ik weet het niet. Ik **ontving** een telegram uit het gesticht.*   Past
       I know it not. I received a telegram from the home
       "I don't know. I had a telegram from the home."

    b. *Ik **heb** een telegram uit het gesticht **ontvangen**.*   Perfect
       I have a telegram from the home received
       "I have received a telegram from the home."

                                                                        (de Swart, 2007, p. 2291)

5. a. *Hij **ging** naar buiten, **kwam** weer terug en **zette** stoelen neer.*   Past
      he went out, came back again and put the chairs down
      "He went in and out, arranging chairs."
   b. *Hij **is** naar buiten **gegaan, is** terug **gekomen** en **heeft** de stoelen*   Perfect
      ***neergezet**.*
      he is outside went, is back came and has the chairs put down
      "He went in, came back, and arranged the chairs."

<div align="right">(van der Klis et al., 2018, p. 9)</div>

In all sentences taken from *L'étranger* and HP above, a change from OVT to VTT does not lead to ungrammaticality. In fact, these are normal Dutch sentences. These plausible Dutch sentences do not appear in the analysed literature, however. It might be the case that translated literature does not provide sufficient information to draw definitive conclusions about the use of the PP and VTT in narrative discourse. Both *L'étranger* and HP are literary works, and the language used was most probably influenced by a literary style of writing. The existing observations on the PP and VTT are based on written literary language only, and not on spoken language. As spoken language could provide more insights into the uses of the perfect, spoken language has to be analysed as well before drawing conclusions about the behaviour of the VTT in the Dutch language. That is why this study compares the uses of the PP and VTT in narration and in dialogue in the American comedy television series HIMYM.

HIMYM is a sitcom about the fictive lives of five friends: Ted, Robin, Barney, Lily, and Marshall, who all live in Manhattan. Every episode of the show addresses everyday-life problems of these characters, mostly regarding themes as love, marriage, friendship, and career. This show was selected for analysis for several reasons. Firstly, HIMYM is an original series, so it has not been filmed and translated from a book. As a consequence, the series has been minimally influenced by traditional literary writing styles. Possible results on the VTT will thus not be affected by literary writing. Secondly, the show is framed in such a way that the main character Ted, in the year 2030, tells this son and daughter about the events that led him to meet their mother. He thus tells his kids stories about his life in past tense. The described events by Ted happened between 2005 and 2014, and are presented to a viewer of the show as if they are happening in present time. The show thus includes dialogue, i.e., when events play in chronological order, as well as narrative discourse, i.e., when Ted starts, interrupts, and ends an episode with his comments and stories in 2030. HIMYM provides an opportunity to analyse the uses of the VTT in narration and in dialogue, without this being a literary corpus study. Lastly, this television series provides a form of spoken language that is accessible and can therefore easily be analysed. HIMYM is an

American show, so viewers are presented with spoken English. Subtitles of this show can be downloaded from the internet for free. Subtitles are made by translators who transcribe what has been said in an episode, so Dutch subtitles are not simply a translation of the English subtitles. Dutch subtitles represent how a Dutch person would translate the spoken English. Because subtitles are such direct transcriptions of the spoken language, subtitles are used in the present study instead of, for example, the translated film-scripts of the series.

HIMYM thus offers an opportunity to analyse the uses of both the PP and VTT in spoken language. The instances of PP and VTT can be compared to each other, both in the narrative parts of the series and the parts with dialogue. The spoken language in a show like HIMYM can possibly give more insight into the uses of the PP and VTT than translated written language. Previous literature suggests that the VTT has a broader distribution than the PP, and that neither are often used in narrative discourse. This study aims to find out if these conclusions can also be drawn from spoken language. The present study addresses the question: Does the *voltooid tegenwoordige tijd* occur more in Dutch than the present perfect does in English in spoken narrative discourse in the television series *How I Met Your Mother*? Following the existing literature, it is expected that both the PP and VTT do not occur much in narrative discourse. Considering that the VTT in narration does not lead to ungrammaticalities, it is possible that the VTT can be found in spoken language more than it is found in literary works. The first hypothesis formulated regarding the research question is that VTT will be found in narrative discourse in HIMYM, more so than the English PP. Van der Klis et al. (2018) showed that the French PC is more often translated with a VTT in Dutch than with a PP in English. This indicates that the distribution of the VTT in narration is broader than the PP. The same is expected to be found in HIMYM. Secondly, previous research has suggested that the use of the PP is even more restricted than the VTT overall (De Swart, 2007; Le Bruyn et al., 2019; Van der Klis et al., 2018). It is therefore also hypothesised that the VTT occurs more in dialogue than the PP.

3. Methods

3.1 Materials

Two episodes of the American comedy tv-series *How I Met Your Mother* were used for the analysis. This show in particular was used for this study, because besides dialogue it also contains narrative discourse in the form of the main character Ted telling his

future kids stories about his life. Episode 1 and 2 from season 7 of the show were selected because of availability reasons. The written subtitles in both English and Dutch were available for free on the internet, so these were downloaded. Subtitles were chosen for the analysis instead of, for example, an episode script, because the Dutch version of a script would likely be a translation of the English script. An analysis of a translated script is more like a translation of written language instead of spoken language. Secondly, scripts would provide a lot of information irrelevant to the current study, such as information about every movement of a character, background music, and for example eye-gazes. Only the spoken language and its direct translation to Dutch were necessary for this study, so subtitles were used.

3.2 Procedure

After the collection of the four files of subtitles (Episode 1 English, Episode 1 Dutch, Episode 2 English, Episode 2 Dutch), irrelevant information was deleted from the files. As subtitles also help hearing-impaired people while watching television, the subtitles would, for example, indicate whether music would play, or whether abstract sounds were made/played. This information was deleted, as it made the files messy and unclear. This left files which only contained the words spoken by the characters on the show.

Both episodes were watched twice while reading along with the subtitles; once for English and once for Dutch. This was done for two reasons: subtitles often contain mistakes, so it had to be made sure that no mistakes were made or words were omitted; and the subtitles did not indicate when normal dialogue was spoken or when Ted would provide information in the form of narrative discourse, so while watching the episodes these indications were added to the files manually.

The frequency counts for the use of PPs and VTTs happened in two stages. The first stage consisted of a search on a laptop, by searching for "have", "has", "s", and "ve" for English and "ben", "is", "zijn", "heb", "hebt", "heeft", and "hebben" for Dutch with the search function (Ctrl + F) in the file. All occurrences of these verbs were checked to see if they were part of a PP or VTT. If they were, they were highlighted so they would be easy to find later. During the second stage, the printed versions of the files were checked for any forgotten or wrongly interpreted PPs or VTTs by reading the paper versions and correcting manually with a pen.

All PPs and VTTs were counted, and divided into two categories per episode: occurrence in narrative discourse versus occurrence in dialogue.

4. Results

The results of the search can be found in Table 1. As can be seen, only one English PP occurred in narrative discourse. This was not the case for Dutch: a total of five VTTs occurred in narrative discourse. Overall, the use of PP and VTT mostly occurred in dialogue.

Table 1

Number of present perfects / voltooid tegenwoordige tijden used in two episodes of How I Met Your Mother in English and Dutch

Category	Episode 1 English	Episode 1 Dutch	Episode 2 English	Episode 2 Dutch
Narrative discourse	0	2	1	3
Dialogue	12	27	8	37
Total	12	29	9	40

5. Discussion

This study aimed to find out if the Dutch VTT occurred in narrative discourse in spoken language. Two episodes of the sitcom HIMYM was analysed. It was furthermore investigated if the VTT would appear more in narration than the English PP. A frequency count revealed that a PP was used once in narration, while the VTT was used five times in total. This confirms hypothesis one, which stated that VTT would occur in narration in Dutch. The results also showed that the VTT was used more than the PP in dialogue, namely more than twice as many times in Episode 1 and over four times as many in Episode 2. This confirms hypothesis two, which predicted that the VTT has a broader distribution overall. This is in line with the findings of Le Bruyn et al. (2019).

These results show that the VTT is used less often in narration than in dialogue but that it is used nevertheless. Previous studies did not find many occurrences of VTTs in narration, and thus claimed that the use of the VTT is restricted in narrative discourse (e.g. De Swart, 2007; Le Bruyn, Van der Klis, & De Swart, 2019; Ritz, 2012; Van der Klis, Le Bruyn, & De Swart, 2018). It is possible that this restriction is greater in written language than it is in spoken language, because of, for example, formal writing styles. The VTT might not be suitable for a long story, but it is certainly

acceptable to use at the start or end of a conversation. Exactly this can be observed from HIMYM, as Ted uses the VTT to start or end his stories:

6. a. *En dat is hoe Marshall Punchy's bruiloft **verknoeid heeft** (VTT).*   Episode 1
      and that is how Marshall Punchy's wedding ruined has
   b. "And that is how Marshall destroyed (SP) Punchy's wedding."

7. a. *Jessica **is afgestudeerd** (VTT) op Rhode Island, en ze **heeft** een*   Episode 2
      *wereldreis **gemaakt** (VTT).*
      Jessica is graduated from Rhode Island, and she has a world
      trip made
   b. "Jessica is a Rhodes scholar. She**'s travelled** (PP) all over the
      world."

In (6), Ted very explicitly ends his story about how Marshall ruined Punchy's wedding. The English version of the episode used an SP here, but the Dutch subtitle writer chose to translate this with a VTT. Example (7) shows how Ted starts the story about Jessica, in which a VTT is used twice. These two examples show that it is certainly possible to start or end a conversation using a VTT in Dutch in spoken language. The one occurrence of a PP in narration also happened at the start of a story, namely in the matching English sentence about Jessica, as can be seen in (7b). This possibility to introduce a new conversational topic with a perfect has been pointed out by Nishiyama and Koenig (2010). They argued that the perfect can be used for "topic negotiation" (p. 634). The authors conducted a corpus research and found that a perfect is sometimes used at the start of a conversation, to introduce a new topic. Ted also makes use of this strategy when he starts his story about Jessica. Note that this also happened in the Dutch translation of *L'étranger* (example (1c)). This indicates that not only the VTT can be used to start conversation, but a PP is also acceptable. This, however, only occurred once over both episodes, so no conclusions can be drawn about how commonly a PP is used like this.

It should briefly be noted that not much is known about the person or people who made the Dutch subtitles. It is most likely the case that these were made by one person, and not checked by other people. It is also unknown what the proficiency level in English is of this translator. The results are thus most probably based on the judgements of one Dutch person. It is plausible that a different translator would have used more or less VTTs. If a follow-up study would be conducted, it would be wise to have several translators write the Dutch subtitles. These different translations should then be compared for reliability. A second concern about the current study is that only two episodes of one show were analysed. Only one PP was found in these two

episodes, which might have been different if two other or more episodes were analysed. The same holds for the number of VTTs found. A future study in which more episodes, and ideally more series than just HIMYM, are analysed would provide a more complete picture of the distributions of the PP and VTT.

6. Conclusion

The present study showed that the Dutch VTT is compatible with narrative discourse, as it has been found in the translation of the show HIMYM in the short stories told by Ted. A frequency count revealed that VTT is used more often in narration than the PP, and that the VTT is used more than the PP overall. This second finding confirms previous findings that the VTT is more broadly distributed than the PP. Previous studies on the differences between the VTT and PP did not suggest that the VTT is compatible with narration. The current study differs from the existing literature in that it considered spoken language instead of written language. This study thus suggests that spoken language should be taken into account when trying to understand the uses of the VTT and PP.

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