

## Dual Grammatical Functions of the Adjective *First* in English

Hiromi OTAKA\*

### Abstract

There are quite a few fixed expressions in English, just as in other languages. One of them is “This is the first time ~,” which is likely used especially in a colloquial setting where the speaker/writer refers to an experience he/she had for the first time. However, it is also true that many people, even native English speakers, are likely to misuse tense in the subordinate clause of this collocation. Grammatically, the tense used in this construction should be the perfect tense, as exemplified below (*English Grammar in Use* 2015).

Ex. 1: This is **the first time** I have driven a car.

2: That was **the first time** I had seen a panda.

However, as a matter of fact, both the present participle and the *to*-infinitive are likely to be used mistakenly as observed in the following examples.<sup>1)</sup>

Ex. 3: \*This is **the first time** driving a car.

4: \*That was **the first time** to see a panda.

What makes things more complicated and confusing is the existence of another collocation, “This is *my* first time ~,” in which the perfect tense is not used, but the present participle or the *to*-infinitive is.

Ex. 5: This is **my first time** seeing a panda.

6: Is this **your first time** to see a panda?

7: \*This is **my first time** I’ve seen a panda.

In addition, the variety of pronouns that may be used as the subject of the main clause (i.e., *it/this/that*) also contributes to the confusion. In

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\* Professor, Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics, Kwansei Gakuin University

1) Sentences with an asterisk or question mark in the beginning indicate that they are ungrammatical or ambiguous, respectively.

particular, the pronoun *it* is tricky because it sometimes functions as a preparatory subject, as in (8).

Ex. 8: Is it your first time writing/ to write an e-mail in English?

9. ?It is the first time I've seen a panda.

It should be noted that in the case of (8), *writing* and *to write* could be interpreted as a gerund and a noun clause, respectively, which could contribute to the aforementioned confusion among English users.

The present paper explores why the perfect tense is to be used in the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the first time ~” in English. To this end, it should be noted that this fixed expression is comparable to superlative expressions as in (10), in that both types of expressions require the perfect tense in their constructions.

Ex. 10: This is **the tallest boy I've ever seen**.

In short, it can be argued that *the first*, composed of the definite article and a sequence adjective (or ordinal numeral), may function as a superlative form of the adjective *first* in English (NB. zero-morpheme superlative adjectives like *best*, *least*, *worst*, and *most*). That is, *the first* is semantically identical to the superlative in terms of the order of experiences the speaker has had within the temporal range (i.e. *his/her life*) indicated by the use of the perfect tense. Thus, for example, (1) above can be rephrased as “He has never driven a car before.” The perfect tense implies a certain temporal range within which the speaker has experienced various things, comparing them to state which is the greatest or earliest in a given sequence.

On the other hand, the perfect tense is not used in the case of the subordinate clause of another collocation “This is the *last* time ~,” although this type of sentence also contains a sequence adjective, *last*, which also could be considered a superlative because it refers to something occurring the latest in the order of experiences the speaker has had. Nevertheless, the perfect tense is not used in this construction; rather, either the *to*-infinitive or the future tense is used, as shown in (11) and (12), respectively.

Ex. 11: This is **the last time** (for us) to see each other.

12: This is **the last time** I will listen to you.

13: \*This is **the last time** we've seen each other.

The reason why the perfect tense is not used in this construction is that the time period mentioned above is the speaker's whole life including the future, and that the perfect tense used in a subordinate clause preceded by a noun phrase containing a superlative pronoun implies a state completed

by the speaker, but not the continuation of this state into the future. The latter is deviated from the general usage of the perfect tense.<sup>2)</sup> That is why (11), for example, does not allow the perfect tense to be used in its subordinate clause, and can be paraphrased as “We’ll no longer see each other.”

Once again, regarding the answer to the initial question of why the perfect tense is used in the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the first time ~,” it is because the sequence adjective *first* in the noun phrase *the first time* can function grammatically as a superlative degree adjective in English. However, this is not always the case, as we see with other collocations containing *the first time* such as “This marks the first time ~.”

Ex. 14: This **marks the first time** that the company owns LNG vessels.

15: This case **marks the first time** the H5N2 virus has been detected in Japan.

On the other hand, in the other collocation in question, “This is my first time ~,” the adjective *first* functions as a mere positive degree adjective. Thus, this dual grammatical behavior of *first* might be the major reason why L2 learners of English tend to misuse tense in sentences containing *first*.

## I. Introduction

A common grammatical mistake of Japanese learners of English is to use the wrong tense<sup>3)</sup> in the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the first time ~.” For example, one might say or write *\*This is the first time to visit Kyoto* or *\*This is the first time visiting Kyoto*, instead of *This is the first time I’ve visited Kyoto*. In modern English grammar (as stipulated in a grammar book such as *English Grammar in Use* 2015), the perfect tense is supposed to be used instead of the *to*-infinitive and present participle in this construction. However, these mistakes are not only characteristic of L2 Japanese learners of English; even many native speakers of

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2) The present perfect in most uses for example refers to a state or series of actions holding good up to and including the reference time (the present in this particular case), with continuation into the future implied. For example, the sentence “He’s got fond of reading” implies that he is likely to continue to enjoy reading in the future.

3) “Tense” in English in general combines two distinct features, “time” and “aspect,” with the added difficulty of relative versus absolute time in many constructions. Thus, “tense” being used here includes “aspect” in terms of meaning. Incidentally, participles primarily indicate aspect, not time.

English make this same mistake so often that it is frequent in texts posted online, for example.<sup>4)</sup> What we need to ask here is why such mistakes are likely in this collocation.

One possible reason is that, as seen from the example sentences below,<sup>5)</sup> there are numerous sentences with similar constructions containing one of the key words *time*, *first*, or both collocated with either the *to*-infinitive or the present participle. As a result, many people, especially L2 learners of English, may be easily confused when weaving these key words into a sentence.

Ex. 1: You have **no time to lose**.

2: Now is **the time to say** something about it.

3: It is **high time** you went to bed.

4: Who was **the first** person to discover the American continent?

5: This is **my first time** visiting Kyoto.

6: It was **my first time to go** (or go) to New York City.

7: That was **the first time** I had (ever) visited Kyoto.

8: **The first** time (that/when) I saw him, he was a kindergartner.

9: I visited Kyoto **for the first time** last year.

10: This is **a first** for me.

11: I'm **the first** to admit it.

12: The birthday address on Sunday would have been **the first** by the emperor, who will turn 60, since his accession to the throne on May 1, last year.

(*The Mainichi Daily*: February 17 2020)

13: There's always **a first time** for everything.

However, as we shall see in the next section, this does not seem to be the only cause of confusion among users of English. Indeed, while the answer to this question is worthwhile from a pedagogical point of view, it is also important to answer another related question: Why should the perfect tense be used in the subordinate clause at issue? As even grammarians have been unsure about the reason, it is not surprising that people are prone to the grammatical mistakes above when using the collocation to talk/write about an experience they had for the first time in their life.

The goal of the present study is twofold. One is to explore why tense is often

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4) For example, we can see this kind of problematic sentences involving various tenses in data collection sites for English sentences such as *Weblio* and *Reverso Context* on the internet. In addition, the author has found a sentence reading "This is the first time that I heard of it" in the Japanese-English dictionary *The Light House* (2012, 6<sup>th</sup> edition).

5) The example sentences here are collected from *Reverso Context*, *The Cambridge English Dictionary*, *Eijiro*, *English in Use* 2015, and *The Mainichi Daily*, published in 2018-2019.

misused in the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the first time ~,” and the other is to determine why the perfect tense should be used in this clause in English.

## II. “This is my first time ~” vs. “This is the first time ~”

These two collocations look very similar in structure and are both frequently used, especially in a colloquial setting, when someone refers to something as the first experience in his/her life span.

Ex. 14: This is **my first time** hearing the news.

15: This is **the first time** I’ve heard the news.

It is true that these two constructions share one thing common in terms of syntactical modification. In (14), *hearing the news*, containing a present participle of the verb *hear* followed by its object, functions as an adjective modifying *time*. On the other hand, in (15), the subordinate clause *I’ve heard the news* functions as an adjectival clause modifying the preceding noun *time*. Therefore, they may both be treated as postpositive modifiers.

However, they are used differently in English grammar: The former requires a present participle as in (14), *hearing*, the latter a verb in the present perfect tense as in (15), *have heard*. More accurately, in the latter, if the tense of its main clause is the preterit, the following subordinate clause takes the past perfect as in (7) above according to Tense Agreement.

What then is the reason for the difference between the two? This is probably because the adjective *first* differs in grammatical function between the two. That is, in the case of *my first time*, the sequence adjective (or ordinal numeral) *first* preceded by a possessive pronoun *my* is functioning as a positive degree adjective. On the other hand, in (15), its counterpart preceded by the definite article is functioning as a superlative degree adjective.<sup>6)</sup> Note that for example, 15 can be rephrased in another superlative form with the result of “This is the **latest** news I’ve ever heard.” This bears out that the adjective *first* being used in the collocation functions as the superlative. On the other hand, in the case of sentences containing the phrase “my first time ~” as in (14), the verb of the present participle follows functioning as a postpositive adjective. In addition, as a matter of fact, the *to*-infinitive is also used in the case of “This is my first time ~,” as exemplified in for example 16 unless the tense of the main clause is of the past, as in (17).<sup>7)</sup> This

6) In other words, because the adjective *first* in this phrase is of the superlative, the definite article is required. Incidentally, this is not yet acknowledged in any grammar books of English.

7) This is because the *to*-infinitive is basically used to imply something that occurs in the future. Therefore, the present participle is more felicitous because it can refer to something that ↗

duality of the adjective *first* in grammatical function will be further argued in details in the next section.

Ex. 16. This is **my first time** to hear the news. (*This* is to hear the news)

17. \*That was **my first time** to hear the news.

### III. Why is the perfect tense used in “This is the first time ~”?

A grammatically possible answer to this question is, as previously mentioned, that the ordinal numeral *first* with the definite article could be regarded semantically as equivalent to a superlative form without suffix *-est*, namely zero-morpheme superlatives like *least*, *worst*, *most*, and *best*. Observe the following sentences with different adjectives in the superlative, noting the semantic range of experiences that the subject has had at the time of utterance, which is implied by using such a range marker as *in* and *of*, or the perfect tense for the same purpose.

Ex. 18: He is **the tallest** boy in his class (or **the tallest** of the boys).

19: He is **the brightest** boy (that) I've ever known.

20: Einstein is **the greatest** scientist that has ever lived.

In forming a superlative sentence, there need to be three or more items within the range of comparison that the speaker/writer compares when stating which is the greatest/first among them.<sup>8)</sup> In the cases of (18)-(20), their semantic ranges for comparison are “his class (i.e. a set of the boys)” in (18), “the boys that I’ve ever known” in (19), and “the scientists that have ever lived” in (20). In other words, the subject of each sentence is claimed to rank highest in each group. More accurately, the way a finite set of factors for comparison is indicated differs between (18) and (19)-(20). The former is marked with a preposition as a range marker (*in*, *of*), the latter with the perfect tense but no preposition. However, it is not the case that the latter has no set of factors for comparison; they are simply not expressed in the surface structure.<sup>9)</sup> Therefore, (19) and (20) can be rewritten as (21) and (22), respectively. These revised versions may seem more logical to L2 English learners because the range marker is explicitly stated.

Ex. 21: He is **the brightest** of the boys (that) I have ever known.

22: Einstein is **the greatest** of the scientists that have ever lived.

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↙ occurred in the past; e.g. “I remember seeing him somewhere.” C.f. “I remember to see him at noon today.”

8) On the other hand, in the case of a comparative sentences, there needs to be only two factors for comparison.

9) This is why trying to translate these sentences word by word into Japanese is quite difficult. In the Japanese way of expressing superlativeness, a set of members has to be clearly referred to with a range marker or the compound postposition *~no naka de* (‘in’).

Each set of factors for comparison is obvious, as seen from the underlined parts. That is, the former is “the boys (that) I’ve ever known” and the latter, “the scientists that have ever lived.” Therefore, it can be argued that superlativeness can be expressed without using a range marker because English grammar has developed in such a way that the adjectival clause in the perfect tense can play the role semantically of indicating the potential set of members involved without using a range marker for comparison. Moreover, it should be noted that the perfect tense used in a subordinate clause like in (21) and (22) semantically implies only a state brought (or completed) by the subject, eliminating the implication of this state to be continued (see footnote 4).

The same holds regarding the collocation “This is the first time ~.” In this case, the semantic range for comparison is the subject’s experiences throughout his/her whole lifetime until the time of utterance due to the use of the present perfect set in the modifier. Note the similarity in logic between the two sentences (23) and (24) below. The latter can be considered the same as the former in terms of superlative meaning. The clauses are both used adjectivally, modifying the preceding nouns *boy* and *time*. The only difference is that *that* in (23) is grammatically a relative pronoun, whereas its counterpart in (24) is a relative adverb.

Ex. 23: He is **the brightest boy** (that) I have ever known.

24: This is **the first time** (that) I’ve been to Kyoto.

Because the ordinal numeral *first* with the definite article functions as a superlative, the use of the perfect tense in the subordinate clause is not affected by the tense of the main clause, as in (25)-(26), unlike the case of *my first time*.

Ex. 25: This will be **the first time** I’ve flown to Hawaii.<sup>10)</sup>

26: That was **the first time** I’d flown to Hawaii.

The same thing can be said for other sequence adjectives like *second* and *third*, as observed in (27).

Ex 27: This is **the second** time I’ve flown on a plane.

However, in the cases of *the second* and *the third*, the use of the *to*-infinitive is also available, as in (28), and in case the tense of the main clause is preterit, its subordinate clause takes the past tense due to Tense Agreement, as in (29). Why are tenses other than the perfect also available in this construction? This is probably because the meanings of the sequence adjectives other than *first* may be regarded as less superlative.

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10) Some grammarians might say that this is not as grammatical as the future perfect, “the first time I’ll have flown to Hawaii.” However, as this is a colloquial construction and the future perfect is far from colloquial.

Ex. 28: This is **the second** time (for me) to drop my smartphone.

29: That was **the second** time I dropped my smartphone.

30: \*This is **the second** time (that) I dropped my smartphone.

Furthermore, as a matter of fact, the adjective *first* used in the phrase of *the first time* does not always function as the superlative if used in other collocations such as “This **marks the first time** ~” and “**It is the first time** ~.” That is, not only the perfect tense but in fact any tense may be used in the subordinate clauses, as shown in (31)-(39). That these usages of *the first* differ from that in “**This is the first time** ~” seems to cause confusion among English users.

Ex. 31: This case **marks the first time** the H5N2 virus has been detected in Japan.

32: The flight **marked the first time** a woman in the ASDF had flown as a pilot on an overseas mission other than on a training program.

33: This **marks the first time** that the company owns LNG vessels.

34: The move **marked the first time** a criminal complaint was filed regarding one of the government run health insurance systems.

35: This year’s festival, the 28<sup>th</sup>, **marks the first time** in 108 years for the Olympics to be held in Athens.

36: It **marks the first time** an immigrant of Japanese descent will become a president of a nation.

37. **It is the first time** (that) I heard of this.

38. **It is the first time** for them to see snow.

39. It also marks **the first time** a Japanese national has been confirmed to have the virus

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In the case of the collocation “It is the first time ~,” as shown in (37)-(38), for example, a clause with a verb in the past tense or a phrase with a *to*-infinitive can occur as well as a clause in the perfect tense. This is because of the presence of the neutral pronoun *it* functioning as a preparatory pronoun, which refers to the constituent occurring after *the time*. In other words, in (37)-(38), *I heard of this* and *for them to see snow* both function as nouns overall. In the case of (39), the part following the phrase *the first time* can be regarded as either a noun (the referent of the preparatory pronoun *it*) or an adjective (an adjectival phrase modifying *time*). Thus, being unable to say whether the clause at issue is being used adjectivally or nominally might be another source of confusion among English users.

There is one more issue we must address in this section, the difference in meaning between *the first time* being used not as a noun phrase and *for the first time*. These two are likely to be semantically confusing, but actually these two can differ in how they are used, as exemplified below.



- Ex. 40. Many people vomit **the first time** when they start drinking liquor.  
 41. Dave drank beer **for the first time** when he was 16 years old.

*The first time* in (40) is functioning as a conjunction followed by a relative clause, while *for the first time* in (41) as an adverbial phrase.

#### IV. Why is the perfect tense not used in “This is the last time ~”?

Lastly, it is also interesting to note that, as seen from (42)-(45), the present perfect tense is not used in the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the last time ~,” although this main clause contains *the last*, which, like *the first*, is a sequence adjective preceded by the definite article. *The last* means that something is ranked at the very end in a temporal sequence of factors in the set of experiences for comparison. This is exactly the opposite of *the first*’ in conception. Thus, both could be equally regarded as superlative in meaning. However, this is not so. Why is the perfect tense not used in the construction “This is the last time ~”?

- Ex. 42: **This is the last time** I listen to you.  
 43: **This is the last time** I will see you.  
 44: **This is the last time** for us to see each other.  
 45: **It was the last time** for the Imperial Couple to attend the annual tree-planting festival before the Emperor abdicates in April 2019.

(*The Mainichi Daily*: July 2018)

The answer to the above question is that there is a difference in the implications of the semantic range for comparison between the two collocations. In the case of “This/That is/was the first time ~,” the semantic range implied for comparison is the whole life of the speaker up to the reference time of the main clause. That is, the speaker’s future is excluded from *the whole life* here. This is because, once again, the perfect tense used in a subordinate clause can imply a state completed by the speaker, but not the continuation of this state in the future. On the other hand, in the case of “This is the last time ~,” the semantic range is the speaker’s whole lifetime, including the future. That is why (42) “This is the last time I listen to you” can be paraphrased as “I’ll never listen to you any longer.” Therefore, the collocation *This is the last time* ~ is incompatible with the perfect tense in its subordinate clause. In other words, the speaker’s whole lifetime, including the future, cannot function to imply the semantic range for comparison in which the greatest/last is to be chosen by the speaker. Thus, for example, (46) sounds somewhat ungrammatical, as opposed to (45).

- Ex. 45: He is **the richest man** I have ever seen. (= He is the richest of the men I have ever seen.)

46: \*He is **the richest man** in my all lifetime.

(c.f. He is the richest man in my life so far.)

## V. Conclusion

The present paper explored why the tense of the subordinate clause of the collocation “This is the first time ~” is often misused by L2 learners of English, as well as why it should take the perfect tense in English.

In conclusion, the sequence adjective (or ordinal numeral) *first* can function grammatically as either a positive degree adjective or a superlative degree adjective. When preceded by the definite article, the adjective is likely to be taken as the superlative, and when preceded by a possessive pronoun, it is likely to be taken as a positive degree adjective, which is why the perfect tense should be used in the case of *the first*, which is functionally the same as zero-morpheme superlative adjectives like *best*, *least*, *most* and *worst*.<sup>11)</sup> Thus, *the first* is semantically equivalent to “the initial of all” in the sequence of experiences that the speaker has had during his/her lifetime. English grammar has developed such that something in the superlative is shown by using the perfect tense with the help of a range marker like *in* and *of*, meaning that it is the greatest within the range marked. What is characteristic of expressions in the superlative in English is that the range marker is not necessarily used if the object is modified by a clause with a verb in the perfect tense. English has developed this way in its grammar. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, this is not the case in Japanese, in which a range marker (e.g. *~no naka de*) is obligatory for superlative expressions.

However, this particular usage of the adjective *first*, as argued above, is not always true for *the first time* in other collocations, such as “This marks the first time ~,” and “It is the first time ~.” The tense used in the subordinate clause of these collocations is not restricted to the perfect, as we have seen. This is, again, because *the first* does not always function as a superlative. The use of the preparatory pronoun *it* in the main clause may cause the following phrase to be a noun phrase, unlike “This is the first time ~.” The same thing can be observed for the construction containing *the second time*. This sequence adjective *second* is

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11) Some online English dictionaries such as *Weblio* and *Your Dictionary* have enlisted *firstest* as the superlative form of *first* with an example of “get there the firstest with the mostest.” However, neither of these forms seems at all formal. However, those forms are purely jocular, imitations of supposed illiterate speech purely for humorous effect. Another example, more common, is “my most bestest friend in all the world,” which is used exclusively to evoke a young child or an adolescent girl gushing enthusiastically, and thus to disparage someone’s enthusiasm or affection as immature. It would never be used seriously.

sometimes taken as of superlative degree, but at other times as a positive degree. This duality in function of these sequence adjectives may cause L2 learners of English to misuse tense easily when forming these constructions.

On the other hand, the perfect tense is not used in the construction, “This is the last time ~,” even though this collocation equally involves a sequence adjective with the definite article, *the last*. This is because *the last* cannot function as a superlative degree adjective in English, since the semantic range for comparison in this case is not restricted to the experiences the speaker has had at the time of utterance, but involves potential experiences the speaker will have in the future.

Last, it can be claimed that the new knowledge on the adjective *first* in English grammar discussed in this paper may help L2 learners of English effectively learn how to use the tense in the subordinate clause of various collocations containing *first*.

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