

The Meaning of *By Now*

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The present study explores the meaning of *by now* (*now*: the speaking time). Quirk et al. (1985: 692) note that “*By* refers to the time at which the result of an event is in existence,” using the example sentence *She should be back by now (but I’m not sure)*. They do not explicitly state whether the element of inference suggested by *should* is essential to the use of *by now* in the example, although it actually is. With regard to this matter, Leech and Svartvik (2002: 87) indicate, using the sentence *The wound should have healed by now*, that one often uses *by now* when one is not certain that the event has happened and that it is otherwise more preferable to use *already*. It is tempting to assume that the concept of inference seems to be the key to the correct use of *by now*.

However, there is an example where *by now* sounds strange even though it is used with an expression associated with inference.

- (1) Taro: When will Ken be coming back to Japan? I thought he said he would some time next month, but ...
Miki: *He must be back *by now*, because he wrote in his blog yesterday that he’d eaten Japanese food for the first time in six months.

One must replace *by now* with *already* for Miki’s response to sound natural in this case. Also, there are examples where, even though there is no inference involved, *by now* sounds natural.

- (2) We all know what you did *by now*. Everyone hates you *by now*.
(3) As godfather to the boy and longtime friend of the father, Renzo has been participating in this grim saga for seven years, and *by now* there is little of anything left to say. (Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*)
(4) I turn back and find him ripping the adhesive tape off his nose and pulling the feeding tube out of his stomach. I grab hold of his hand but the tube is *by now* all the way out and a milky liquid pools into the bed. (The Corpus of Contemporary American English)

Reflecting on all of the examples provided above, the present study argues that

by now is used when the speaker draws on the knowledge that the probability of the occurrence of the event modified by *by now* increases over time. In (1), the ground on which Miki bases her inference is the fact that before the conversation Ken wrote in his weblog that he had eaten Japanese food. No progressive increase in the probability of Ken's being back in Japan is involved here, hence the unnaturalness of (1). In the natural-sounding cases where no expression of inference is needed (e.g., (2), (3) and (4)), other expressions (e.g., *all*, *everyone*, *left* and *all the way*) suggest increasing certainty over time. In other cases, the non-inferential use of *by now* (e.g., **She is back by now*) sounds strange, because one does not usually evoke the probabilistic change that leads up to the speaking time, if the statement is a report on some present state about which the speaker knows for certain. If there is any suggestion that some kind of inference is involved (e.g., *Susan should be back by now*), then *by now* sounds natural because, when hearing an inference, the hearer is usually prompted to think that there should be some past event that serves as grounds for the inference (e.g., *Susan left the store more than 90 minutes ago*). In such a case, the hearer is likely to evoke the increasing certainty over time (e.g., from 90 minutes ago to the speaking time).

Our hypothesis can also explain why *may*, *might*, *perhaps* and *possibly* are a little less likely to co-occur with *by now* than *should*, *must* and *probably*. Increasing certainty over time is more readily evoked when a considerable amount of time has already passed, in which case the evoked certainty has already reached a rather high level when the speaker evokes it.

Finally, we point out that this increase in certainty has no bearing on other temporal uses of *by* (Compare the unnatural sentence **Susan left the store at 5:30 and by now she's home* with the natural sentence *Susan left the store at 5:30 and by six she was home*).

References

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