

Puzzling out the English Present Perfect Puzzle

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Puzzling out the English Present Perfect Puzzle¹

According to Kuryłowicz, Perfects universally evolve from an initial resultative meaning to a final stage where they eventually oust and replace existing aorists. In this respect, the English Present Perfect stands out in firmly disallowing the combination with specific past time adverbials. The quaint position of English explains the expression coined by Klein of a “Perfect Puzzle.” This article aims to shed light on the long and complex history of the relationship entertained by the Perfect with definite past time reference.

D’après Kuryłowicz, les parfaits sont voués à évoluer depuis un sens initialement résultatif vers un stade ultime où ils remplacent les formes existantes dans la fonction d’aoriste. À cet égard, le Present Perfect anglais se distingue par l’agrammaticalité de sa combinaison avec des adverbes renvoyant à un moment spécifique du passé. Cette position surprenante de l’anglais au regard des autres langues est à l’origine de l’expression forgée par Klein d’un « perfect puzzle ». Cet article vise à mettre en lumière les relations complexes du parfait anglais avec ces adverbes au fil d’une histoire longue et complexe.

Introduction

Typological studies bearing on the history of perfects have brought to light a strong trend (cf. Kuryłowicz 59), rationalised into the postulate of a universal cline of unidirectional language change, whereby these forms evolve from aspectual to temporal reference, first indefinite, then ultimately definite, at which stage perfects no longer rightly deserve that term but qualify as aorists. This evolution has been diversely called *perfect-*

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to-perfective path (Bybee *et al.* 54; Schwenter and Torres Cacoulos) or *aoristic drift* (cf. Fryd 1998, 2015; Squartini and Bertinetto).

With regard to the English Present Perfect, the accepted view is that it “does not in general go very well together with definite past time adverbials” (Dahl 137) whereas, in comparison, no such restriction applies to its combination with indefinite adverbials (Comrie 60):

- (1) a. *I have met your brother yesterday. (Dahl 137)
 b. I have recently learned that the match is to be postponed. (Comrie 60)

Commenting on the peculiar situation of English, Klein thought it indeed so surprising that he coined for it the expression of *Present Perfect Puzzle*. The expression met with undeniable success, and is still a favourite of Tense and Aspect scholars. As a modest tribute to Klein’s contribution to the field, the present survey will further his attempt to “puzzle out” some of the complexities attached to the English Perfect in its relation with past time reference.

Dahl’s categorical rejection of example (1a), as it turns out, is not strictly reflected in his attendant observation, which suggests rather that the posited incompatibility of the Perfect with definite past time adverbials may only hold “in general.” Caution is indeed warranted, as instances of the putatively ill-formed pattern are not hard to come by and do crop up in some guise or another at various stages in the history of the language, but also in Present-Day English.

Maslov (1990) provides the following definition of the Perfect: “an aspecto-temporal form of the verb, expressing a present state as a result of a preceding action or change, and/or expressing a past action, event or state that is somehow important to the present and is considered from the present point of view, detached from other past facts” (translated from Russian by Lindstedt, 259-60). One key element in this definition deserves to be highlighted for the purpose of this overview: lack of correlation with other past events, i.e. what Lindstedt calls *non-narrativity*. In other words, the event in the Perfect must be anchored in the present—however extended the scope of this present—and cannot be aspectually perfective and so disconnected from the moment of speech, nor consequently enter into any form of coordination with a string of other events themselves also temporally disconnected from the moment of speech. This translates into the purported incompatibility of the Perfect with narratives, where events appear iconically arranged in a chronological order of succession.

This study proposes to investigate, from their earliest attestations, those instances of the English Perfect which run counter to the principles set out in the above paragraphs, and favour instead a more or less explicit temporal disconnection between the event referred to and the moment of speech.

The *aoristic drift/perfective path* is, in essence, a progression in the course of which the Perfect becomes compatible with increasing degrees

of temporal remoteness, until it ultimately ousts and replaces the Past tense altogether, or at least relegates it to some minor role.

In the iconic example of Spanish, the shift from indefinite to definite past time reference takes the form of a two-stage development where a hodiernal² constraint first applies, before pre-hodiernal contexts can be allowed. Lindstedt (373-4) offers interesting examples in Alicante Spanish, where the 24-hour rule is the norm, in which a speaker is asked to put into words a string of events, namely: stepping on a snake, being bitten by the snake and finally killing it with a stone. When prompted to recount these events, the speaker resorts to the periphrastic Perfect if asked what took place *an hour ago*, and the Past tense if it all took place *yesterday*. Tense selection thus offers a clear indicator by which to assess the degree of evolution of any one variety of Spanish along the perfective path, with archaic dialects ignoring the Perfect altogether and favouring the sole Past tense and, at the other end, the most advanced varieties opting for the sole Perfect (cf. Schwenter and Torres Cacoulos), however close or remote the events in question may be from the moment of speech.

The situation of the English Perfect bears little resemblance with the scenario outlined for Spanish. If close observation of the English Perfect does reveal a far greater degree of compatibility with definite past time reference than is generally assumed, it remains an object of debate to determine the extent to which this can be viewed as evidence of an ongoing aoristic drift. It is hoped that these lines will contribute to the debate.

The first topic of discussion will concern a key temporality constraint affecting the use of the Perfect called the *lifetime effect*. This will be followed by a survey of Perfect use in narrative contexts, where it is viewed as a *historical* Perfect. The last part will be dedicated to the combination of the Perfect with definite past time adverbials.

Temporality constraints: the *lifetime effect*

The consensus on temporality and the Perfect is long established: “When the predication referred to falls within a certain undefined space of time not distinctly thought of as severed from the moment of speaking, the perfect appears to be the normal tense” (Poutsma 259).

This understanding was already contained in a nutshell in White (83-4), who favoured the Preterite (and so implicitly excluded the Perfect) “when we refer to actions long since past, and the performers of which have already left the present stage of life.”

The consensus does not stop here, as White’s views are echoed in Jespersen (270), a grammarian who, in view of his notoriety, certainly played a key role in setting down the modern-day doctrine on temporality and the Perfect: “English [...] does not allow the use of the perfect if a

2. From Latin “hodie” *today*.

definite point in the past is meant, whether this be expressly mentioned or not. Sentences containing words like *yesterday* or *in 1879* require the simple preterit, so also sentences about people who are dead [...].” This principle is reflected in (2a) below, where use of the Perfect is infelicitous if uttered at any time after the monarch’s life, in contrast with (2b), which may be produced long after her death, by virtue of the fact that Queen Victoria here belongs in a class of people having all visited Brighton. The property described is evidently not restricted to animate subjects, see ex. (3):

- (2) a. *Queen Victoria **has visited** Brighton.
 b. Even Queen Victoria **has visited** Brighton. (Palmer 53)
- (3) a. England **has had** many able rulers.
 b. *Assyria **has had** many able rulers. (Bradley 67)

It is now standard, following Musan (272), to refer to the temporal constraint at play in these examples in terms of a *lifetime effect*: the infelicity of (3b) is thus owed to the temporal hiatus between a now defunct subject, i.e. Assyria, and the choice of the Present Perfect. To be sure, the temporality of linguistic arguments does not solely reflect objective criteria, e.g. the time-bound existence of Assyria, but is first and foremost a linguistic construct. As an illustration of this point, the grammatical subject Shakespeare in (4a-b) takes its temporal cue from the nature of the predication, and can thus be viewed either as time-bound in (4a) (i.e. attached to the man’s life), or as atemporal—and so connected with the moment of speech—in (4b). According to the canon, therefore, the latter alone evinces compatibility with the present tense of the copula verb:

- (4) a. *Shakespeare is a notorious drunkard.
 b. Shakespeare is a renowned playwright. (Lakoff 844-5)

Lifetime constraints explain the infelicity of (5a) below: the timespan attached to the subject being disconnected from the moment of speech, use of the Perfect is ruled out. But, as it turns out, (5b) can quite aptly defeat the lifetime constraint. How so? The suggestion is made here that the acceptability of (5b) can be puzzled away if one considers that Aristotle is not the topic of discourse: what is being discussed is who if anyone within the class of philosophers may have already tackled the philosophical question at hand. It is in this context that the name of Aristotle is provided, on the grounds of his affiliation to the class of philosophers. As such, he exhibits the required contemporaneity which licenses (5b), a status of which he would be deprived otherwise, should he be considered *per se*:

- (5) a. *Aristotle **has written** the Ethics.
 b. Aristotle **has treated** the subject in his Ethics. (Lakoff 844-5)

Far from being restricted to subjects, this constraint applies to different grammatical roles in the predication, e.g. (6a), as well as to adjuncts,

e.g. (6b), so that both instances similarly imply that the Monet exhibition is still open:

- (6) a. **Have you visited** the Monet exhibition? (McCawley 107)
 b. **Have you been** to the Monet exhibition?

The lifetime constraint may be capricious in its application. This is for instance made clear in (7a-b), where the respective referential values attached to Gottlob Frege (German philosopher, 1848-1925) differ radically, as is reflected in the infelicity of (7a):

- (7) a. *Frege **has been frightened** by many people.
 b. Frege **has been denounced** by many people. (Inoue 580)

Undoubtedly, the mundane nature of the predication in (7a), and so its temporal restriction to a limited set of events, means that reference is here made to a mere mortal, whose transient existence upon this earth is bound between the dates of his birth and death, a period which stands in clear disconnection with the moment of speech and by way of consequence disallows the Perfect. By contrast, (7b) sets the scene not for the impermanent being of flesh and bones going by the name of Frege but, by metonymy, for the corpus of philosophical and mathematical thinking that he embodies, which, in view of its magnitude, transcends the boundaries of time and so reaches up uninterruptedly to the moment of speech, thereby warranting the Perfect.

The Perfect in narrative contexts: the *historical* Perfect

It makes theoretical sense to consider the Perfect with temporal reference to proceed diachronically from a loosening of the aspectual meaning denoted by the resultative Perfect, a putatively earlier usage itself descended directly from the original matrix of many perfects: the stative *have* + *object* + *participial adjective* construction. It is safe to assume that this process of emancipation must have benefited from the addition within the scope of the *have*-Perfect of the absolute construction with transitive verbs, followed by that of intransitive verbs. It is difficult to ascertain, however, how much of the entire process predates the Old English period, where resultative and temporal meanings coexisted already, cf. (8-9) below.

The Perfect in (8) is a textbook instance of an aspectually resultative meaning, with explicit completion of the “healing” event and observable consequent change of state, i.e. the blind can now see :

- (8) Ða stóð se Hælend, and het lædan þone blindan to him. Ðaða he genealæhte, þa acsode se Hælend hine, Hwæt wylt ðu þæt ic þe dó? He cwæð, Drihten, þæt ic mage geseon. And se Hælend him cwæð to, Loca nu: þin geleafa hæfð ðe gehæled. And he ðærrihte geseah, and fyligde þam Hælende, and hine mærsode.

[Old English c990 AD] *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church Containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Ælfric*, in the Original Anglo-Saxon, with an English Version. Volume I. Dominica in quinquagesima

(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38334/38334-h/38334-h.htm>)

Jesus then stood, and bade them lead the blind man to him. When he came near Jesus asked him, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? He said, Lord, that I may see. And Jesus said to him, Look now: thy faith hath healed thee. And he immediately saw, and followed Jesus, and glorified him. [Transl.]

Contemporaneous with this aspectual meaning, the Old English Perfect was also liable to play the role of what Bybee *et al.* (18, *passim*) call an *anterior*, where the form expresses not a current *result* but current *relevance*, i.e. “[reference to a past action perceived as] relevant to the current situation.” Such a function is exhibited in (9) below:

- (9) Ða wæs sum ðegen, Annanias geháten, and his wíf Saphíra: hí cwædon him betweenan, þæt hí woldon bugan to ðæra apostola geferrædene. Namon ða to ræde, þæt him wærlícor wære, þæt hí sumne dæl heora landes wurðes æthæfdon, weald him getimode. Com ða se ðegen mid feo to ðam apostolum. Ða cwæð Petrus, Annania, deofol bepæhte ðine heortan, and ðu hæfst alogen þam Halgan Gaste. Hwí woldest ðu swician on ðinum agenum? Ne luge ðu na mannum, ac Gode. (*ibid.*, In die Sco Pentecosten)

Then was a thane, called Ananias, and his wife Sapphira: they said between themselves, that they would incline to the fellowship of the apostles. They then resolved, that it would be safer to withhold a portion of the worth of their land, in case aught befell them. The thane then came with the money to the apostles. Then said Peter, Ananias, the devil hath cheated thy heart, and thou hast lied to the Holy Ghost. Why wouldst thou deceive in thine own? Thou hast not lied to men, but to God. (1844 translation by Benjamin Thorpe)

- ➔ *[more accurately: the devil cheated thy heart, and thou hast lied to the Holy Ghost. Why wouldst thou deceive in thine own? Thou lied not to men, but to God. (MF)]*

In (9), the Perfect *ðu hæfst alogen*³ is framed by two verb forms in the Past tense,⁴ which begs the question of what motivates the tense alternation. The first observation to be made is that the Perfect in the context displays little in the way of aspectual denotation, notably with regard to the attainment of some end-point of the eventuality in question, or to some resultant state. Rather, it takes on a temporal function, and demonstrates in the process a manifest ability to appear in an ordered sequence of events. Is it, for all that, exempt of any sort of denotation vis-a-vis the situation of speech? The proposed answer is in the negative, and the suggestion is made here that the pattern in (9) is an early

3. “alogen” (*aleogan*, var. of *leogan*): *to lie, tell falsehoods*, strong verb Class II, past participle.

4. “bepæhte” (*bepæcan*): *cheat, deceive*, weak verb, Past 3Sg. “luge” (*leogan*): *lie, tell falsehoods*, strong verb, Class II, Past 2Sg.

The modern translation (1844) puts all three events in the Perfect, in a narrative sequence modelled on the historical Perfect, no doubt on the assumption that tense-switching is here meaningless. Such is not my understanding. (MF)

attestation of the Perfect of *current relevance*, whose timespan is an *extended now* (or “Xnow”), so-called after McCoard (123) and Dowty, in reference to a period extending uninterruptedly from the present to some indefinite point in the past. A Perfect of current relevance, then, but one with an important additional twist, insofar as example (9) displays not one but two timelines, that of the framing events in the Past tense, offering a background, and that of a foregrounded event, in the Perfect. The situation aptly illustrates what Mustanoja had in mind, though his interest was with Middle English: “When the writer wishes to awaken in the reader a feeling of concern or strong emotion, the perfect tense is used to emphasize the importance, dreadfulness, pathetic quality, etc., of the event or situation” (506-7). In this particular function, the Perfect is usually called *historical* or *narrative* Perfect (cf. Gräf; Mustanoja), in reference to a similar role played by the Present tense for foregrounding purposes in traditional oral narratives. Two timelines, then, because, on the one hand, the focalised event remains bound within an ordered sequence of discrete events located in a disconnected past—this is how the historical Perfect generates a perfective effect—whilst, on the other, an illusion of synchronicity is produced as a rhetorical device in the speaker/addressee relationship, the better to bring a past event to the fore in order to highlight its importance (or dreadfulness, etc.) via the effect of current relevance thus enabled. Here, it may be suggested that the event in the Perfect is brought to the fore because it carries a notion of consequence: if they lied to the Holy Ghost, it is because the Devil had taken hold of their hearts.

Tense-switching has long been acknowledged as a narrative device, and a number of studies have borne in particular on the alternation between the past and present tenses (Gräf, Schiffrin, Fleischman, Fludernik), especially in medieval oral narratives. The device remains prolific in Present-Day English, notably in informal narrative genres, e.g. (10-11):

- (10) [...] and it was quite a big document, it was like thirty pages long, and all of a sudden it's **gone** through, and the printer's **just started** printing, it's **got** to page thirty, and it's **kept** going, and I couldn't stop the printer [...]. (Cheshire 2005 *Queen Mary Narrative Corpus*; in Levey 2006, 137)

Ex. (11) below is particularly noteworthy insofar as the long collection of perfects is split between a first set of standard Xnow / current relevance forms and a second sequential set of perfective events, beginning probably with “Alan's laid it in his path” and ending with “I've looked.” It is suggested that the moment of the missed opportunity at the penalty spot offers a temporal beacon allowing the narrative shift:

- (11) [Interview given by Graeme Souness, manager Newcastle United] Well, I thought that apart from the goal we were the better team today, I mean Shay's **made** a fantastic save in the first half, but apart from that, had nothing to do, and we've **had** some really great opportunities, Brad(s?) saved one, Alan's **put** one

wide, and Lee's **had** a great opportunity at the penalty spot where Alan's **laid** it in his path [...]. [about the goal] Morten's **handballed** it in, and the ref's **had** a good look at it, and he's **looked** at his linesman, and I've **looked** at both of them, so between them, they'll be disappointed when they see it on TV. (Walker 2011, 73)

As illustrated in this survey, use of the narrative Perfect is most productive in the world of sport, and nowhere more so than in football commentaries (cf. Walker 2008, 2011), usually in the course of exchanges produced at half time or after a match, when sport commentators and players typically find themselves in a studio reviewing a match, sometimes helped in this task by a TV monitor upon which key actions are played back to invite comments. This technical innovation may be conjectured to have played a key role in the expansion of the grammatical usage under consideration: earliest attestations indeed date back to the 70s, which matches exactly the time when digital video equipment revolutionised TV production techniques.

Having acquired high social visibility and made its way into everyday usage among football aficionados and lower income urban populations in general, the pattern was bound to generate a matching movement of repulsion from the other end of the social spectrum. Here is one such reaction from *Guardian* journalist David McKie, occasioned by a sample of historical Perfects:

- (12) "Here, for instance, is Tommy Saunders, manager of Chippenham FC of the Dr Marten's Premier League, reported in the Wiltshire Gazette & Herald, several days after the Bluebirds succumbed 3-1 to soaraway Newport County. 'We've **missed** absolute sitters [...] Mark Badman **has kicked** it straight at the goalie from five yards. Our luck was summed up in the last minute when Steve Brown **has put** in an absolute pearler of a cross to Charlie Griffin and, from four yards, he **has managed** not to put it in the net.'

I think what is happening here is that Brooking and Saunders are reliving events so deeply stamped on their consciousness that they seem to be happening still. The tense involved here deserves a name of its own: the '**re-enactment perfect**,' perhaps. What worries me is that the practice may spread." (David McKie, *The Guardian*, 3 October 2002)

David McKie's label of *re-enactment* is indeed spot on and easily applied to any number of similar examples. It fits, for instance, the context of (13) below to a T: Police Ten 7 is a very popular reality TV show aired in New Zealand, where a former police officer revisits crime cases. These unfold on the screen with their own (recreated) historical timeline. As horrors take place, the former inspector surveys it all as an invisible bystander talking all the while to the show's presenter who is in the studio, and delivering a blow-by-blow account of the crime as it was committed, no horrid detail excluded. To help TV viewers along the way, "re-enacted" scenes are blurred, though they may have their own sound track for better effect (shouts, shots, etc.).

As he delivers his account, the ex-police officer alternates skilfully between backgrounding use of the Past tense for lesser events, and foregrounding use of the historical Perfect, for dramatic effect when things accelerate and turn sour... The use of *then* in (13) shows that the events are pictured as discrete entities in an ordered sequence:

- (13) GB: He's dropped the gun while he's doing the robbery
 DK: That's right yeah – he's then **bent** down, **picked** these items up [*i.e. the gun plus some medicines mentioned earlier in the narrative*]. He's then **left** the store with his accomplice. (Cox 2005: 113-4, New Zealand Police Ten 7 TV programme, 2.16/3.2.1-3.4.4)

Its high visibility notwithstanding, the historical Perfect in Present-Day English remains generally frowned upon, in particular when used outside the realm of sport. David McKie's disdainful rejection of the pattern in sport commentaries is unsurprisingly echoed in the damning judgment passed by New Zealand magistrate Cecile Rushton who, in an interview given to the *Christchurch Star* (6 August 2003) on the occasion of her retirement, complains about those police officers who “use this peculiar *has done this*, and *has done that* tense,” confessing that she has been “fighting that grammar for the last 16 years to no avail” (Cox 120).

It appears to be the case that Australian police officers, but also their New Zealand colleagues, have elevated the use of the historical Perfect in their reports to the status of a norm. This predilection has not failed to attract the attention of linguists (e.g. Cox, Engel and Ritz, Ritz and Engel, Ritz), but outside of hypothetical considerations on the likelihood of a—perhaps not so far-fetched—influence of football lingo on the syntax of Australian and New Zealand police officers, nothing much has surfaced to-date to explain why this particular profession is at the forefront of language innovation. Example (14) offers a typical illustration selected from a wealth of similar instances found in Australian police media releases:

- (14) Police have charged a 38-year-old woman with four counts of serious assault and one count each of serious assault police and obstruct police after an incident yesterday. Around 3.45pm police attended an address on Nicol Way at Brendale regarding a disturbance. Upon arrival a woman **has** allegedly **become** abusive and aggressive towards police officers. The woman **has** then allegedly **punched** an officer in the face and then **spat** on him, she was then arrested and allegedly **spat** on a further two officers during the struggle. (Queensland, Police media release, 28 January 2009)

From a structural point of view, the temporal framework in (14) mirrors the typical pattern established so far, of backgrounded events favouring the Past tense, with a shift to the Perfect for a foregrounding effect justified by the introduction of complicating action into the narrative (cf. Labov, 363-70).

Police media releases are written by specially-appointed officers who do not physically leave the premises of the police station but work out of

reports brought to them by police constables. These latter accounts are strictly protected from the prying eyes of the public—linguists included, alas!—and so no one can say how much syntactic rewriting is actually put in at the level of media officers themselves. Media releases are collected daily by the press, and are frequently read out *verbatim* by radio or TV journalists, or printed out untouched in the written press.

There are strong indications that in the UK, Australia and New Zealand—though not, it would seem, in Canada or the USA—the historical Perfect as a narrative device may be expanding to the coverage of other popular sports or social activities, e.g. snooker (cf. Williams 18), and to informal narratives of the type shown in (10) above. Denison (193) quotes an instance of a similar narrative Perfect in a British newspaper, and suggests that the type may be on the increase. Still, this modern version of the historical Perfect appears to be marked as lower class, probably because of the way in which the tense oversaturates the language of football commentaries. It comes therefore as no surprise that someone like British comedian Catherine Tate, who by profession always keeps an ear to the ground for the latest language fad, will have clicked on the potential interest it offered for comedic purposes, e.g. the (hilarious) narrative quoted in full in (15)⁵:

- (15) – It’s been such a mental day today. You wouldn’t believe it! Lunchtime, right, I tells Hayley I fancy a jacket potato. She says, “I’m going to Pret A Manger,” so I walks down with her ‘cause it’s on the way. In the end, we’ve ended up sharing a jacket potato, cottage cheese and a salade niçoise. We’ve gone back to work, we’ve got in the lift, next thing I know, the doors have opened, she’s walked out, I’ve followed her out, I’ve taken one look around me... I’m only on the fifth floor, ain’t I?! I’m only on the fifth floor in Human Resources.
 – You don’t work in Human Resources, babe.
 – I know! I’m on the fifth floor in Human Resources. I’m supposed to be on the third in Personnel! Well, we have gone off into uncontrollable hysterics! She said, “What you doing up here?” I says, “I’ve only followed you out, ain’t I?” She said to me, “You’re a lunatic! What you gonna do now?” I said, “I think I’ll just walk back down.”
 – What’s Human Resources?
 – I dunno!
 (https://subslikescript.com/series/The_Catherine_Tate_Show-441051/season-1/episode-4-Episode_14)

This narrative (beginning with “Lunchtime”) starts off in earnest with a succession of historical Presents⁶ and resumes at “we’ve ended up” for an entire sequence of historical Perfects whose role is to bring to the fore the supposedly striking sequence of events that unfold after the narrator’s lunch. Comic effect in the passage is obtained via the blatantly

5. Cf. also Walker (2008, 301) for further analysis.

6. Note the use of non-standard final –s in 1Sg.

ill-assorted articulation of a trivial set of events, on the one hand, with a powerful narrative device more typically used to showcase dramatic turns of events, on the other. Although the hiatus works by itself—a dim-witted secretary builds up beyond reason a string of non-events—the target of the caricature is probably not so much this vacuous individual as the rhetorical mannerisms that she churns out *ad absurdum*.

The Perfect and definite past time adverbials

The remaining paragraphs of this overview will be devoted to the combination of the Perfect with definite past time adverbials. As mentioned earlier (cf. Comrie; Dahl), the canonical view of the Present Perfect is that combinations with definite past time adverbials are not felicitous e.g. *yesterday, on Thursday, at four o'clock*, etc., e.g. (16):

(16) *John has left at four.

This restriction, it must be noted, does not apply universally to all varieties of World Englishes⁷ (cf. *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English*). Nor does it apply to non-finite Perfect constructions, e.g. (17 a-b-c):

- (17) a. Myriam must have left at four.
 b. For Myriam to have left at four is rather unusual.
 c. Myriam having left at four, she was able to catch her train on time.

Giorgi & Pianesi propose an interpretation of the ungrammaticality of (16) within the constraints of the extended now concept, and attribute it to a “mismatch between the ‘past’ meaning of an adverb such as **at four** and the present-like interpretation of the tense” (85-6). In other words, a sentence whose truth value is pragmatically anchored in the present of speech time will license additional temporal specification on the sole condition that its scope includes speech time, e.g. adverbials like *today, these days*, but not *yesterday* or *at four*.

Pastness is therefore not a criterion in itself. What matters is whether the past time interval reaches up to speech time, or not. Which leaves out as totally irrelevant the criterion of relative recency: any adverbial specification delimiting a discrete eventuality, e.g. *EVENT + at four*, but also quite similarly *EVENT + two seconds ago*, will necessarily generate a temporal disconnection with respect to speech time, and so translate into the unwanted mismatch...

One notes, however, that the felicity of (16), rephrased in (18), does not invalidate the constraints previously outlined:

7. A number of varieties of English spoken worldwide (e.g. India, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Bahamas; to a lesser extent Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania, Fiji) show no restriction of any sort vis-à-vis the combination of Perfect and definite past time reference.

- (18) Now that, for the first time in his life, John **has left at four**, he will perhaps take pity on those who have to do so every morning.

Indeed, what makes (18) felicitous is the fact that adverbial *at four* evinces a generic meaning. The relevance of this feature is further verified in the acceptability of (19-20-21):

- (19) Jill **has** {often/never/always} **left at four**.
- (20) – Why is Chris in jail?
– He **has worked on Sunday**⁸ and working on Sunday is strictly forbidden in this country. (Klein 1992, 549)
- (21) When we remember our last shopping trip, we might also remember what the grocery store looked like: we might recall its colour, its shape, its arrangement, and so forth. When we do this, we are aware of the fact that the image in front of our ‘inner eye,’ so to speak, is an image of the grocery store we **have seen yesterday or a week ago**. (Anselm Oelze, *Animal Rationality: Later Medieval Theories, 1250-1350*. Leiden: Brill, 2018, 170-71)

Evidence confirming that specific events are disfavoured can be found in the (near-) impossibility of focalising such events with the Perfect in WH-questions (though non-specific experiential meaning is licensed, provided iteration makes sense), cf. Kiparsky.

- (22) a. *Where have you found my watch? [resultative (NO)/experiential (YES)]
b. *Where has Archduke Ferdinand died? [resultative (NO)/experiential (NO)]
c. Where have you hidden my watch? [resultative (YES): takes hiding event for granted/experiential (YES)]

The constraint justifying the infelicity of (16) operates in the same fashion with objective referential adverbials (e.g. *in 1987*) or anaphoric adverbials, e.g. *in the evening (of that day)*, *on Sunday (of that week)*. By contrast, indefinite time adverbials (cf. McCoard; Klein), e.g. *recently*, *lately*, *just*, etc., may freely collocate with the Perfect:

- (23) We **have earlier today heard** very good testimony from Mr. Alexander. (1946, *Hearings of the Committee on Education and Labor*, vol. 1, p.145)

An important incidence of the fuzziness expressed by the adverbial is that the latter generates no patent disconnection with speech time. The usefulness of the notion of *semi-definite* adverbials coined by Declerck (249) to account for instances such as (24) below remains to be ascertained, in the absence of clear indications as to its purpose or limitations, but also how definiteness is actually quantified:

- (24) I **have this minute heard** that the deal is off.

8. A similar effect is achieved, and perhaps more likely, with the use of an indefinite article: *on a Sunday*.

The pattern shown in (23-24) displays events as perceived retrospectively, with regard to their current relevance, i.e. the bearing they have on the situation of speech: both signify that the subject is newly (23), or very newly (24) apprised of some important information. A variant of this type is available where, rather than a *single* event, the Perfect denotes a *class* of events, e.g. (25):

- (25) A few of *you* **have in the past tried** to write to students you are sponsoring and sometimes not gotten replies from them.
(<http://www.northernmagic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Report-22.pdf>)

In (25), the stock of events for each subject is not implicitly limited in number, and focalisation does not target the events and their consequences but the *subjects* themselves. This is therefore tantamount to a predication of existence: the stock of events is viewed as forming part of the stock of experience of each grammatical subject. This type of Perfect goes indeed by the name of *Perfect of experience*⁹ (cf. Poutsma; Zandvoort). As pointed out by Depraetere (604), the likelihood of an experiential interpretation for a sentence such as *I have opened the door* is conditioned by a lack of interest for the current state of the door in question, so that attention may successfully shift to the grammatical subject, and in particular the subject's proven ability to open that door.

Interestingly, in predications where multiple events are concerned, and where the situation at speech time is not focalised as verifying some consequent state, the Perfect seems to display a greater degree of compatibility with definite past time adverbials, e.g. (26-27). Furthermore, contrary to examples (18-19-20-21), they do not constrain a generic interpretation. Pending further investigation, it will be assumed that these instances count as Perfects of experience:

- (26) Cossiga, Francesco: became president of Italy in 1985. He became MP for Cagliari in 1963. He **has served** as Minister for Public Administration **from 1974 to 1978**, Prime Minister **from 1979 to 1980**, and President of the Senate **from 1983 to 1985**. (BBC English Dictionary s.v. 'Cossiga')
- (27) Mrs. Thatcher set up the group following a proposal from Mr. Ferdinand Mount [...]. It met for the first time in July and **has met** subsequently **on September 10, November 30 and January 19**. (*The Guardian Weekly*, 27 February 1983)
- (28) How has he been occupying himself this week?
a. *Well, he has played golf on Tuesday.
b. Well, so far he has played golf on Tuesday.
c. *Well, he has played golf on Tuesday, has ridden horseback on Wednesday, and has rested on Thursday.
d. Well, he has played golf on Tuesday, ridden horseback on Wednesday, and rested on Thursday.

9. Or *experiential Perfect*.

Examples (28 a-b-c-d), borrowed from Pancheva & von Stechow, confirm the above observations. They show that in the case of a single event, mismatch between speech time and event time is infelicitous. This is made clear in (28c), where each instance of the repeated **have** auxiliary refers in turn to a single event. In contrast, in (28d), the string of events forms a class under the heading of the same auxiliary. Lastly, the felicity of (28b) is owed to the presence of *so far*, which equally implies that the event of *playing golf* may form part of a class of events.

The few instances quoted thus far provide only a sample of instances of a pattern—the Perfect with definite past time adverbials—whose actual productivity exceeds what is generally assumed to be the case. As expected, prescriptivist rejection of such patterns most often prevails. On occasion, however, the explanations given to account for what has been described as “performance errors” (the expression is used by Quirk *et al.*, 195 fn a.) are in themselves interesting. Thus, in particular, with Abbott, who chastises the Bard’s grammar in (29) for what he feels “can only be explained by a slight change of thought” (245):

- (29) D.Pedro. Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?
 Claud. I have drunk poison whiles he uttered it. (Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, v.i. 253)

While (29) cannot exactly qualify as an instance of experiential perfect, its acceptability appears nonetheless to be in some way facilitated by the implication of protractedness conferred upon the event of uttering by the nature of its grammatical object (i.e. the substantial speech delivered by a cruel Borachio), from which derives the evidence of Claudio’s prolonged agony. Abbott’s keen perception of stylistic propriety is not at fault, and credit must be given where credit is due: the grammatical pattern is well-spotted as it is clearly at odds with the canon. As it happens, Abbott’s explanation finds succour in the great grammarian Poutsma who, faced with the fact that so many instances of the incriminated pattern (cf. (30) to (33)) crop up within the otherwise impeccable prose of renowned authors, shows wisdom in opting to see logic in this usage. Here is his penetrating argument, worth quoting in full:

Although English is reputed to be very strict in the use of the preterite when the predicate is accompanied by an adjunct or clause denoting an epoch of the past, yet observant reading will soon bring to light a goodly number of instances in which the rule is disregarded. Nor can it be urged that the English in which such instances are met with is of questionable purity.

A careful observation of the cases in which the perfect is used contrary to the rule will reveal the fact that in almost all of them the adjunct denoting the epoch of the past has back position or is, at least, placed after the predicate. It is, indeed, not improbable that deviation from the ordinary practice is in the majority of cases due to this fact: the speaker starting to make a statement without any clear thought of a past epoch, the latter occurring to him almost by way of an afterthought as he approaches the conclusion. (Poutsma 260)

The following is a selection of instances borrowed from Poutsma's *Grammar*:

- (30) I am told he **has had** another execution in the house **yesterday**. (Sheridan, *School*, I, I, 365)
- (31) Indeed I **have seen** Blanche, **six or seven years ago**, when she was a girl of eighteen. (Ch. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Ch. XVI, 191)
- (32) All these instances **have been given** in *Notes and Queries* **many years ago**. (Skeat, *Notes & Quer.*, 1889, 1 March)
- (33) We **have had** well over 800.000 casualties in France **last year**. (*Eng. Rev.*, No. III, 186)

Poutsma's description of the adverbial modification as an *afterthought* is evidently modelled upon Abbott's *change of thought*. It views the adverbial as a late addition, and so, implicitly, as peripheral to the main clause. Congruent with this description is indeed the fact that it cannot be prosodically prominent, but is given "comma-like" intonation. Commenting on (34) below, Poutsma (260) further adds that this pattern is especially productive "when there is a distinct reference to a state of things resulting from an activity in the past," adding that here "the attention is directed to the moisture on the grass, shrubs, etc., as the result of the phenomenon of thawing":

- (34) Evidently it **has thawed during the night**. (OED., s.v. 'it', 3a)

A similar perception of the external status of the adverbial phrase is probably at the root of Swan's (443) suggestion that the type is found "in brief news items, where space is limited and there is pressure to announce the news and give the details in the same clause."

The Perfect with definite past time adverbials is also especially productive when these are preceded by *only*, e.g. (35-36-37):

- (35) Yesterday FN Arena brought you a global inflation warning from respected Morgan Stanley economist Andy Xie (Be Warned, Inflation Is Coming) and although Xie's warning is of a longer term nature, we **have only last night witnessed** the scope of inflation fears in the US as the Dow fell 214 points on the CPI numbers.
(<https://www.fnarena.com/index.php/2006/05/18/inflation-has-arrived-and-theres-more-to-come/>)
- (36) I **have only yesterday** installed the plugin (Moodle 1.8.6) and read some of the forum threads. (<https://moodle.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=105726>)
- (37) I have had lessons since the age of 11 and **have only last year stopped** them.
(<https://www.mandy.com/uk/singer/shannon-smith>)

In combinations with time adverbials, *only* has been variously described as a focus particle (cf. König), or a pragmatic marker (cf. Walker 2018) specialising in the expression of emphasis or surprise (mirative function). In the examples quoted here, *only* restricts the range of possible values to one, viewed as the least anticipated, desired, etc. These indexical adverbials (e.g. *last night*, *last year*, *yesterday*) do not appear to felicitously commute freely with other types of time adverbials, eg. (36’):

(36’) *I have **only on July 3rd** installed the plugin.

This leads to the tentative assumption that *only last night/week/year*, or *only yesterday* all express in fact a degree of relative recency with respect to the moment of speech, one that is found in some way sufficiently remarkable to be underlined.

Instances also abound which support Poutsma’s suggestion for (34), that contexts verifying a change of state favour the Perfect in spite and regardless of any past time specification, e.g. (38-39-40):

(38) It is 4th of July. It is Washington’s night of nights. The diplomatic Pym **have arrived a week ago** to take up his appointment as Deputy Head of Station. (J. Le Carré, *A Perfect Spy*, 576)

(39) It’s my problem, not yours. Or if it is yours, you’ve **solved it long ago** by saying it’s all a lot of damned nonsense. (S. O’Faolain, *Lovers of the Lake*, in *The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories*, 147)

(40) As for the television industry itself, it **has long ago dropped** so low in public respect that there are now few contenders for a lower spot. (*The Baltimore Sun*, 15 July 1991)

Interest for the situation prevailing at speech time in these instances makes all the more sense if one argues that *ago*, on its own or within complex adverbial expressions, may still somehow reflect the original meaning of the term. Indeed, *ago*, originally a past participle, derives from the O-E verb *āgān*, signifying *come to pass*, *come about*, and more specifically, when speaking of time, *pass*, *elapse*. Thus, (39) specifies less a time of occurrence in the past than the breadth of the time interval extending beyond the “solving” event and right down to the moment of speech, a time interval throughout which the consequent state following the event is seen to obtain.

It must be noted that from its earliest attestations, *ago* wavers, as it were, between the two ends of the temporal interval it specifies: now focussing attention on the distal end of the interval, and so upon *event* time, now favouring speech time, for the retrospective vantage point it affords. The former is presumably at play in (38), in the less productive context of a definite temporal denotation, while the latter is evidenced in (39-40).

Conclusion

The norm for the Perfect strictly excludes any mismatch between event time and speech time, and only allows co-referent (e.g. *now, today...*) or indefinite specification (e.g. *lately...*). Specific reference is disallowed irrespective of the degree of temporal proximity (e.g. **five seconds ago*).

From the various patterns inventoried and discussed here, however, a more complex picture emerges.

It is too early to say if any lasting change will come out of the current predilection for the historical Perfect in some geographically and socially circumscribed varieties of English, and notably its striking compatibility with specific reference in various marked sub-genres, e.g. Australian Police media releases, sport commentaries. Although some such instances may be viewed as illustrations of an advanced stage of perfectivisation—i.e. reference to chronologically ordered independent events—they do not as yet clearly meet the criterion of effacement of speaker subjectivity to count as aorists and still retain a key testimonial¹⁰ component. Subjective presence can indeed be argued in patterns where definite past time specification is introduced as a peripheral addition to the main clause, whether in clause final or medial position. Here again, any hint of aoristicisation must be ruled out, and the type is ill-suited for narrative functions such as objective reference and ordered sequences of events: when the Perfect is combined with definite past time adverbials, these play an ancillary role with regard to the crucial current relevance expressed by the verb phrase, and cannot therefore be given topical prominence through fronting:

- (41) **Six or seven years ago, I have seen Blanche.*
- (42) **In France last year, we have had well over 800.000 casualties.*
- (43) **Only last night, I have installed the plugin.*

Yet, strong as this prohibition against fronting appears to be across varieties of English, it fails strikingly to operate in the reportative style of Australian Police media releases, e.g. (44), where Ritz (2010: 3406) notes that 53% of definite past time adverbials in her corpus actually favour clause-initial position:

- (44) *At about 3.20 pm yesterday a man has entered the Eat-N-Run take away store on golden Four Drive, Bilinga, armed with a rifle. (Ritz 2010: 3406)*

In conclusion, the English Perfect shows in usage a far greater degree of compatibility with definite past time reference and perfectivity than is generally sanctioned in prescriptive grammars, some of which is

10. See Corre for a discussion of *evidentiality* and the Perfect.

evidenced from the earliest stages of the language and throughout its history. In Present-Day English, significant fluctuations in usage of the patterns under consideration are often regionally, sociolinguistically or stylistically marked, cf. the narrative or reportative use. For all that, the Perfect remains firmly anchored in speech time, and there is little indication that it is at this stage on the verge of becoming an aorist proper, nor replacing the simple past altogether.

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