

### Analysis of the Present Perfect Tense in English and it's Classification

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#### ABSTRACT

*The present perfect expresses completed action and it is formed with have or has and the past participle form of the main verb. The present perfect is often considered to be one of the most semantically complex structures in English because it expresses a variety of meanings and is related to "a situation set in some indefinite period that leads to the present" (Greenbaum and Nelson 2002:56). There has been a lot of research about the present perfect and its classification based on the meaning and/or context. It has been divided into several types (Comrie, 1976; Binnick, 1991; Iatridou, et al. 2001; Leech, 2004; Davydova, 2011, among others). This chapter is an overview of the research done by Comrie (1976), Iatridou et al. (2001), and Davydova (2011).*

According to Comrie (1976:56), the perfect aspect is generally defined as "the continuing relevance of a previous situation". He mentions that one diagnostic feature of the English perfect aspect is that it is not allowed to be used together with any phrases indicating a specific time of a past situation, for example, one would not say, "*I have got up at five o'clock this morning*", in which "*at five o'clock this morning*" refers to a specific time (p. 54). It does not mean that specification of time is excluded as such, as shown in "*I have seen Fred today*", or "*I have seen Fred this morning*", in which the utterance time is included within the specific time expressed by the adverbials *today* and *this morning* (p.54).

Comrie (1976) classifies the present perfect into four types: perfect of result, experiential perfect, perfect of persistent situation, and perfect of recent past.

First, let us consider the perfect of result.

(1) a. Tom lost the key. (non-perfect)

b. Tom has lost the key. (perfect)

In the case of the present perfect, a present state is regarded as the result of a certain past situation, which clearly illustrates the present connection to a past situation. Example (1a) indicates a past action and we do not have any information about the present state, i.e. whether he has found the key or not. On the other hand, example (1b) emphasizes not only the action itself but its relevant result: that he does not have the key in his hands at the utterance time. Let's look at another example.

(2) Sabina has cleaned the house. (The house is now clean.)

Comrie (1976) suggests that the perfect aspect indicates a connection between the past and the present. In example (2), *cleaning the house* is a completed past action and, relying on the present perfect *has cleaned*, the listener can understand that the action has a relevant result at the time of speaking. As illustrated in the above examples, the present perfect involves two time references: a past action and a present state.

Second, let us consider the experiential perfect. In the experiential perfect, the sentence covers the meaning that the subject has experienced a certain situation at least once in the past up to the present and often occurs with adverbials such as *once, twice, three times, ever, never*, etc.

(3) a. I have never visited Tokyo.

b. Mr. Choi has been to Samarkand.

c. Mr. Choi has gone to Samarkand.

Example (3a) indicates the speaker's experience of visiting Tokyo with the use of the adverbial *never*. As for examples (3b) and (3c), the verbs *be* and *go* obviously illustrate differences between the experiential perfect and the perfect of result (Comrie, 1976). Sentence (3b) expresses that Mr. Choi has had an experience of visiting Samarkand at least once in the past leading up to the utterance time. In contrast, sentence (3c) expresses that Mr. Choi left Korea in the past time and has not come back yet. Maybe he is in Samarkand or on his way there.

Third, let us consider the perfect of persistent situation.

(4) a. We have known each other for ten years.

b. We have known each other since 2009.

c. They have been discussing the matter for two hours.

The perfect of persistent situation expresses an action that started at a certain time in the past leading up to the present, with the time interval often expressed by *for* and *since*. In the above examples, both sentences (4a) and (4b) indicate an acquaintance which extends from 2009 up to the present. As in sentence (4a), if the speaker intends to illustrate the period, then the *for* phrase should be used. If the speaker intends to illustrate the starting point of the action, then a *since* phrase is used. In many cases, the present perfect progressive is employed, as in sentence (4c), where 'discussing the matter' is an action that happened continuously for two hours. Lastly, let us look at the perfect of recent past.

(5) a. The children have just slept.

b. I have been to the cinema recently.

The perfect of recent past denotes a situation that happened a short time ago or has just occurred, as in (5a) and (5b). In other words, this type of perfect means that, "the present relevance of the past situation referred to is simply one of temporal closeness, i.e. the past situation is very recent" (Comrie 1976:60). This occurs very often with adverbials such as *just, recently*, etc

According to Iatridou et al. (2001), the present perfect is employed to indicate an eventuality that occurred before the utterance time.

(6) a. Petros has visited Thailand. (p.190)

b. We have aired the room.

Example (6a) indicates that Petros visited Thailand in an indefinite past time prior to the utterance time.

Both the simple past and the present perfect share the same features. In other words, both of them indicate past action. However, Iatridou et al. (2001) proposed a distinction between the simple past and the present perfect on the basis of previous research. The simple past highlights “a temporal precedence between the Speech time and the Reference time” whereas, the present perfect highlights “a temporal precedence between the Event time and Reference time” (Hornstein 1990; cited in Iatridou et al. 2001:190).

Iatridou et al. (2001) also proposed four subtypes of the present perfect: the universal perfect (U-perfect), the experiential perfect, the perfect of result, and the perfect of recent past.

The universal perfect expresses an ongoing eventuality at an interval, from the past up to now, or indicates “that the predicate holds throughout some interval stretching from a certain point in the past up to the present” (Iatridou et al. 2001:191).

(7) a. We have been friends since 2003.

2003  Now

b. I have been training in the health center for two weeks.

Example (7a) indicates a friendship which runs from 2003 up to the present time with the starting point of the state indicated by *since*. Sentence (7b) utilizes the present perfect progressive, since the action is an ongoing habitual action and the predicate *train* can occur in the progressive form. The whole interval was mentioned in this sentence and used temporal preposition *for*.

Experiential perfect expresses that the subject has experienced a certain situation once, several times or never in the past up to the time of speaking.

(8) a. My daughter has never visited the Eifel Tower.

b. Have you ever been to Europe?

Example (8a) states that the speaker’s daughter has not visited the Eifel Tower so far in her lifetime. In questions, *ever* is used in experiential meaning or asking the listener if the subject has experienced some action or situation in the past indefinite time up to the present time, as in example (8b).

The perfect of result expresses an eventuality with the relevant result or “it is possible only with the telic predicates and only for as long as the effect of the underlying eventuality holds” (Iatridou 2001:155).

(9) a. I have curled my hair.

b. He has washed the dishes.

Example (9a) can be resultative perfect only if the predicate holds the result, or while the hair is still curly. As soon as the hair turns straight example (9a) can be considered as experiential perfect.

The perfect of recent past is employed to indicate a recent situation or an eventuality that has just occurred.

(10) a. The students have had many writing tasks recently.

b. The children have just arrived home.

This kind of perfect often occurs with temporal adverbs like *recently* and *just* as in examples (10a) and (10b).

Davydova (2011) mentions the simple past as an alternative of the present perfect and explains the simple past as “the location of the situation prior to the present moment” (p.53). She refers to two functions of the simple past: it either expresses an eventuality that held at a specific time in

the past or it narrates a range of past events that happened one after the other. These eventualities do not relate to the utterance time. Time adverbials such as *yesterday*, *some days ago*, *last year* (*week*, *month*), *in 1990* (exact years), etc. are employed for the simple past tense.

- (11) a. I visited Osaka last year.
- b. \* I have visited Osaka last year.<sup>7</sup>
- c. His eldest son moved to Chicago in 1990.
- d. We met him a few days ago.

When time adverb ‘last year’ is used, the simple past must be employed as in the sentence (11a). Using the present perfect with an adverb that indicates a specific time in the past, such as *last year*, creates a grammatically incorrect sentence, as in example (11b).

- (12) a. I baked a pie.
- b. I have baked a pie.

In the case of the above examples, sentence (12b) is preferable based on Standard English. However, according to the context, the simple past tense can be employed as in example (12a) (for example, “*I baked a pie. It was Friday when John arrived home.*”)

On the other hand, Davydova (2011) describes the present perfect as a “current relevance” of a past eventuality; in other words, the present perfect is preferable for a past eventuality with a present result, as in example (13a).

- (13) a. The children have done their homework.
- b. We have planted flowers in our garden.

Example (13a) indicates that the children finished the action in an indefinite past time, which could be any time before the time of speaking, but the action has current relevance as the task is complete by the time the statement is made.

Davydova (2011) presented four major types of the present perfect: the resultative perfect, the extended–now perfect, the experiential perfect, and the perfect of recent past. According to Davydova (2011:62), all of these types of the present perfect share the notion of current relevance and this notion is the main feature to distinguish the present perfect from the simple past tense. The degree of current relevance is marked according to the types of the present perfect as shown in Figure 1.

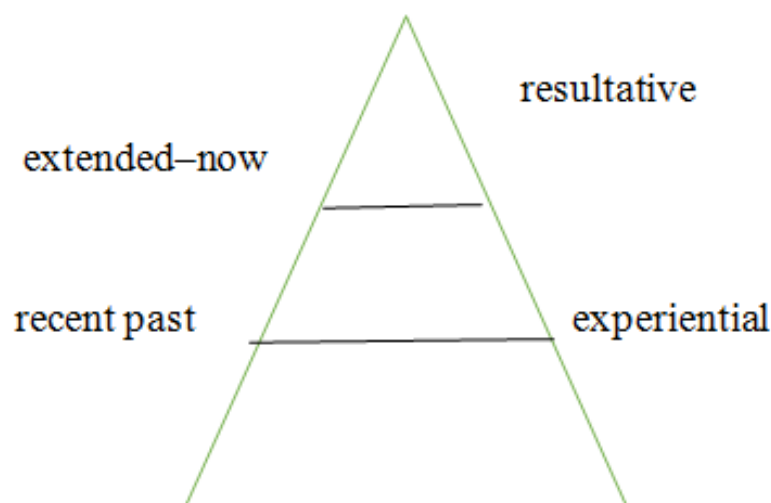


Figure 1. The hierarchy of uses of the present perfect (Davydova 2011:66)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the top positions are occupied by the resultative and the extended–now perfect, and this ranking indicates that these two types of the perfect are the most notable as opposed to the other two types of the perfect.

First, let us review the resultative perfect. Davydova (2011) asserts that the resultative perfect is the core meaning of the perfect, since this type of the perfect denotes the present (current) result of some past action or situation.

(14) a. He has broken his leg.

b. They have written three letters.

Both of sentences (14a) and (14b) show current relevance or present result of some past eventuality: (14a) expresses that the subject had a bad accident in the past and in the present he has a broken leg as a result, and (14b) indicates the result of three completed letters at the utterance time.

The extended-now perfect expresses an eventuality that a situation started in the past and persists into the present, which makes its current-relevant meaning quite notable. The continuous form of the perfect is used for progressive actions, and often occurs with time expressions such as, *since*, *for*, *for a long time*, and *up to now*, etc., as in (15a).

(15) a. I have been waiting for him since two o'clock. (It is three o'clock now.)

b. She has visited the church for six years.

In (15a), the starting point of the action is in the past, that is, the subject began to wait at two o'clock and the action is ongoing until the utterance time. Example (15b) expresses a habitual action, or the subject began to attend the church six years ago, and she has visited regularly up to the present time. As indicated in this example, the habitual perfect is another subtype of the extended–now perfect and expresses an eventuality that started in the past and has held regularly up to the present time.

The experiential perfect describes a situation or activity that has happened at least once or several times or never happened until now.

(16) a. I have been to Jeju-do once.

b. We have tried to make kimchi several times.

In the case of (16a), the experience of visiting Jeju-do island has happened from the indefinite past up to now, and this action can be repeated in future (in one's lifetime), thus we can consider it currently relevant. The last type is the perfect of recent past.

(17) a. I have just received an email.

b. The children have been to the theatre recently.

The perfect of recent past usually employs time adverbials such as *just* and *recently* and expresses a past situation which occurred recently or a short time before the speaking time, as in (17a) and (17b).

### Summary

Most linguists have proposed four major semantic types of the present perfect. This article, has focused on the four types proposed by Comrie (1976), Iatridou et al. (2001), and Davydova (2011).

Table 2 Four types by Comrie (1976)

Four types	Example sentences
The perfect of recent past	The children have just slept.
Experiential perfect	Mr. Choi has visited Samarkand.
The perfect of result	I have found the key.
The perfect of persistent situation	We have known each other for ten years.

Table 3 Four types by Iatridou (2001)

Four types	Example sentences
Universal perfect	We have been friends since 2003.
Experiential perfect	My daughter has never visited the Eifel Tower.
The perfect of result	I have curled my hair.
The perfect of recent past	The children have just arrived home.

Table 4 Four types by Davydova (2011)

Four types	Example sentences
The resultative perfect	He has broken his leg.
The extended–now perfect	I have been waiting for him since two o'clock
The experiential perfect	I have been to Jeju-do once
The perfect of recent past	I have just received an email.

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