

# Semantic Features of Verbs and Types of Present Perfect in English

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**Abstract:** English present perfect is usually divided into several types; however, analysis of concrete examples shows that such classifications into types depend on the context and on some semantic features of verbs. This paper discusses the interaction between such features and present perfect with the examples from the contemporary British novel (Lodge 1989). The discussed examples point to the following tendencies in such interaction: telic and momentary situations usually indicate that the goal was reached, while the stative and durative situations usually imply continuation or experience lasting up to the point of speech (often in the progressive aspect).

**Key words:** duration, English, present perfect, stativity, telicity

## 1. Introduction

English present perfect is one of the most complex finite verb forms in English, both because of its specific temporal structure (situation starting in the past, continuing to the point of speech and possibly after it) and because of the other components included in its interpretation. Older pedagogical grammars (e.g. Thomson & Martinet 1992, first edition 1960) and more recent larger ones (Quirk et al. 1985, Huddleston & Pullum 2002) try to explain it using a set of temporal and non-temporal features, dividing its uses into several types (e. g. the perfect of result, the perfect of recent past etc.), which are often directly or indirectly related to certain semantic features of lexical verbs (e.g. momentariness, stativity etc, *cf.* Brinton 1988). However, in the application of these divisions to the concrete language material (not just to the examples provided in grammar books), one often faces problems, because sometimes the temporal components, the semantic structure of verbs and the context create a complex string of interdependence and influence the type of the present perfect in different ways. Therefore, this paper would first discuss some general features usually related to the present perfect itself and then some semantic features of verbs which might influence the interpretation of this verb form.

## 2. English Present Perfect and Semantic Features of Verbs

Pedagogical English grammars like Thomson & Martinet (1992) usually discuss present perfect within the category of tense, and this is also the case with some more theoretically-oriented and comprehensive grammars like *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002). The latter treats present perfect as a non-deictic past tense within the section “Perfect Tense”, the secondary tense system. According to this grammar, the secondary past tense system includes the perfect as the marked member, and the non-perfect, as the unmarked member (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 139). As far as its temporal features are concerned, on the time-line present perfect occupies a portion of the past reaching up to the moment of speech, and possibly a portion of the future. Thus, for example, H. Reichenbach (1947: 290) uses the following formula to define present perfect: E – S, R (event in the past, reference point and the point speech coinciding) This is how he distinguishes it from the past

nonprogressive which is defined as R, E – S (reference point and event coinciding in the past, before the point of speech).

In some other comprehensive grammars (Quirk et al. 1985: 90) present perfect is included into English aspectual oppositions, and some authors include it into the category of phase (Palmer 1989: 46-47). The aspectual view is, for example, also advocated by Comrie (1976), who writes that perfect is a rather different aspect from the progressive, because “it tells us nothing about the situation in itself, but rather relates some state to a preceding situation” (Comrie 1976: 52), concluding that perfect is an aspect in a sense different from the English progressive-nonprogressive aspects. Comrie (among others), writing about aspect and inherent meaning, says that some inherent or semantic properties of lexical verbs “interact with other aspectual oppositions, either prohibiting certain combinations, or severely restricting their meaning” (Comrie 1976: 41). These properties may include punctual and durative, telic and atelic, as well as stative and dynamic situations (Comrie 1976: 41-51).

These properties (or at least some of them) seem to play an important role in the interpretation of present perfect in a specific context. To discuss these features, we would start from a general classification of lexical verbs into activities, states, accomplishments and achievements (*cf.* Vendler 1967). To outline this classification, we could say that activities are dynamic situations with possible duration whose segments are qualitatively equal (homogeneous), because the situation does not have a goal. States are non-dynamic, homogeneous, but without the dynamic segments, they have possible duration and do not imply a goal. Accomplishments are dynamic situations ending after some duration when a natural terminal point, a goal, is reached, while achievements are momentary situations. This classification of verbs is thus primarily based on three general semantic features: stativity, duration and telicity.

### *2.1 Types of Present Perfect*

Regardless of the temporal or aspectual approach, present perfect is usually divided into four basic types which are also often related to some semantic features of verbs. Such a division into the types of present perfect usually includes the perfect of result, the perfect of recent past, the perfect of persistent situation and the experiential perfect (Comrie 1976: 56-61), but there are other divisions like the division into the following types: state-up-to-the-present, indefinite past, habit-in-a-period-leading-up-to-the-present and resultative past (Leech 2004: 36-40). The second division explicitly includes some general components of the lexical meanings of verbs (stativity, duration) or the meanings implied in the syntactic context (habit, repetition, result), which points to the significant link between these components, context and the interpretation of present perfect. When one analyses the above-mentioned link between aspect and certain semantic features within the English present perfect, it seems that the semantic features of verbs usually do not prohibit the use of present perfect, but in some cases they might require a specific type of perfect. Actually, certain semantic features like telicity, duration, stativity seem to influence the very type of present perfect, for example the telic situations often lead to the perfect of result, and the stative ones to the perfect of persistent situation. Therefore, starting from this framework, this paper would try to investigate the influence of these semantic features of verbs and the context on the type of present perfect in the examples excerpted from a contemporary British novel - *Nice Work* by D. Lodge (the numbers in brackets after the examples denote the pages from that novel).

### 3. Corpus Analysis

The corpus includes 191 examples with present perfect from David Lodge's *Nice Work*; 170 of them are nonprogressive (89%) and 21 progressive (10,99%), 152 are dynamic (79,58%) and 39 stative (20,4%, all of them nonprogressive). These examples would be related to the three possibly significant semantic features – stativity, duration and telicity – and the types of present perfect. The analysis would start from the division of verbs into those denoting stative and those denoting dynamic situations.

#### 3.1 Stative Situations

It has already been mentioned that the typical stative situation implies possible (longer or shorter) duration, that it is homogeneous, it lacks dynamic segments, so it could be subdivided into temporal segments only; finally, it does not have a goal and it ends when another dynamic situation changes the existing state. Therefore, it is logical to expect that the stative verbs would have to select the context compatible with these features.

In addition, another theoretical assumption is necessary for this analysis - the usual classification of English stative verbs (*cf.* Quirk et al. 1985: 96) into the verbs of inert perception (e.g. *see, hear*), verbs of cognition (e.g. *know, believe*) and relational verbs (e.g. *own, resemble*).

As it has already been mentioned, the analyzed corpus contains 39 stative verbs in the nonprogressive present perfect, the most frequent verbs among them are the verb *be* and the verbs of perception *hear* and *see*, as well as the verbs *have, know, designate* and *notice*.

In the corpus, the copulative verb *be* is usually followed by a prepositional phrase or a noun phrase, denoting presence or existence of a certain state, for example:

- (1a) Vic has never been inside the place. (28)
- (1b) Haven't you ever been in love, then?' (293)
- (2a) ...he took a post at a university on the south coast of England, where he has been ever since, now occupying a personal Chair. (42)
- (2b) ...you've been a tremendous asset to the Department, even in the short time you've been here. (64)
- (2c) 'He's been with the company a long time.' (211)
- (2d) 'Thanks, but I've been up all night, printing off my book.' (330)
- (2e) We've been married twenty-three years. (237)
- (2f) 'I've been in love with you for weeks.' (293)

As for the type of present perfect in these examples, it seems that the feature stativity excluded the notion of result or of recent past, which was to be expected. Namely, these examples belong to the experiential perfect (1a, b) or the perfect of persistent situation (2a, b, c, d, e, f). Experiential perfect is accompanied by the usual adverbials (*ever, never*), and the perfect of persistent situation by the temporal adverbials for duration (*a long time, all night, ever since*).

The verbs of inert perception and cognition could be illustrated with the following examples:

- (3a) 'You've heard about Industry Year, Vic?' (88)
- (3b) 'I've seen her before', he said. (108)
- (3c) 'Haven't you noticed the way he's carrying on?' (201)

- (3d) 'I've never known you give a second's thought to serviette in your life before,' she said. (234)  
 (3e) You've known for some time this was going to happen. (370)  
 (3f) 'I've seen you in action. I've shadowed you.' (381)

These verbs, like some of the above-mentioned states, indicate experiential perfect (3a, b, d, e, f). In other words, it seems that the verbs of perception in this corpus tend to indicate that a certain perception occurred at least once (or not once) in the period up to now, perhaps with repetition, but without continual, uninterrupted duration. As for the example (3c), it could denote experience up to now (several times, with repetition) or recent past (once, without repetition).

### 3.2 Dynamic Situations

Unlike states, typical dynamic situations require some input of energy for the realization of the process they denote and they imply a repetition of dynamic segments. These situations are usually subdivided into several groups; the division into activities and process verbs is relevant for this discussion (Quirk et al. 1985: 95-96), the former requiring a conscious agent, the latter not. The basic features related to these situations are possible duration and possible telicity. The analyzed corpus contains 152 dynamic verbs, 131 of them (86,18%) in the nonprogressive and 21 in the progressive (13,81%); the progressive includes the examples like *Although she has been teaching now for some eight years, on and off, ... she always feels a twinge of anxiety at the beginning of a new term* (41), *A tradesman who has been ringing at the front door for several minutes gives up and goes away* (78), *I gather you've been spending a lot of time there lately* (363) and others.

#### 3.2.1 Duration

This feature can be related both to stative and dynamic verbs; states, activities and accomplishments have the feature [+duration], and achievements the feature [-duration]. Having discussed the states, we could start from the examples with the situations denoting some duration, and these examples include typical activity verbs like *dance, do, eat, laugh, learn, live, make, read, spend, stare, stay, take, wait, write*. For example:

- (4a) ...like clamorous patients who have been waiting all night for the doctor's surgery to open; (41)  
 (4b) The heads of other men present have been swiveling from side to side, like spectators in a tennis match, during this argument. (76)  
 (4c) The students who have been writing everything down now look up and smile wryly at Robyn Penrose, like victims of a successful hoax. (77)  
 (4d) Robyn looks up from the copy of *North and South* from which she has been reading this passage, and surveys her audience with a cool, grey-green eyes. (80)  
 (4e) 'They've learned what's expected of them in a patriarchal society.' (222)  
 (4f) 'I haven't danced for ages.' (287)  
 (4g) 'I don't think I've ever read that one.' (356)  
 (4h) Whereas you've been working for yourself in the company's time. (369)

Most of these examples with the above-mentioned verbs indicate continuation from the unspecified point or period in the past to the present moment, thus belonging to the type called perfect of persistent situation (4a, b, c, d, h). The example (4f) is a specific kind

of the perfect of persistent situation because it denotes the continuation of the non-existence of a situation (not dancing for ages). However, in the example (4e), which implies a reached goal (*what's expected of them*), the type of perfect is the perfect of result or recent past, and in the example with the adverbial *ever* (4g) the type is experiential perfect – implying that the subject did not have a certain experience (reading a certain book).

The second group of examples, those with the feature [– *duration*], or momentary verbs, includes the verbs like *appear, arrive, ask, borrow, bring, close down, decide, deliver, discover, finish, invite, lend, meet, offer, pay, reach, reduce, sell out, split up, start, trigger*. Some of the typical examples are:

- (5a) The pressure of his foot on a wired pad under the stair-carpet has triggered the burglar alarm... (18)
- (5b) She carries the *Daily Mail*, which has just been delivered. (20)
- (5c) Marjorie has now appeared at the lounge window...(27)
- (5d) Vic grunts, unsurprised that his Marketing Director has not yet arrived.
- (5e) ‘Have you brought me to the phone just to tell me that?’ Robyn inquired icily. (208)
- (5f) ‘I’ve sent off that reference to America.’ (383)

As expected, momentary verbs typically denote the situation immediately preceding the moment of speech, which is often accompanied by the adverbials *just* and *now* (examples 5b, 5c), or *yet* in case of the non-realization of the situation (5d). In the examples without adverbials modifying present perfect, the implication is also immediate or very near past (examples 5a, e, f). So, these examples belong to the perfect of recent past. However, some momentary verbs with adverbials denoting frequency (*never, ever*) also indicate experience up to now, which classifies them into the experiential perfect:

- (6a) He has never met Beryl, said to be Everthorpe’s second wife, and formerly his secretary. (71)
- (6b) It has already been used twice for the circulation of internal mail and resealed by means of staples and Sellotape. (84)
- (6c) ‘Haven’t we met before?’ he said. (110)
- (6d) ‘That’s because you haven’t met him yet.’ (380)

There are just a few such examples in the corpus and they imply a context which unambiguously indicates repetition of the momentary situation up to now, most of them with the verb *meet*. As for this verb, it is interesting to point out the difference between the perfect of recent past and the experiential perfect: with the adverbials like *just, recently*, this verb is interpreted as recent past, and with the adverbials like *ever, before* as experiential perfect.

### 3.2.2 Telicity

Telicity is the feature in the semantic structure of some dynamic lexical verbs and verb phrases which denotes the existence of a goal. This goal could be indicated by the presence of the direct object, adverbial particle or other syntactic elements. The following examples (and some of the above-mentioned) indicate the presence of a goal:

- (7a) Vic Wilcox has now, strictly speaking, left the city of Rummage and passed into an area known as the Dark Country... (31)
- (7b) ‘Have you signed the Official Secrets Acts?’ (119)
- (7c) Halted at a red light, Robyn consults her *A to Z*, but before she has found the place on the map, the lights have changed and cars are hooting impatiently behind her. (99)
- (7d) Anyway they’ve just discovered that compulsory retirement is unconstitutional... (329)
- (7e) ‘Mr Wilcox has dropped his pen, Marion,’ she said. (341)
- (7f) ‘I’ll tell Swallow that I’ve changed my mind.’ (342)

As it has been pointed out, if the nonprogressive verb is followed by a well-defined object (NP or a nominal clause), it usually implies a goal (examples 7a, b, c, d, e, f). The combination of the feature [+ telicity] with the present perfect (nonprogressive) indicates that the goal was reached immediately before, or a short time before the point of speech, which is usually interpreted as the perfect of recent past (the examples under 7) or possibly the perfect of result.

### 3.3 Ambiguities

As expected, some examples from the corpus were ambiguous when it comes to the above-mentioned types of present perfect, even when their semantic features and the context were taken into account. For example:

- (8a) Now we’ve gone into reverse. (66)
- (8b) Raymond Williams has called them “Industrial Novels” because they dealt with social and economic problems... (72)
- (8c) He’s been trained, hasn’t he? (143)
- (8d) Foundtrax has stolen the Rawlinson’s bone from you... (207)
- (8e) I’ve had enough,’ said Penny Black, getting to her feet. (304)
- (8f) ‘I mean, I’ve had enough of this heat.’ (304)
- (8g) ‘No. I’ve had enough of the rat race.’ (380)

The verb in the example (8a), *go*, is dynamic, durative and atelic, or momentary and telic if its meaning is ‘leave’, but it is difficult to establish the type of perfect it implies: the possible interpretations include recent past or result. There is a similar problem with the example (8c): the training could be related to recent past or could present a result of a past process. The second example (8b) contains a telic momentary verb *call* (meaning ‘give a name’), but it could hardly be designated as recent past, result or experience. It is not a typical persistent situation either, because the situation itself does not continue up to now, so it is perhaps best described as “current relevance” of the situation. The example (8d) is closest to recent past, with the verb *steal* being dynamic, momentary and telic. Finally, the last three examples (8e, f, g) contain the phrase ‘have enough’ in present perfect; it seems that these verbs denote the perfect of persistent situation, that is an undesirable continuation of a situation up to now.

These examples (but also some of the previous ones) illustrate the difficulties one faces in classifying the concrete sentences with present perfect into a certain type which is determined within a specific theoretical framework.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper started from the assumption that the interpretation of the finite verb form present perfect often depends on some semantic features of lexical verbs and on the context. The analysis of the corpus showed that such interdependence really exists, even though the basic semantic features taken into account (stativity, duration, telicity) do not prohibit the use of present perfect; however, they influence the interpretation of the types of perfect (perfect of result, of recent past, experiential perfect and the perfect of persistent situation).

It turned out that the stative verbs (verbs of inert perception and cognition in this corpus) excluded the perfect of result and often the perfect of recent past, which follows from the fact that they are atelic. Therefore, their most frequent interpretations were the experiential perfect (perception or cognition occurring once or more than once up to now, or not occurring at all) and the perfect of persistent situation in cases when these verbs denoted continuative situations (for example, being in love or knowing).

On the other hand, dynamic verbs which were durative and atelic typically belonged to the perfect of persistent situation, denoting a situation which continued from a point or period in the past up to now. Telic dynamic verbs (specially the momentary ones) usually belonged to the perfect of recent past, implying that the goal of the situation was reached in the near past.

As for the perfect of result, it is interesting to point out that the corpus almost did not contain unambiguous examples of that type, only some examples which could be interpreted both as recent past or result. Moreover, the notion of result is rather subjective, which has been pointed out in the relevant literature. For example, Comrie (1976: 56-57) writes that “in the perfect of result a present state is referred to as being the result of some past situation”, adding that this type of perfect assumes that the result is still significant, but it “makes no claims what constitutes a continuing result, only that there is some continuing result.” This seems to be the essential problem with this type of perfect – the notion of result is rather relative, even for the native speakers, let alone for those who want to learn how to use this type of perfect in English. Having in mind that problem and the examples from the corpus presented in this article, perhaps it would be better to refer to this type of perfect as “the perfect of current relevance” instead of the perfect of result.

Finally, to conclude, one could say that English perfect denotes a link between a preceding situation and a following situation in the past, present and future. This link could be established in several ways, which provides several types of perfect. As for present perfect, the link is established between a past situation and the point of speech (*now*); such a link is possible if the situation immediately precedes (the perfect of recent past), if it is a part of somebody’s experience (experiential perfect), if the situation continues till the moment of speech (perfect of persistent situation) or if it is – for some reason - still significant or relevant (current relevance). In addition, there seems to be some interdependence between certain semantic features of lexical verbs and these types of perfect, so stativity, telicity and duration should be also taken into account when interpreting present perfect.

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