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The “News Perfect”
from an Evolutionary Perspective

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Abstract

The present perfect aspect, one of the most complicated features of tense and aspect in English, can be related to three time categories, viz. the past, the present, and even the future. Of these, only the past and the present will concern us here. This study will focus on one use of the present perfect—the “news perfect.” This study argues that there are two kinds of news perfects in present-day British English, the present-centered news perfect and the past-centered news perfect. The above argument is based on the Between Theory, in which I assert that, from an evolutionary perspective, the present perfect in present-day British English is developing from a present-oriented sense at Stage 3, to a past-oriented sense at Stage 4. This study will also show how analysis of the “news perfect” provides evidence in support of the Between Theory that supplements the support provided by the “extended current relevance,” co-occurrence of the present perfect and the adverbials of definite past, and the “I seen it” pattern in Fu (2010).

Keys Words: the present perfect, the present-centered news perfect, the past-centered news perfect, grammaticalization, the Between Theory

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1. Introduction

The present perfect aspect, which poses some of the most confusing problems regarding tense and aspect in English, can be related to three time categories, viz. the past, the present, and the future. For many years, this unique feature of the present perfect has attracted many experts’ academic interests, especially in its uses or functions from various perspectives, resulting in the classification of the present perfect uses varying greatly from one study to another. Among various perfect uses classified in the literature, the “hot news” perfect in (1) below sheds a light on the historical development of the present perfect.

(1) Malcolm X has just been assassinated. (McCawley, 1971, p. 104)

1.1 McCawley (1971) and Yao (2016)

McCawley, presumably the first to name the present perfect use in (1) above the hot news present perfect, or “hot news” for short, asserts that this hot news perfect is obviously distinct from three other uses in that the hot news perfect conveys surprise value for the audience. It is assumed that, in (1) above the listener does not have any information about the assassination at the time of utterance, or at the time of reporting. The recency of the news story in (1) from the speaker’s or reporter’s perspective is also indicated by the use of the temporal adverbial “just.” Similarly, in recent research, Yao (2016, pp. 129-30) suggests that the hot news perfects are “newsworthy” from a reporter’s perspective or from a reporter’s assumption that the news

2) In McCawley (1971, p. 104), three other uses of the present perfect are “(a) to indicate that a state of affairs prevailed throughout some interval stretching from the past into the present (Universal); (b) to indicate the existence of past events (Existential); and (c) to indicate that the direct effect of a past event still continues (Stative).”
story is significant for the audience. As suggested above, a reporter’s choice of the hot news perfect use is often pragmatically motivated and it is very challenging to define it in a clear-cut manner.

1.2 Schwenter (1994)

In some research, the hot news perfect is deemed almost the same as the past tense or the preterite when viewed from semantic and temporal perspectives. Schwenter (1994) concludes that “the hot news function represents the endpoint of the perfect category, since it holds the most tenuous relation between a past event and the present” (p. 1007). This conclusion is based on the premise that “the reporting that follows the hot news sentence is an elaboration of the past event, not of its present consequences” (Schwenter, 1994, p. 1001). Schwenter, although partially correct, completely neglects the fact that the present perfect uses are followed by the present contexts in many British news stories.

1.3 Argument against Schwenter (1994)

It is true that Schwenter (1994) is supported by such an example as (2) below, with the present perfect in the past context in the leads of BBC online news stories. In example (2), “a double suicide bombing” is reported in the present perfect in the lead, followed by its elaboration of two sub-events, “a suicide bomber killed four people in the club,” and “a second bomber in a car attacked emergency services” in the simple past tense respectively. However, Schwenter’s conclusion is challenged by example (3) in practice and by Yao (2016)\(^3\) in theory as follows.

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\(^3\) Yao (2016) is a quantitative research study based on the verb forms in the leads of news reports in the New York Times and the Sydney Morning Herald from 1750 to the present-day.
(2) A double suicide bombing at a wrestling club in the Afghan capital Kabul has killed at least 20 people and injured 70, officials say. After a suicide bomber killed four people in the club, a second bomber in a car attacked emergency services responding to the incident. (BBC online, September 5, 2018)

(3) The US has threatened sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC) if it goes ahead with prosecutions against Americans. The court is currently considering prosecuting US servicemen over alleged detainee abuse in Afghanistan. (BBC online, September 11, 2018)

In example (3) above, immediately after the present perfect construction, “The US has threatened sanctions,” the present continuous construction, “The court is currently considering” follows. This combination of the present perfect and the present continuous uses establishes a reporting context in which the news story is just an interim report of a developing story. Moreover, Schwenter is further challenged by Yao (2016), who says “the hot news perfect has in fact given way to other past-referring verb forms” (p. 145). Contrary to Schwenter, Yao concludes that the hot news perfects, in spite of their past-oriented meaning, are unexpectedly replaced by their rivals, past-referring verb forms.

1.4 The Purpose of this Study

In view of the above controversial points concerning the hot news present perfect, the purpose of this study is to prove that in present-day British English there are two kinds of news perfects. On the basis of the Between Theory, I assert that, from an evolutionary perspective, the present perfect is developing from a present-oriented sense at Stage 3, to a past-oriented sense at Stage 4. The Between Theory is supported by the
“extended current relevance,” co-occurrence of the present perfect and the adverbial of definite past, and the “I seen it” pattern in Fu (2010). Data found in news stories in British English suggests that the Between Theory is also supported by the “news perfect.”

2. The News Perfect, the Hot News Perfect, and Grammaticalization

2.1 The News Perfect and the Hot News Perfect

Because of ambiguity in its definition, the hot news present perfect, or “hot news” for short, is explained in different ways by different researchers depending on their respective purposes. In this research, instead of the hot news perfect, the term “news perfect” is employed to indicate the present perfect function in the leads of news reports in British English, including web news stories such as BBC online news stories, and broadcast news such as BBC World.

2.2 The News Perfect and Grammaticalization

Bybee et al. (1994) and Elsness (1997) view the evolutionary path of the present perfect as a semantic shift between the present-centered sense and the past-centered sense. Bybee et al. (1994, p. 81), from a cross-linguistic perspective, focus on the semantic shift from the current relevance or “anterior” to the past or “perfective.” Elsness (1997, p. 347) takes a more expansive view. Although he does neglect some features of word order at the early stage of the present perfect, he does attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the history of the present perfect. Diagram (4) below follows Fu (2010, p. 49) in presenting a revised version of Elsness’s three-step theory, elaborating the early historical development of the
present perfect with reference to word order and semantic focus.

(4) Four Stages of Semantic Focus Shift in the English Present Perfect (Fu, 2010):

Stage 1: Present > Past
Stage 2: Present < Past
Stage 3: Present > Past
Stage 4: Present < Past

To begin with, Stage 1 in (4) above is characterized by “the present outweighing the past” semantically, meaning that the semantic weight on the present overpasses that on the past. Stage 1 covers a historical period till the 14th century, roughly in the OE and early ME periods. The present perfect at this stage follows a different word order of “have + n. + past participle,” such as “I have my work done.” approximately meaning that “I have my work in a done or finished condition.”

The word order change in early ME leads the present perfect into Stage 2, at which the semantic focus shifts from the present to the past. This stage lasts from the 14th century, when the current syntactic form or word order of the present perfect became established, to the 18th century, when “a strict semantic differentiation” (Görlach, 1991, p.111) between the present perfect and the preterite became established.

Next, Stage 3 begins as late as the early 18th century, immediately after “a strict semantic differentiation” between the present perfect and the

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4) “Present > Past” shows that the semantic focus on the “present” outweighs that on the “past,” while “Present < Past” shows that the semantic focus on the “past” surpasses that on the “present.”

5) OE stands for Old English from 449 to 1100, while ME stands for Middle English from 1100 to 1500 (Ukaji, 2000, p. 17).

6) See OED Online and Ando (2005, p. 130) for further information.
preterite became established, and lasts up to the present-day. Stage 4 is a hypothesized stage at which the present perfect is considered a past-referring verb form, the same as the perfective or the preterite in Bybee et al. and Elsness.

2.3 The Between Theory: Explanation and Supporting Evidence

This study takes the position that (a) the present perfect in present-day British English is developing from Stage 3, the present-centered perfect, to Stage 4, the past-centered perfect, and (b) because this transition is not completed, in contemporary British English the present perfect functions as both a past-centered perfect and a present-centered perfect. This study posits that the contemporary British use of the present perfect is moving from Stage 3 to Stage 4; therefore we label our position “the Between Theory.”

Literature, such as Fu (2009, 2010, 2011), substantiates that the development of the present perfect – its movement toward the past-oriented Stage 4 – is supported firstly, from a viewpoint of temporal structure, by the co-occurrence of the present perfect and adverbials of definite past discussed in Fu (2009); second, from a pragmatic perspective, by the “extended current relevance” described in Fu (2010); and third, by the “I seen it.” pattern in Fu (2011) which provides another contributor to the shift from morphological and phonological perspectives.

The data cited in this research are taken from the leads of BBC online news stories and BBC broadcast news stories as well.\(^7\) British English

\(^7\) Analysis of written news and broadcast news reveals that, although they differ in many ways, they are similar to each other in those features that concern us here, which are the following: (a) both place the most important information at the beginning and provide the details later, and (b) both emphasise immediacy in their reporting.
was chosen because it provides far more examples of the present perfect usage than American English does.\(^8\) The present perfect examples in the leads of BBC online news story and the broadcast news story of BBC World are classified into three groups as follows, the news perfect in the present context in Part 3 below; the news perfect in the past context in the following Part 4; and the news perfects in both present and past contexts in Part 5 below.

### 3. The News Perfect in the Present Context

(5) African countries have shown a healthy appetite for Chinese loans but some experts now worry that the continent is gorging on debt, and could soon choke. The Entebbe-Kampala Expressway is still something of a tourist attraction for Ugandans, nearly three months after it opened.

(BBC online, September 3, 2018)

An economic news story, example (5) above begins with the present perfect construction of “African countries have shown a healthy appetite” in its lead, and is followed by a clause introduced by the conjunction “but,” “but some experts now worry,” which adopts the present verb form. Furthermore, in the immediate context, the present verb form of “is still something of a tourist attraction” is employed. From the combination of one present perfect use and two present uses, the general focus of this news report is not on what happened in the past, but on the current relevance, to be specific, the resultative state at the time of reporting or utterance.

\(^8\) Yao (2014, p. 19) says “We have seen a very significant decline in the frequency of the PP relative to that of the SP in the AmE data. However, the BrE data exhibit only a mild decrease.”
Hong Kong has refused to renew a work visa for the Asia news editor of the Financial Times, sparking concerns from the UK government. Victor Mallet is also vice-president of the city’s Foreign Correspondents’ Club (FCC), which upset local and Chinese authorities by hosting a separatist speaker in August. (BBC online, October 7, 2018)

Example (6) above is very similar to (5) in its present perfect use in the news lead and in its use of the present tense in the immediate context. In (6) above, the event of “Hong Kong has refused to” in the news lead is followed by a present verb form, which directs the reader’s attention to the relevant state at the time of utterance. The current state of “Victor Mallet is also vice-present of the city’s Foreign Correspondents’ Club” establishes a pragmatic context that semantically defines its anterior verb form of “has refused” as being present-centered.

A group of armed men and women have broken into a packed theatre in Moscow and are holding up to one thousand people hostage. (BBC World, October 24, 2002)9) (Fujii, 2004, p. 22)

Example (7) from Fujii (2004) combines the present perfect function of “A group of armed men and women have broken into a packed theatre” in the lead with the present continuous tense of “are holding up to one thousand people hostage” in the immediate context. This combination indicates that although the action of “breaking” is in the past, the focus of the news story is placed on the resultative state of “breaking” at the time of reporting. In other words, the focus shifts to what is going on, or to a developing story, which corresponds to the present progressive tense employed in the context. The developing story or breaking news plays an important role as an attention-getter for the news story.

9) “BBC World, October 24, 2002” is the original source information in Fujii (2004).
(8) In other news, the Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, has sacked his controversial Foreign Minister, Makiko Tanaka. The dismissal comes after Ms. Tanaka became involved in a row with officials over who should attend last week’s aid conference on Afghanistan. (BBC World, January 30, 2002) (Fujii, 2004, p. 46)

In example (8) above, the present verb form “comes after Ms. Tanaka became involved” in the immediate context follows the present perfect one of “has sacked his controversial Foreign Minister,” emphasising the “immediacy” or vivid value of the news story, which is another way for news reporters to use in order to attract audience’s attention.

The above four examples in Part 3 argue against Schwenter (1994) and assert that the present-centered perfects are still used in present-day British English, partially supporting the Between Theory by showing that the present perfect has not yet reached Stage 4. The Between Theory is also supported by the news perfect in the past context in Part 4 below which shows from an evolutionary perspective that the present perfect is developing and undergoing various changes.

4. The News Perfect in the Past Context

Example (9) below combines the present perfect use of “has died” in the lead with the simple past use of “served as an MLA” in the immediate context. The simple past construction following the news lead clarifies detailed information related to the event of “die,” i.e., the death of Robert Coulter.

(9) Former MLA Reverend Robert Coulter has died, aged 88. The Ulster

10) Refer to Fujii (2004, p. 15) for more information.
Unionist politician served as an MLA for North Antrim between 1998 and 2011. (BBC online, September 5, 2018)

(10) There has been a sensational upset in the world of boxing. The heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson, has lost his world title to Evander Holyfield. The referee stopped the fight in the 11th round after Tyson was unable to fend off a sustained flurry of punches to his head. (BBC World, November 10, 1996) (Fujii, 2004, p. 66)

In approximately the same manner, example (10) above employs two present perfect phrases, “has been a sensational upset” and “has lost his world title,” at the beginning of the news story, and follows them with one simple past phrase, “stopped the fight.” The past construction is an elaboration of the events in the present perfect in the news lead, directing the reader’s attention to what happened in the past instead of what is going on at the time of utterance.

(11) A court in Myanmar has sentenced two Reuters journalists to seven years in prison for violating a state secrets act while investigating violence against the Rohingya minority. Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, nationals of Myanmar, were arrested while carrying official documents which had just been given to them by police officers. (BBC online, September 3, 2018)

(12) President Donald Trump’s controversial nominee for the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh, has been sworn in following weeks of rancorous debate. The Senate earlier backed his nomination by 50 votes to 48. (BBC online, October 7, 2018)

Similarly, the above mentioned co-occurrence of the present perfect use with the past use can also be seen in examples (11) and (12) above, with “has sentenced” followed by “were arrested” in (11), and “has been sworn in”
followed by “backed” in (12). In short, these four examples in Part 4 exhibit a pattern, or a combination of the present perfect in the news lead and the simple past in its immediate context. They establish “an elaboration of the past event, not of its present consequences” (Schwenter, 1994, p. 1001) in the immediate context following the news lead, thereby illustrating the semantic focus of the present perfect in present-day British English that is gradually shifting from the present-centered Stage 3 to the past-centered Stage 4.

5. The News Perfects in Both Present and Past Contexts

In the present perfect functions that are employed in two pragmatically different contexts, the past and present contexts discussed in Parts 3 and 4 above, the semantic focus of the news perfect is clarified from the perspective of its immediate context. These two perfects, the present-centered one and the past-centered one, are even found in reporting the same issue in different news stories.

5.1 Fan Bingbing-related News

(13) Chinese mega star Fan Bingbing has been fined around 883 million yuan ($129m; £98.9m) for tax evasion and other offences, authorities said Wednesday. The star, who disappeared in July, posted a long apology on social media. (BBC online, October 3, 2018)

(14) Chinese film star Fan Bingbing has been ranked last in a report judging A-list celebrities on how “socially responsible” they are, fuelling further speculation about the whereabouts of the actress, who has not been seen in public for more than two months. The 2017-2018 China Film and Television Star Social Responsibility Report, carried widely by state
media outlets, ranks Chinese celebrities according to three criteria: professional work, charitable actions and personal integrity. (BBC online, September 11, 2018)

Both news reports (13) and (14) above are on the same topic, a Chinese mega star Fan Bingbing, who “has been fined for tax evasion and other offences.” The September 11th news report (14) adopts the combination of the present perfect and the simple present, as almost no official information was publicized at the time of reporting, or at the time of utterance, except for that Report. Limited information may be one of the reasons for the reporter to focus on the current information available, leading the entire news item to the present temporally. However, about three weeks later, with the help of more publicized information, the October 3rd news report (13) adopts the combination of the present perfect and the simple past, intending to focus on what happened in the past, which corresponds to the public interests in the issue.

5.2 Nobel Prize–related News

(15) The organisation in charge of destroying Syria’s chemical weapons has won the Nobel Peace Prize. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has been working to rid the world of chemical weapons for the past 16 years. They currently have a team in Syria following a poison gas attack there in August which killed hundreds of people. (BBC online, October 11, 2013)

(16) The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the body overseeing the destruction of Syria’s chemical arsenal, has won the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Committee said it was in honour of the OPCW’s “extensive work to eliminate chemical weapons”. (BBC online,
Examples (15) and (16) above, two Nobel Peace Prize-related news reports in 2013, are on the same topic, but from different temporal perspectives. Example (16) begins with the present perfect of “has won the Nobel Peace Prize” in the lead and continues in the simple past of “said.” The main role of (16) is to tell us what happened in the past. On the other hand, in (15) above the same present perfect construction, “has won the Nobel Peace Prize” in the lead is followed by the continuous perfect “has been working” and the simple present of “have,” aiming to direct the reader’s attention to the current state or even the situation in the near future. Thus, the verb forms succeeding the lead of the news story are not determined by the topic of the news story, but depend on the reporter’s decision to place the semantic focus on the past or the present.

6. Conclusion

Based on three groups of the present perfect functions in the news leads and their immediate contexts, this study demonstrated that there are two kinds of news perfects in present-day British English, the past-oriented news perfect introduced in Schwenter (1994), and the present-oriented news perfect discussed in this study. In addition, this study introduces the Between Theory and substantiates that theory by examining the ways in which the past-oriented and present-oriented news perfects co-exist. Finally, the news perfects are proposed as a fourth contributor to the semantic shift of the present perfect from Stage 3 to Stage 4 discussed above. This conclusion is based on the limited data available in British English. In the future I intend to expand my research to include American English in
order to depict a comprehensive evolutionary path of the present perfect aspect in English.

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