

THE INFLUENCE OF VERBAL SEMANTIC FEATURES ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PRESENT PERFECT IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. *This paper focuses upon the relation between the semantic structure of verbs and the types of present perfect. The aim is to examine the existence of the potential influence that semantic features have on the classification of a verb into one of four types of present perfect (the perfect of persistent situation, the experiential perfect, the perfect of result, and the perfect of recent past). The corpus includes examples of lexical verbs in the form of the present perfect that belong to four situation types given by Vendler and defined by different combinations of features including telicity and duration, which are in the focus of the research. The classification of the examples into four types of present perfect with the reference to telicity and duration has provided an insight into their potential compatibility with the specific types of present perfect.*

Key words: *present perfect, semantic feature, telicity, duration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The present perfect is one of the most complex English verb tenses, primarily due to its reference to the time frame including the past, present, and, in certain cases, even the future. Consequently, the interpretation of this verb form is rather complex as well since the link between the past and present that this tense suggests can be realized in several ways. According to one of its interpretations, the present perfect refers to a situation starting in the past and continuing to the point of speech, or it can refer to someone's experience up to the point of speech. Furthermore, the present perfect is used for describing situations that happened in the past but the consequences and results of which are relevant in the present. Also, it can refer to very recent actions that took place just before the moment of speech. On the basis of these distinct uses, the present perfect is usually divided into four basic types: the perfect of result, the perfect of recent past, the perfect of persistent situation and the experiential perfect (Comrie 1976: 56-61). There are other divisions offered by different authors. For instance, Leech (2004: 36-40) offers

the division into: state-up-to-the-present, indefinite past, habit-in-a-period-leading-up-to-the-present and resultative past. Taking into account Comrie's division, it can be concluded that the interpretation of the present perfect in a particular context necessarily involves the reliance on not only temporal, but also certain semantic features of verbs, such as telicity, duration, and stativity. Brinton (1988: 28-29) introduces the fourth feature, voluntary, but it is already implied by stativity since states marked as [+stative] are simultaneously [-voluntary], while all other situation types, which are dynamic, i.e. [-stative], are [+voluntary] so that the fourth feature is not necessary for the definition of four situation types.

Telicity, stativity and duration are the features on the basis of which Vendler (1967: 97–109) formulated his classification of verbal situations into activities, states, accomplishments and achievements. Each of these situation types is defined by a particular combination of distinctive features:

<u>activities</u>	<u>states</u>	<u>accomplishments</u>	<u>achievements</u>
+duration	+duration	+ duration	-duration
-telicity	-telicity	+telicity	+telicity
-stativity	+stativity	-stativity	-stativity

According to Novakov (2005: 26-27), the distinctive features which define the type of verbal situation are to be understood in the following way:

- a) the distinctive feature [+stativity] implies possible duration but also the lack of dynamic segments that cause the change of the situation; if there are dynamic segments, the situation has the feature [-stativity];
- b) the distinctive feature [+duration] implies that a situation lasts for a shorter or longer period of time, while the feature [-duration] is used for defining momentary situations;
- c) the distinctive feature [+telicity] denotes the existence of a goal; when the goal is reached, the situation comes to its end; [-telicity] implies the lack of a goal.

On the basis of Vendler's classification, it can be concluded that the given features define the core meaning of verbs. The fact that four types of present perfect rely on the semantic features of lexical verbs provides a sound basis for the analysis described in this paper. It focuses upon the research on the potential interaction between the types of present perfect and verbal semantic features taking into account the theoretical possibility that the given features crucially influence the classification of a particular verb into one of the types of present perfect. Moreover, in this way, it is possible to examine whether a particular semantic feature requires a specific type of present perfect.

The examination in question involves two semantic features – telicity and duration since they are considered highly influential in the given context. The corpus includes 85 examples with present perfect forms from the novel *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown. However, only the most illustrative examples are presented in the paper.

2. TELICITY AND THE TYPES OF PRESENT PERFECT

Telicity is a feature present in the set of distinctive features of accomplishments and achievements, verbal situations which come to their end when a goal is reached. The goal

is mainly realised by syntactic means, such as a direct object, a phrasal verb particle or an adverbial.

The initial step in the examination of the mutual relation between telicity and the types of present perfect is to test the hypothesis concerning the very existence of the given relation. The types of present perfect found in sentences containing telic verbal situations are compared to the ones in sentences with atelic situations given in the following examples:

- (1) a) *He has read books for hours.*
 b) *He has swum in the lake.*
 c) *Ha has run in the park.*

The example (1a) contains a situation of certain duration, which is implied by the phrase *for hours*, but without the implication of reaching the terminal point or a goal, i.e. without the implication that a person has finished reading the books. Thus, the verb phrase *has read* belongs to the perfect of persistent situation. The same type of present perfect is found in the examples (1b,c) since both verb phrases denote situations lasting for a certain period of time without achieving a goal.

The following set of examples contain the same verbs but they are used in a different context:

- (2) a) *He has read five books in two days.*
 b) *He has swum the Channel.*
 c) *He has run five miles.*

All the given situations involve reaching of a goal referred to in different ways. In the example (2a), a direct object realised as the noun phrase *five books* introduces the notion of a goal, while the insertion of the adverbial *in two days* clearly emphasises a completeness reading of the sentence. The notion of a goal in the sentences (2b,c) is considered quite straightforward due to the presence of the direct objects *the Channel* and *five miles*. All the examples given in (2), thus, share the feature [+telicity] referring to a reached goal so that they are logically related to the perfect of result.

This comparative analysis has shown that telic and atelic verbal situations are related to different types of present perfect, which leads to the conclusion that the classification of a verb phrase into a particular type of present perfect is influenced by telicity, i.e. that telicity as a feature lying at the core of verbal meaning requires a particular type of present perfect.

Compatibility of telicity with the perfect of result is further investigated through the analysis of the examples from the corpus illustrating telic situations. The examples include different means for the realization of telicity – a direct object, phrasal verbs and the meaning of the verb itself.

A) In the examples (3, 4, 5, 6, 7), telicity is implied by a direct object in the form of a noun phrase (NP):

- (3) *Ring me when you have made **your choice**.*
 (4) *I thought you would want to be informed that we have received **a bomb threat**.*
 (5) *I have just removed **a dozen of my best men** from Vatican City on the eve of conclave.*
 (6) *Science has won **the battle**.*
 (7) *I have also just left **the search for this antimatter weapon** in the hands of secondary officers.*

B) The addition of a particle to a verb with which it forms a single lexical unit introduces the sense of a goal in most cases, as in the example (8):

- (8) *My lieutenant has just pointed out that the masquerade will be more convincing with both of you anyway.*

The perfect of recent past is fairly prominent in the examples (5, 7, 8), which include a direct object and a phrasal verb combined with the adverbial *just* implying that the goal was reached immediately or a short time before the point of speech.

The existence of a goal is indisputable in the examples (3,4,6) in which a verb is accompanied by a well-defined direct object in the form of an NP. Moreover, the notion of a goal is inherent in the meaning of the verbs *receive* and *win* since they imply completeness as one of their sense components. Since all the given situations have the feature [+telicity], they can be interpreted as belonging to the perfect of result. However, Novakov (2008: 52) claims that the combination of telicity with the present perfect possibly indicates that a goal was reached immediately before or a short time before the point of speech although this is not explicitly expressed by a suitable adverbial so that the perfect of recent past is secondarily referred to in the examples (3,4,6).

C) The implication of a reached goal is an inherent semantic feature of the verbs used in the sentences (9, 10, 11, 12):

- (9) *Everyone knows the brothers have faded to dust.*
 (10) *God has become obsolete.*
 (11) *Therefore, it will wait until Ms. Vetra has arrived.*
 (12) *I believe the Illuminati have resurfaced to make good on an ancient pact.*

These examples provide the possibility of a two-fold interpretation involving both the perfect of result and the perfect of recent past. However, since the attainment of a goal immediately before the point of speech is not explicitly given, the perfect of recent past is considered to be the secondary implication in the sentences (9-12). The perfect of result is taken as the primary type of present perfect in the given sentences.

As for the feature of telicity, the examination of the corpus has shown that it affects the type of present perfect a verb phrase belongs to. Regardless of the way in which telicity is realised, all the examples involve two types of present perfect – the perfect of result and the perfect of recent past. Only the examples in which the adverbial *just* accompanies the verb are considered to be the instances of the perfect of recent past exclusively. Other examples imply the perfect of result as their primary type of present perfect.

3. DURATION AND THE TYPES OF PRESENT PERFECT

Activities, states and accomplishments are verbal situations with the feature [+duration], while achievements are defined by the feature [-duration] so that they are momentary situations in which a goal is achieved within a single moment.

The examples in the corpus include all four types of verbal situations and the analysis is focused upon answering the question whether verbal situations with the feature [+duration] share the same type of present perfect.

3.1 States

The following set of examples includes states:

- (13) "Since the beginning of history," Langdon explained, "a deep rift has existed between science and religion."
- (14) "For centuries," the camerlegno said, "the church has stood by while science picked away at religion bit by bit."
- (15) "Scientists have known since 1918," Vittoria said, "that two kinds of matter were created in the Big Bang."

All the examples illustrate situations starting in the past and continuing in the present, which implies certain duration so that all of them belong to the perfect of persistent situation, which was to be expected. This type of present perfect is often accompanied by the temporal adverbials beginning with *for* and *since*, which emphasise the notion of duration.

3.2 Activities

Activities in the examples (16, 17, 18, 19) denote situations that started in the past and, since it is not implied by the context that these situations ended in the past, it is assumed that they continue up to the present moment so that they can be classified into the present of persistent situation. This interpretation is supported by the use of temporal adverbials with *for* and *since*, and particularly the adverbial *always* in the example (16). The example (18) does not contain any temporal adverbials referring to the perfect of persistent situation. However, the verb *study* inherently implies an activity with certain duration being, thus, interpreted as the perfect of persistent situation. If the focus is placed on the result of the past situation that is valid or important in the present (in the given context, the situation results in the possession of knowledge on the brotherhood's history), this example is alternatively referred to as the perfect of result.

- (16) Religion has always persecuted science.
- (17) I have served your Pope for twelve years!
- (18) I am an academic who has studied the history of your brotherhood.
- (19) Since the days of Galileo, the church has tried to slow the relentless march of science, sometimes with misguided means, but always with benevolent intention.

3.3 Accomplishments

Although accomplishments have the feature [+duration], they differ from the previously analysed verbal situation regarding the type of the present perfect they belong to, as it can be seen in the following examples:

- (20) It is time for His Holiness to have the peace he has earned.
- (21) "The field of particle physics," Kohler said, "has made some shocking discoveries lately – discoveries quite spiritual in implication."

Since it implies the attainment of a goal, an inherent sense component of the verb *earn*, the accomplishment in the example (20) belongs to the perfect of result, which has already been illustrated in the analysis of the relation between telicity and the types of present perfect. The temporal adverbial *lately* in the example (21) suggests that the goal

was achieved a short time before the point of speech indicating the perfect of recent past as well as the perfect of result as the secondary type of the given verb phrase. The results of the analysis, thus, highlight the fact that, in the case of accomplishments, telicity is a key feature that primarily determines the type of present perfect. The existence of a goal directly leads to the perfect of result except in the case when a temporal adverbial explicitly points out the attainment of a goal immediately or a short time before the point of speech indicating the perfect of recent past as the dominant type. None of the examples illustrating accomplishments belongs to the perfect of persistent situation, which was the dominant type in the case of states and activities, verbal situations with duration as the dominant distinctive feature.

3.4 Achievements

Achievements are the only type of verbal situations that have the feature [-duration]. Since they imply the attainment of a goal within a single moment, the expected type of present perfect is the perfect of recent past.

The examples (22,23) contain the adverbial *just*, which emphasises the interpretation relying on the reference to the perfect of recent past, which is primarily pointed out by the verbs *finish* and *land* defined by the feature [-duration]:

- (22) *Your colleague has just finished warning me that this will be our sole chance to catch the target.*
 (23) *I've just landed.*

The examples (24,25,26) with the momentary verbs *come*, *bring* and *leave* do not contain the adverbial *just*, but they do belong to the perfect of recent past so that they support the previous statement that the mentioned adverbial only additionally emphasises the meaning of immediate past.

- (24) *Have you come to make me a martyr?*
 (25) *Carlo, you have brought this church to a disastrous juncture.*
 (26) *Have they left already?*

On the other hand, if a momentary verb is accompanied by an adverbial denoting frequency (*ever*, *never*), the context is completely changed. Namely, these adverbials indicate a person's experience up to now with the possible implication of repetition, so that the examples (27,28) belong to the experiential perfect regardless of the use of momentary verbs:

- (27) *And I have done this to stake out the Pantheon based on the testimony of some American I have never met who has just interpreted a four-hundred-year-old poem.*
 (28) *But a few particles is all anyone has ever detected...anywhere.*

As expected, verbs with the feature [-duration] typically denote the perfect of recent past. This type of present perfect is directly implied if a verb is accompanied by an appropriate temporal adverbial (*just*) denoting immediate past. Temporal adverbials have an important role in determining the type of present perfect in the case of momentary verbs, especially the ones denoting frequency (*ever*, *never*) since they require a completely different type of present perfect – the experiential perfect.

The analysis of the corpus has shown that verbs with the feature [+duration] primarily belong to the perfect of persistent situation, while in the case of momentary verbs, the primary type of present perfect is the perfect of recent past. Thus, it turns out that two different types of verbal situations dominated by the opposite key features [+duration] on one hand, and [-duration] on the other, require different types of present perfect, which directly supports the claim about the existence of the mutual relation between semantic features of verbs and the types of present perfect.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis described in this paper has confirmed the initial hypothesis according to which verbal semantic features, such as telicity and duration, influence the classification of verb phrases into the types of present perfect— the perfect of persistent situation, the perfect of result, the experiential perfect and the perfect of recent past. Additionally, the examination of the corpus has shown that temporal adverbials also play an important role in the interpretation of a verb phrase in the form of the present perfect.

It has been revealed that a verb phrase with the feature [+telicity] typically requires the perfect of result. Furthermore, the feature [+duration] is closely connected to the perfect of persistent situation, while the feature [-duration] is related to the perfect of recent past. However, these semantic features are not exclusively related to the given types of present perfect. Actually, there are often two possible interpretations. In such instances, the interpretation of the present perfect is highly influenced by the use of temporal adverbials. Thus, if a telic verb situation is accompanied by an adverbial denoting immediate past, its interpretation leads primarily to the perfect of recent past, and only secondarily to the perfect of result. Also, if a momentary verb is used with an adverbial of frequency, the reference to the perfect of recent past is completely replaced by the experiential perfect.

The investigation in question has also shown that each type of present perfect is compatible with one of three relevant semantic features that define states, activities, accomplishments and achievements marking that feature as dominant for a particular situation type. Thus, activities are typically related to the perfect of persistent situation, which implies that their dominant feature is [+duration]. The same holds for states. Accomplishments are defined by the following set of features: [-stativity], [+duration], [+telicity]. However, regardless of the presence of the feature [+duration], the perfect of persistent situation is not typical of accomplishments. The prototypical type is the perfect of result, which indicates that [+telicity] is the key feature for this situation type. Achievements are defined by the features [-stativity], [-duration], [+telicity] and the dominant type of present perfect is, primarily, the perfect of recent past, and, secondarily, the perfect of result. Thus, momentariness or [-duration] is the key feature for this situation type.

In conclusion, the analysis described in this paper has shown that inherent semantic features of a verb directly determine the type of present perfect it belongs to. However, none of these features is exclusively related to only one type. Thus, the classification of a verb phrase into a particular type of present perfect is heavily dependent not only on the dominant semantic feature, but also on the sentential context.

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UTICAJ SEMANTIČKIH OSOBINA GLAGOLA NA TUMAČENJE SADAŠNJEG PERFEKTA U ENGLISKOM JEZIKU

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Predmet rada je veza između semantičkih osobina glagola i tipova sadašnjeg perfekta. Cilj rada podrazumeva ispitivanje postojanja potencijalnog uticaja koji date semantičke osobine imaju na interpretaciju glagolskih fraza u odnosu na četiri tipa sadašnjeg perfekta (perfekat trajne situacije, iskustveni perfekat, perfekat rezultata i perfekat bliske prošlosti). Korpus uključuje primere rečenica sa leksičkim glagolima u formi sadašnjeg perfekta uz prisustvo sva četiri tipa glagolskih situacija prema Vendlerovoj klasifikaciji, a koji su definisani različitim kombinacijama semantičkih osobina među kojima su i teličnost i trajnost. Ove dve osobine su deo predmeta razmatranja u ovom radu. Klasifikacija primera na osnovu četiri tipa sadašnjeg perfekta u kontekstu teličnosti i trajnosti omogućila je uvid u potencijalno postojanje kompatibilnosti dve navedene osobine sa određenim tipovima sadašnjeg perfekta.

Ključne reči: *sadašnji perfekat, semantička osobina, teličnost, trajnost*