

Cultural and Psychological Factors for the Present Perfect in British English and American English

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Abstract

Syntax is not only formed by historical internal development and linguistic affiliation. It is also formed by linguistic contact due to areal influence. The use of the present perfect (e.g. "I have done it"), vs. the simple past or preterit (e.g. "I did it") in English is presently undergoing what could be considered areal specialization. While in American English the preterit is preferred, even with adverbs like "still" and "yet", producing thus expressions like "Did you sell your house yet?", British English, perhaps following the tendency in other European languages, would rather pose the same question as "Have you sold your house yet?" Although British English is by no means subjected to the shift toward the present perfect as the only grammatical marker for the past, already experienced by German, Italian and French, cultural ties with the Euro-Atlantic linguistic area may be having an effect on its syntax, and more specifically on the use of the present perfect instead of the simple past. Conversely, American English is not participating in this trend and, furthermore, it is obvious that in this dialect the preterit has encroached on the area traditionally reserved for the present perfect.

Keywords: Present Perfect, English, Linguistic Area

1. Introduction

This study seeks to elucidate the context and meaning of the English present perfect in American English and British English. It will be argued that British English is currently extending the present perfect forms into what used to be the semantic realm of the preterit. In contrast, American English appears to remain closer to the original meaning that the perfect came to develop in the Middle Ages. A historical survey will discuss the main viewpoints that grammarians and linguists have held on the topic. Likewise, data and subjective judgments from speakers will be analyzed. The data will point out the cultural and areal characteristics of this linguistic change, the judgments the strong psychological conditioning attached to the perfect.

2. Defining Tense and Aspect

Whether we can assign the perfect to aspect, to tense, or to both concepts depends on how we define each of those categories. The present perfect acts usually as a past (hence tense) which is interpreted as having an extended close relationship with the present (hence the aspectual element). Nevertheless, not all linguists agree on the nature of the perfect as being part of aspect. Comrie, for instance, accepts the perfect in the range of aspect only reluctantly (1976:6), since aspect is generally associated with completed vs. on-going actions. Furthermore, Slavic linguists argue that Germanic and Romance languages do not have aspect when compared to the formally more complex and obligatory aspectual systems of Slavonic (Maslov, 1985:20; Mustanoja, 1960:445, note; Nehls, 1988:173; Zandvoort, 1962:20). Actually, Nehls (*ibid.*) notes that the term “aspect” is a calque from Russian *вид*. It is applied to indicate the contrast between such grammatical pairs as perfective and imperfective. This contrast is made in the Slavic languages morphologically (either by prefixes or suffixes).

On the other hand, not only do other authors admit the existence of aspect in English, but they also find numerous sub-categories such as “indefinite”, “definite”, “perfect” or “completive”, “imperfect” or “durative”, “iterative”, “ingressive” etc. (Cf. Curme, 1931:373; Lyons, 1968:337; Whitehead, 1936:24). Other subdivisions include the “experiential perfect” as in “He has been to China,” “stative of habit”: “He has walked in the park every afternoon this week” or the “resultative state, stative non-dynamic”: “He has seen an elephant” (Rot, 1988:29). Definitions are not more fortunate: “Aspect indicates the aspect, the type, the

character of the action” (Curme, 1931— cited in Zandvoort, 1962:1—). Even Guillaume, the pioneer psycholinguist, did not do more than to paraphrase what Henry Sweet had already said at the turn of the century: “L’aspect est une forme qui, dans le système même du verbe, dénote une opposition transcendant toutes les autres oppositions du système et capable ainsi de s’intégrer à chacun des termes entre lesquels se marquent les dites oppositions” (1929:109).

Leaving this moot point to be resolved by semanticists, we return to the perfect without dismissing or endorsing it as belonging to aspect. As we shall see, the definition of the perfect has not changed since its earliest descriptions. Thus Bybee and Dahl discuss the perfect as indicating that a situation is being described as relevant at the moment of speech or another point of reference” (1989:55). Similar meaning is attributed to it in Comrie (1976:52-65) and in Guillaume (1929:20) who calls it *l’aspect extensif* “vu qu’il sert à renouveler la tension du verbe au moment où elle expire et à la prolonger au delà d’elle même, en extension.” Cf. what Duncan said in 1731: “The auxiliary *I have*, being present, shews that the Mind considers here the Time past, as if it was present” (1967, facsimile from 1731:24); and Murray (1968, facsimile from 1795:42) “The Preterperfect Tense not only refers indefinitely to what is past, but also conveys an allusion to the present time.”

3. The Meaning of Time

If ascertaining the range of aspect is controversial, settling the notion of time is even more challenging, at least from a logico-philosophical point of view. Thus, neither Zeno's paradox whereby time cannot be divided nor Augustine's crucial premise that “The present has no space” (Confessions, Book XI:19-20) because instants “fly with such speed from future to past, as not to be lengthened out with the least stay” (ibid.) can help us in a linguistic description. And that is precisely what many contemporary philosophers of language suggest; e.g. Anscombe (1964), Russell (1918), Smart (1964), and McTaggart (1934) especially. Philosophers consider that the notion of time is so riddled with contradictions that time simply cannot exist. The only possibility of moving ahead is, therefore, by taking an Aristotelian approach and trying to discern what speakers *mean* when they refer to time, rather than attempting platonic metaphysical explanations of what time *is*. Once this is agreed upon, we can leave aside concepts such as Newtonian, Kantian or Relative-Quantum time, as well as all the paradoxes deriving from them (cited in Loizou, 1986:17). Later in this paper we will deal more precisely with the concepts of time and aspect. Now, however, let us

proceed to review the development and use of the perfect in English.

4. Historical Overview

There are indications that Proto-Indo-European functioned formally with only the present and the aorist (preterit) and that only later an imperfect developed (Comrie op. cit. p. 83). As for the future, it is evident that it was formed much later in the Indo-European languages. Even in a language like Latin with a morphologically bound future, the future morpheme suffixes can be traced to an earlier auxiliary marker (García Hernández, 1980) as is the case in today's Romance. The perfect also displays a history of morphological change akin to that of the future, inasmuch as both concepts have undergone more changes than the more stable present and past paradigms. Both Latin and Old English had a certain group of verbs with a morphological preterit form used with the meaning of the present. Thus, Latin perii (I died) is translated customarily as “I'm a dead man.” Likewise, memini and odi (literally “I remembered” and “I hated”) are also said to be present perfects, i.e. “I have remembered” and “I have hated” (Palmer 1954:308; Allen and Greenough, 1983:116). In Old English, some verbs developed a present meaning out of their strong preterit forms. As a consequence “these (strong) verbs adopted new preterit forms on the model of the weak verbs. Thus, the present tense looks like a strong-verb preterit, and the preterit tense looks like a weak-verb preterit” (Diamond 1970:41). Thus magan “to be able” became mæz “I have been able” and meahte “I was able” in the preterit singular. Diamond lists twelve verbs under this category, while Mitchell and Robinson list only eleven (1968:52). As for Latin, grammarians do not find more than three or four of these verbs.

Aside from that subcategory of verbs, Old and Middle English continued to use the preterit forms in contexts where the present perfect is obligatory today: “I saugh you noght this fourtenyght or moore” (Canterbury Tales D, 1783): ‘I have not seen you for a fortnight or more’ (cited in Schibsbye, 1974:135). Middle English, however, witnessed the full-fledged development of the modern perfect; i.e. have + past participle: “Ich habbe iloued de moni zer (Dame Sirith)”: ‘I have loved you many a year’, which alternated with the preterit in meaning throughout Middle and Modern English: “You spoke not with her since?” (Lear, IV, 3, 35), i.e. ‘Haven't you spoken with her since?’. Another subset of intransitive verbs (of motion, predominantly) took the auxiliary be + past participle. All the following Shakespearean examples are cited in Kakietek (1976): “The duke is very strangely gone from hence

(Measure for Measure, I. 4. 49). “His lordship is walked forth into the orchard” (Henry IV, Part 1, II. 4. 353). “...This house is turn'd bawdy-house, they pick pockets” (Henry IV, Part 1, III. 3. 69). Of these, perhaps the only one left in contemporary English is the one with gone as in “He is already gone.” (Copley and Pelham, p.209—1773—)

The historical development of the present perfect originated from a gradual transition in meaning from what started as an adjectival colligated with the verb to have. As these verbs lost their possessive force, they came to be used more and more as simple auxiliaries of the participial meaning. By the late Middle Ages the contemporary meaning of the perfect had already been established in English. Thus, encompassing the so called current relevance, appears the “perfect of result.” Consider (for what Comrie calls the “perfect of persistent situation”) Shakespeare's “I have known thee these twenty years” (Henry IV, Part 2, II. 4. 329 --cited in Kakietek, op. cit. p. 49). In Othello (IV. 2. lff.) we find “you have seen nothing then?” But elsewhere (All's Well V. 3) Shakespeare reverts to the preterit: “I saw the man to-day” (cited in Dietrich 1955:138). Another sub-type of perfect, Comrie's “experiential”, e.g. “Bill has been to America”, as compared to “Bill has gone to America” (“perfect of result”), seems to have been a later development when compared with the other perfects. “God's light, I was never called so in my house before” (Henry IV, Part 1, III. 3. 17) and “Thou art the first knave that ever madest a duke” (Henry IV, Part 2, V. 1. 354—cited in Kakietek, op. cit. p. 50—). As for Comrie's “perfect of persistent situation”, i.e. the type like “I've lived in this house for ten years” (and I still live in it), cf. Shakespeare's “Zodiacs have gone, round, and non of them been worn” (Measure for Measure, I. 2. 156—cited in Kakietek op. cit. p. 47—). One could add more nuances to the perfect and hence more sub-types. Thus there is the so called “habit-in-a period- leading- up- to- the-present”, e.g. “I've always walked to work” (Leech, 1971:34); the “declaratory perfect” (Kruisinga's “declarative”) as in “England has had many able rulers” (Bryan, 1936:378), and the “hot news” perfect: “Malcom X has just been assassinated” (McCawley, 1971:104).

The first semantic attempts to define the present perfect go back to the 18th century. Before this time most English grammarians had only indicated its existence in their paradigms. Lowth in 1762 maintained that constructions of the type “I moved” have an indefinite meaning, while those of the type “I have moved” connote definiteness. Noah Webster in his “Dissertations” proposed an inverse order in accordance with the meaning that is currently assigned to the present perfect: “Thus it is correct to say “I read a book yesterday, last week, ten years ago, etc.”, but it is not grammatical to say, “I have read a book yesterday, last week, etc.”, so that, directly contrary to Lowth's rule, “I moved” is the definite, and “I

have moved”, the indefinite time” (Webster 1967, facsimile from 1789:227). But by far, the most comprehensive grammatical treatment of the present perfect at the time was that of Pickbourn. In his book *The English Verb*, published in 1789, he laid the foundations of what was to become the explanation from which most grammarians drew. Hence his is the current label. “This tense may properly be called the present perfect, or perfect indefinite.” His research comprises several pages and in it we find the first glimpses of what was to be the Current Relevance Theory proposed by Henry Sweet a hundred years later.

5. The Present Perfect in American English

Let us turn our attention now to reviewing the textual data of American English. Colonial diaries constitute a valuable source of information inasmuch as many passages narrate occurrences that happened on the day of the actual writing. Therefore, the concept of current relevance should manifest itself often in these places. Such is the case in many instances:

“An horrid fellow has made a Mock-Sermon [this morning].

I would (...) expell the poison that has been insimulated into the Souls of the people” (Thursday night, 1712, The Diary of Cotton Mather, p. 10).

“When I am sitting with my Family, and going to utter the Songs which my Maker has given me for the Night, the Last thing to do, before I and they retire to Rest, must be to ask of the Capable Children, these Three Questions.

Q.1. Have you not neglected the Religion of the Closet today?

Q.2. Have you used your Pen for any Good Purpose today?

Q.3. Have you done so much Good, that it may not be said, you have wholly Lost your Time today?” (The Diary of Cotton Mather, p. 18).

“The greatest annoyance I have experienced (and great it has been, has proceeded from bugs and musquetoos, the former especially” (Tour through the State of New York, John Fowler, 1830, p. 194).

Aside from Mather's example above, most temporal references to the past appear in the preterit:

“Tell--that I saw little—this morning” (Diary and Correspondence of Amos Lawrence, p. 129—1834—).

“The Corporation met this day at Cambridge” (The Diary of Samuel Sewall, Vol. II, p.

1019—1724—).

“This day I received the enclosed from our secretary” (The Pynchon Papers, Vol. I, p. 85—1670).

“I received two letters from you this year and rejoice to hear of your health and welfare” (The Pynchon Papers, Vol. I, P. 108—1672—).

“This morning came here several persons” (The Boston News-Letter, July 9th-16th, 1705).

“This morning an Indian arrived” (George Washington Diaries, Vol. I, p. 84—1754—).

“This morning I assisted in getting the old Dove on shore” (The Journals of Ashley Bowen of Marblehead, Vol. I, p. 225—1769—).

Another instance of what seems to violate Comrie's perfect of result (i.e. persistence of the situation) comes from Royall Tyler's play “The Contrast” (1787):

“Darby; that was his baptizing name; his other name I forgot.”

On the other hand, it had to be “persistence of the situation” what made Joseph Dudley, governor of Massachusetts, express himself in the following terms:

“By the favour of Almighty GOD, we have been last year preserved from any inroad of the Enemy by Land, or any considerable Depredation upon our Coast; and the Forces in the several Parts have done their Duty towards our Preservation” (The Boston News-Letter, June 3, 1706).

Thus, last year must have been felt at the time of this address as a very relevant event with respect to the present. This example would suggest that relevance can override the overt manifestation of temporal expressions in English. As for the conditioning role that adverbs of time may play in this respect, still, already, and yet are regularly found accompanying only the perfect:

“It has been and still continues very moderate Weather” (Letters and Papers of J. S. Copley and H. Pelham, p. 177—1771—).

“Mr. West has already enjoyed the benefit of improving himself” (Letters and Papers of J. S. Copley and H. Pelham, p. 208—1771—).

“All Persons...who have not already paid...” (The Boston News-Letter, March 24, 1707).

“Tho' I have heard nothing of your motions from Gouldsboro' westward yet” (William Bingham's Maine Lands, p. 1141—1802—).

However, the adverbs just (now), never and lately appear in free variation in parallel environments and often from the pen of the same authors:

JUST (NOW)

“I have just now receiv'd an Account” (Correspondence of William Shirley, p. 466—1751—).

“I have just now received a letter” (The Pynchon Papers, Vol. I, p. 57—1666—).

BUT:

“I had just now the honour of your Letter” (Shirley, p. 521—1756—).

“I just now received the enclosed” (Pynchon, p. 125—1674—).

“Just now I received intelligence” (Pynchon, p. 63—1666).

“Yours of 28 instant I received just now” (Pynchon, p. 97—1671—).

“I just received a letter from you by this Indian” (Pynchon, p. 118—1673).

LATELY

“...which I have lately received from London” (Mather, p. 95—1712—).

“God has ordered it, that a man of this Neighbourhood has lately died” (Mather, p. 63—1712—).

“I have lately reviewed the several Regiments” (The Boston News-Letter, June 3, 1706).

BUT:

“I lately declared in a Sermon, that...” (Mather, p. 48—1712—).

“I lately received the favor of yours” (Jasper Mauduit, p. 86—1762—).

“The Restraint I lately laid the recruiting Officers under...”. (Shirley, p. 406—1755—).

NEVER

“You have never menshoned in all your Letters Antonio” (Copley and Pelham, p. 177—1771—).

BUT:

“I never heard the names of Indians mentioned in Colonel Lovelace's letter” (Pynchon, p. 82—1668—).

“I'm a true born Yankee American son of liberty, and I never was afraid of a gun yet in all my life” (Tyler's “The Contrast”, p. 57—178).

Another important source of data stems from the interrogations that took place in Salem in 1692 when the witchcraft trials were held.

(Bish) “I know nothing of it I doe not know whether be any witches or no.”

(Mr. Har) “no have you not heard that some have confessed.”

(Bish) “no I did not.” (Woodward, Records of Salem Witchcraft, p. 145).

“Have you never had any apparition?”

“No. Sir.”

“Did you never pray to the Devill that your daughter might confess no more?”

“No. Sir.” (Ibid, p. 185).

“What would you have me say? I never wronged no man in word nor deed.”

“Here are 3 evidences.”

“You tax me for a wizard, you may as well tax me for a buzzard. I have done no harm.”

“Is it no harm to afflict these?”

“I never did it.” (Ibid, pp. 256-257).

As in contemporary American English, never, lately, and just (now) lent themselves to being used indistinctly with the present perfect or the preterit in the same environments.

For Contemporary English, we can summarize the following information: some adverbs seem to combine preferably with the present perfect: since, so far, up to now, for the time being, lately, etc., others subcategorize for the preterit: ago, last, yesterday, etc., while another group combines well with either preterit or present perfect: ever, never, always, yet, just, etc. **Current Relevance:** The present perfect is used when the action which occurred in the past bears some relevance to the present, e.g.: “I’ve cut my finger” (and it is still bleeding). **Indefinite time:** When something that occurred in the past is not precisely pinpointed in time the present perfect must be used, e.g. “Have you been to Munich?” (sometime in the past), but “Were you in Munich?” (in the 1972 Olympic Games, for instance). A lot has been added to these three categories by several authors. Much of the debate is not conclusive, however, because it is based on pragmatic feelings; thus, as I mentioned above, James McCawley (1971:104) adds a fourth category that he calls Hot news: “Malcom X has just been assassinated”, while Martin Joos states that “They have shot President Kennedy’ seems to be ‘They shot President Kennedy’ (which is the exact wording in which the grim tidings were brought to the billiard-room of the University Club at the University of Wisconsin that day by a member of the faculty) plus an extra have too pedantic for such an occasion, that is, too frivolous” (1964:146). As for McCawley, he does not justify his choice (National Geographic, Feb. 1960:274).

Dialectal differences on this topic have been noticed almost exclusively by non-American grammarians (Palmer 1974:52-53), Leech (1971:38), Visser (1973:2193),

Defromont (1973:100-101), and Vanneck (1958:237-242). All these authors provide examples, many of them excerpted from contemporary American literature, and from their own field observation. Thus Palmer remarks that “For a British speaker it would not be normal to ask a child coming to the table ‘Did you wash your hands?’” (1974:53), while it is perfectly suitable for American speakers. Leech points to the preterit usage with yet where in British English it would be rejected, e.g. “Did you sell your tape-recorder yet?” (1971:38). Defromont, a Current Relevance theorist from the Université de Rabat got his data from American plays, mainly from Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman.” After demonstrating a wide use of the preterit in American English, in the environments in which usually in British English one would expect the present perfect, e.g. “Here, we brought you some flowers,” Defromont concludes that the present perfect is receding in America “...l’emploi du Past tend à se développer au détriment du Present perfect et du Past Perfect” (1973:117). This remarkable phenomenon led another Briton, Brian Foster, to refute E. Nida’s assertion that “it is quite possible to say ‘I finished the book’ after just putting it down” (Cited in Foster, 1972:210). Foster’s reply reveals a certain frustration that bespeaks a phobia for Americanisms:

“This is perfectly true in the American variety of English but --at the moment-- is quite foreign to British idiom. I have only once ever seen a case of it, and it was in the middle of the nineteen-fifties when the London Casino of Old Compton Street, London, issued a souvenir card concerning the new Cinerama technique. This card, of American inspiration, bore the legend I was in Cinerama. To the British eye this sentence appears incomplete and prompts such queries as ‘when?’, ‘where?’. It should perhaps be added that such syntax is known to Englishmen via the famous ‘Kilroy was here’, let alone such Hollywood film phrases as ‘I just ate’ and the ever-recurring ‘so you finally got here?’ (1972:210).

Vanneck, another Englishman, contends that by replacing the present perfect by the preterit American English is losing some semantic distinctions that British English still maintains: e.g.:

1a. “You look worried. What’s happened?” (I’ve no idea what my friend may have seen or heard.)

1b. “You look worried. What happened?” (I knew that my friend was to attend a meeting which is now over. I want to know what happened at it.)

2a. “Have you had lunch?” (If not, would you care to join me?)

2b. “Did you have lunch?” (If not, you must have been very hungry unless you managed to get a snack later). (1958:238-239).

Although No.1 seems to be coherent in its distinction, No.2 is rather farfetched. The meaning assigned is obviously arbitrary, and may just be one among many interpretations that according to context one could derive. Vanneck contradicts himself when on one page (240) he proposes that the American “colloquial” preterit represents a new development, and not a survival, while on the next page (241) he suggests that it may be an archaism since a similar use of the preterit is very common in Ireland. Vanneck stresses the diverging nature of American and British English by pointing out that the American idiom “You said it!” became “You’ve said it!” when it was introduced in England. Now, granting the co-occurrence of the preterit in American English with traditionally subcategorized present perfect adverbs like yet and already, we might want to ask if there is instead a reverse tendency in British English. As regards this, Trudgill (1978:13) and Hughes and Trudgill (1979:9) make reference to the incipient extension of the present perfect in the British Isles: “A number of British linguists have observed, informally, that ‘something is happening to the perfect’. The observations are, specifically, that increasing numbers of speakers are using constructions such as: ‘He’s played for us last year’, ‘They’ve done that three years ago’”(Trudgill, 1978:13).

6. Linguistic Area and the Present Perfect

If the present perfect undergoes in British English the process followed by other European languages, this dialect will have moved one step further toward what Argentiari calls the “Euro-Atlantic” language: “l’avvicinamento graduato e centripeto della lingua italiana e di tutte le lingue euro-occidentali alla lingua euro-atlantica” (cited in Muljacic, 1971:331-332). After all, other West Germanic languages with an active present perfect and a preterit may follow suit: German (depending on the region and dialect): “Ich sang~Ich habe gezungen”, Dutch “Ik zang~Ik heb gezongen” and Swedish “Jag sjung~Jag har sjungit” still maintain a present perfect. But North Germanic, Yiddish and Afrikaans have already neutralized the perfect/preterit distinction with their compound forms (Lass, 1987:323). Yiddish reportedly completed this grammaticalization by the 17th century. Afrikaans extended its preterit up to the late 19th century, when it was finally overcome by the compound form stemming from the original present perfect: Yiddish “Ix hob gezungen,” Afrikaans “Ek het gesing” (Lass, 1987:325). The European scenario is then one of convergence towards the replacement of the old preterit paradigm that was handed down by Indo-European. The preterit is thus replaced by the compound forms of the present perfect, which will lose

therefore its meaning of “current relevance” along with all the other aspectual nuances that it may have had once. But how can a speaker who consistently uses the preterit, even for events that happened a few instants earlier, break all the rules shared by his speech community? A possible explanation rooted in the concept of underlying structures is given by Trudgill to account for British English sentences like “He's played for us last year” and “They've done that three years ago”: “[These sentences] may have their origin in a form of blending: 'He has played for us + He played for us last year'. The point is, however, that we do not really know how they arose, or exactly how they are used; and that, not only are intuitions of no use in this case, they are actually wrong” (1978:13). This reasoning is analogous to Saurer's proposal concerning the anomalous “John has left at 5:00” (yesterday): “For some speakers, however this sentence is acceptable. We can respond to this in two ways. We can say that they speak a different dialect from the one interpreted here. The other is to say that in those cases the adverbials yesterday and at 5:00 are not to be construed as adverbs of the tenseless sentences John have* left or John leave but are added from outside, to the present perfect sentence John has left as an afterthought, as it were” (Saurer, 1984:87; Bernard Newman, 1957:137). It could be argued that the “unusual” present perfects above are examples of subjective projections not shared by the speech community as a norm, but tacitly understood as relevant.

N° 1 below represents the status in American English. N° 2 shows the grammaticalization process that demonstrates the first signs of change in British English. N 3. shows the completed grammaticalization of the present perfect as in modern spoken French and standard Italian (with a few possible fossilized preterits alternating with the present perfects in the latter language).

AMERICAN ENGLISH

1. Objective projection shared by all the speech community: “I have read the paper” (this morning).

Alternatively: “I read the paper.”(this morning) where the preterit marker is overridden by the pragmatic significance of the event, since the latter is either recent or still relevant to the speaker. The preterit is thus beginning to be seen here as a present perfect in meaning.

BRITISH ENGLISH

2. “He played for us last season.”Alternatively: “He's played for us last season.”

The current relevance element begins to fade and it becomes “blunt”, since it is being used in free variation with the preterit to indicate events that no longer imply necessarily relevance to the speaker.

EUROPEAN LINGUISTIC AREA

3. “Hier j'ai vu une belle maison” (French).
 “Hieri ho visto una bella casa” (Italian).
 “Ayer he visto una bella casa” (Peninsular Spanish)
 “Yesterday I saw a beautiful house”

In languages like those in N° 3, the use of the present perfect to mark current relevance has either disappeared (French and to a lesser extent Italian) or is currently fading (Peninsular Spanish).

The language specific variations concerning the punctual vs. the perfective past can be viewed within a tendency pointing to a Sprachbund or amalgamation within a linguistic area. Cultural ties depend to a great degree on vicinity and shared areas of mutual influence. Although the dichotomy between present perfect (European area) vs. preterit (American area) does not appear so clearly defined in British English and American English as it is currently observed between Peninsular Spanish and American Spanish, for instance, British English could very well be subjected to the same areal linguistic trends governing the replacement of the simple past by the present perfect in Europe.

Note

1. Although, according to Grünbaum, we cannot escape confronting the problem for: “the coming into being or becoming of an event, as distinct from its merely being, is thus no more than the entry of its effects(s) into the immediate awareness of a sentient organism (man)” (cited in Loizou, 1986:17).
2. These verbs are known traditionally as “defective verbs” (Allen and Greenough, 1983:116).
3. Of the following cases of colonial American English with the verb to be as an auxiliary only the combination with go has survived: “Here are come...”. (The Boston News-Letter, Dec. 2, 1706). “I am just now arriv'd here” (Shirley, p.478—1756—). “We are now enter'd into the Eighth Week” (The General Magazine, Philadelphia, P.323—1741—). “...whose works he is now gone to study”. (Copley and Pelham, p.209—1773—).

4. Webster employed the preterit where nowadays one would use the present perfect instead: “We have therefore the fairest opportunity of establishing a national language, and of giving it uniformity and perspicuity, in North America, that ever presented itself to mankind” (1967, facsimile from 1789:36).
5. More puzzling is Feigenbaum's subcategorization of “They have killed Anastasio Somoza”: “When the noun phrase has unique reference, the clause describes an event that occurred once” (1981:398). As regards this type of example communicating the news of a political assassination, it is significant to recall Lincoln's dream a few days before his death, in which, reportedly, he saw a body laid out in the White House and heard a soldier say “The President was killed by an assassin!” (National Geographic, Feb. 1960:274).
6. Thus, Argentieri believes that, among other predictable changes, the remnants of to be + past participle in French and in Italian are bound to disappear and that Italian will lose the final -e of its infinitives “per adeguarsi all' uso generale della lingua francese, spagnola e portoghese” (Cited in Muljadic, 1971:332).
7. It is significant that in Afrikaans the last preterit to disappear will be was-were. Thus in Afrikaans the preterit of “I was” is still “Ek was” not “*Ek het gewees” (“I have been”). Likewise in 16th-century Yiddish texts with compound forms expressing preterits, the only form from the original past paradigm is ver (was): “...er ver oyx fin Krouky”, ‘...he was also from Kraków’, (Lass, 1987:325). The resilience of the preterit of to be is also evident in Standard Italian, where it may alternate with the compound past as an auxiliary in passive sentences like “America fu scoperta nel 1492” or “America è stata scoperta nel 1492”.
8. Another “deviant” present perfect, this time from a literary source is found in the following paragraph: “We appreciate your help exceedingly, Captain Newman’, said the Personage. ‘Now we have already discussed this affair at some length last night.’” (Bernard Newman, The Maginot Line Murders, ch. XIV, p.260. Cited in Erades, 1957:137).

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