

CROSS – LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH PRESENT PERFECT AND THE ROMANIAN PERFECTUL COMPUS

Iulia IGNATIUC, *PhD, Associate Professor,
Alecu Russo State University of Balti*

Rezumat: *Articolul de față urmărește analiza trăsăturilor comune și deosebirilor între Present Perfect în limba engleză și Perfectul compus în limba română. Se subliniază idea că deși verbul are forme perfectului în diferite limbi, ele se deosebesc atât din punct de vedere al sensului lor gramatical, cât și al funcțiilor lor în discurs. Datorită caracterului specific al formelor verbului la Present Perfect în limba engleză, ele nu pot fi utilizate în texte narative spre deosebire de formele verbului la perfectul compus, care este un timp al naratiunii.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *condiție, rezultat, aspect, momentul vorbirii, eveniment, timp de referință, timp al naratiunii, trecut nespecificat.*

The perfect forms do not constitute a peculiar feature of the English language only. They are found in several languages, among them Romanian, Italian, Spanish, etc. This does not mean that they are similar in all these languages. However in all the languages the perfect forms point to actions or circumstances that happened before the present moment. In most cases it focuses on the resulting state and not on the action itself. Swan M. writes “The Perfect shows how the speaker sees the event – perhaps as being connected to a later event or as being completed by a certain time” (2009, p.402). That is why grammarians often talk about the ‘perfect aspect’ rather than ‘perfect tenses’. Some linguists believe that the perfect is a special tense and not aspect. Some think it constitutes a separate category of time correlation (Ilyish B. 1971, p.37). Thus the perfect is placed on the same line where the other tenses are placed. Most linguists, however, refer the ‘perfect’ to the category of aspect, though they point out that it is most strongly related to time. In modern linguistics it is said to combine the time reference which means the expression of time with aspectual information.

Many linguists believe that the perfect points to the current relevance of the event in discourse. It is pointed out that “the perfect indicates the continuing present relevance of a past situation”. (Comrie. B. 1976, p. 97). Discussing the Present Perfect, H. E. Hernandez points to the fact that “... relevance can be confirmed in the ways in which the Present Perfect form

relates a past action to the moment of speech” (2008, p. 121). In his study, he examines several ways of relating a past action to the moment of speech trying to determine this relationship.

Thus linguists emphasize the relation between the action itself expressed by the Present Perfect and the moment of speech. This relation is different from the relation between the action expressed by the verb in the Simple Past and the moment of speech. For a more complete analysis of the Present Perfect linguists often contrast it with the Simple Past. This is because the implications of the Present Perfect that something happened before the present moment are similar to those of the simple past. The Simple Past is used when the specific time of what happened is explicitly expressed (*in 1995, at 7 o'clock yesterday, an hour ago*). It may also be implied by the context, e. g., in the narration of a sequence of actions. The assumed time frame of the Present Perfect, on the other hand, lasts up until the present moment. Most authors point to the fact that in the Present Perfect attention is drawn to the consequences rather than the action.

I've made a report.

To clear up the differences between the Present Perfect and the Simple Past, Reichenbach (1947, p. 76) introduced the notion of “reference time” R. His scheme helps to explain the difference between the Present Perfect and the Simple Past. For the Simple Past the reference time R coincides with the event E (what really happened) and they precede the speech time S. For example:

She arrived yesterday.

The event E and the reference time R come before the speech time S. The sentence thus tells us only about the arrival. In the case of the Present Perfect, according to Reichenbach, the event E precedes the reference time R but the latter coincides with the speech time S. Thus the sentence “*She has arrived*” tells us that the person arrived and she is here at the moment. Reichenbach’s scheme is often used to explain the peculiarities of the Present Perfect in English.

The Present Perfect is not used with adverbials that express the definite time. That is why it is not used with adverbs of the type *at 1 o'clock*. At the same time, we should state that the Present Perfect is used with other types of adverbs, such as *today, this morning, this afternoon, this evening, etc.* All these adverbs include the speech time S.

She has arrived this morning.

It is still morning in the sentence above and the speech time is included as it coincides with the reference time R.

As we have mentioned above, the Present Perfect and the Simple Past are used with different adverbs. The choice of adverbs dictates the use of the tense. As narrative texts, for example, have an abundance of locating time adverbs, they are not characterized by the use of the Present Perfect. Henriette de Swart thinks the Present Perfect “... is an inappropriate tense to tell a story” (2008, p. 191). She explains it by pointing to the fact that “narrative contexts require the perspectives to shift to the sequence of events rather than to stay at the speech time S” (2008, p. 196). Thus the Present Perfect is not compatible with adverbs that usually accompany the forms of the Simple Past. The Present Perfect is compatible with deictic adverbials only. That is why, as H. de Swart writes, the Present Perfect is not usually used for narration. It is curious to notice here that while the Present Perfect is not expected to be used in narrative texts, the Past Perfect possesses this property due to the fact that it can be sometimes used with locating time adverbials. H. de Swart provides the following example:

Sara had left at six o'clock.

She explains that later at some moment it was clear that Sara left at six o'clock (2008, p. 197).

It is worth mentioning here that the Past Perfect is compatible with usage in narrative contexts like when-clauses:

When she had got up she phoned him.

It is probably important to remark that ‘when’ in the given context does not mean ‘at a certain time/moment’ but ‘after’ a certain time/moment. Thus we might admit that ‘when’ is usually used to denote an action taking place at a certain moment.

When the children had written their papers, they handed them in.

We have two past actions here one of which (had written) precedes the other (handed in).

The lack of compatibility of the Present Perfect and narrative contexts is not true of all languages that have perfect tenses. Thus in Romanian, a Romance language with three perfect

tenses, Perfectul Simplu, Perfectul Compus and Mai Mult ca Perfectul (Pluperfect), Perfectul Compus, unlike the English Present Perfect, is frequently used in narrative contexts in Romanian.

Un rol important în această mișcare l-a avut Valeriu Gafencu, el fiind stâlpul în jurul căruia s-au adunat cei ce se opuneau reeducării. Când a aflat de grozăviile de la Pitești, a spus "ne așteaptă și pe noi timpuri grele!" (Moise, 2007, p. 126)

The English Present Perfect differs from its counterpart in French, the *Passé Composé*. Thus the Romanian Perfectul Compus as well as the French *Passé Composé* are appropriate tenses to be used in narration as they are not limited in use in any of these two languages and this allows them to freely combine with time adverbials typical of narrative contexts.

Ea a plecat la ora șapte.

Elle est partie à sept heures.

In case we translate a French narrative text with the French *Passé Composé* grammatical forms into Romanian, we will use the Romanian Perfectul Compus in order to render the meanings of the French *Passé Composé*. However, if we translate such a text into English, we will use the Simple Past that is the normal narrative tense of the English language. When translating an English narrative text with Simple Past grammatical forms into Romanian we should use the Romanian Perfectul Compus which may easily be used in Romanian narrative texts.

He entered the room, looked at us and put the letter on the table.

El a intrat în cameră, s-a uitat la noi și a pus scrisoarea pe masă.

The examples clearly show that there is no absolute correspondence between the English Present Perfect and the Romanian Perfectul Compus.

She called Sally and told her the whole story.

Ea a chemat-o pe Sally și i-a spus întreaga poveste.

The day has broken.

S-a luminat de zi.

The analysis of the Present Perfect cannot be complete if there is no characterization of its functions. That is why in the next part of our paper we shall focus on these functions. Comrie (1976) talks about the uses of the Present Perfect. Some of them, however, correspond to its functions. Thus he distinguishes Perfect of Result, Perfect of Experience, Perfect of Persistent Situation and Perfect of Recent Past. Talking about the functions of the Present Perfect we should start with what is considered to be the principal function, that of making connection across time. A. Thompson and A. Martinet regard the Present Perfect as "a sort of mixture of present and past" (1997, p. 88). G. Leech considers the Present Perfect "past with present relevance" (1983, p. 123).

Another important moment related to the use of the Present Perfect is its frequent use in direct speech. This explains its wide use in conversation, in letters, in news and radio reports, other types of reports and prayers.

Due to the unspecified past that the Present Perfect expresses, it focuses on the result of the action and it is often called **Resultative** Perfect.

Bill has bought a new car.

The car is in his garage and he may use it.

Gail has got a baby.

Gail has become a mother and has a son or a daughter.

The next function the Present Perfect performs is indicating some **experience**. It may express any kind of experience:

- Health

Sam has broken his leg.

- School/college experience

He has often cheated on the exam.

- Travelling experience

I have often travelled by air.

- Computer experience

They have seldom joined an internet chat.

The types of experience may vary depending on the life situations.

The Present Perfect may also perform the function of expressing **repeated actions** in the past that might happen again.

She has seen the movie more than once.

The sentence does not imply only the idea that she has seen the movie several times but also that she might see it again.

They have already fought against the Turks.

The idea of this sentence is that they may still have to fight against the Turks.

The next function is the **continuative** one. It is mainly expressed by verbs that are usually not used in the continuous.

She has known him for over a decade.

With other verbs it is the Present Perfect Continuous that is used to express continuity.

They have been discussing the question for more than two hours.

Sometimes the continuous action is broken into periods.

I have been playing chess for about five years.

The Present Perfect is often used to express **accomplishments**.

She has learnt three foreign languages.

It might have taken her a lot of time to do this but finally she did it.

In certain situations the Present Perfect expresses **accusations**. Most often the Present Perfect is used in the continuous aspect to express accusations, though not always.

You have cheated again!

You've been playing computer games again!

The adverb 'again' is usually used in such cases.

We may also use the Present Perfect to express **change over time**. It happens when we talk about some change that has happened over time.

He has grown and become a strong young man.

The situation in the region has improved.

As the Romanian Perfectul Compus is usually a terminative form due to the fact that it expresses a complete action finished in the past before the speech moment, its most important function is to point out the result of an action that may or may be not connected to the moment of speech.

Automobilul s-a stricat. (It is still broken)

Automobilul s-a stricat trei zile în urmă. (It probably has been repaired)

In English, in the first example we would use the Present Perfect but in the second one, we would use the Simple Past. In Romanian, it is the adverbial that would tell us that the car might have already been repaired.

Perfectul Compus might express a single or a continuous action. In the latter case, it will be helped by some lexical determiners: *toată ziua, o zi întreagă, o lună de zile, etc.*

Eu am lucrat toată ziua.

The lexical determiner points to the duration of the action that is, however, cut from the present moment.

This does not happen in English, though.

The Romanian Perfectul Compus may also express an instantaneous action. In this case, it is also accompanied by a number of adverbs, like *brusc, deodată, dintr-o dată, pe neașteptate*. These adverbs additionally point to the instantaneous character of the action.

Pe neașteptate ea a ieșit din cameră.

The English translation will preserve the adverb (suddenly) but the verb will be in the Simple Past.

Suddenly she left the room.

Like the Present Perfect, Perfectul Compus may express repeated actions:

Și-a petrecut cu ei toate sărbătorile.

An adverb, like *de multe ori, adesea, în fiecare zi, toate, des, etc.*, is usually used in such examples (Lucian T. 2008, p.9).

Like the Present Perfect, Perfectul Compus may be used to express:

- Some kind of **experience**:

Am călătorit des cu avionul.

- b) **Repeated actions**:

Au mai luptat împotriva turcilor.

- **Accomplishments:**

A învățat trei limbi străine.

- **Accusations:**

Iar ai copiat!

- **Change over time:**

Situația în regiune s-a îmbunătățit.

Thus though the English Present Perfect and the Romanian Perfectul Compus share some of the functions, they differ as far as the most important function, of pointing out the result of the action, is concerned. This is because the English Present Perfect makes a connection between a past event and the speech time. H. de Swart assumes that the English Present Perfect is the only tense that provides a perfect illustration of the Reichenbachian schema E – R, S” (2008, p.207). We may assume then that Romanian, like Dutch and French, is exceptional in as far as Perfectul Compus is concerned. The Romanian Perfectul Compus is ambiguous, like the French Passe Compose, between a Present Perfect and a Simple Past tense.

References:

1. COMRIE, Bernard. Aspect. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976. 142 p.
2. De SWART, Henriette. Discourse Properties of the Perfect and Related Tenses in French, English and Dutch. In: G van der Meer&A ter Meulen (Eds), Proceedings of the Conference Making Sense: from lexeme to discourse, 2008, pp. 195-212.
3. ILYISH, Boris. The Structure of Modern English, Moscva: Prosveshchenie, 1971, pp. 370.
4. LEECH, Geoffrey. Meaning and the English Verb, London: Longman, 1987. pp. 152.
5. POPESCU, Stefania. Gramatica practică a limbii române. București: Tedit F.Z.H.93, 2001. pp. 687.
6. REICHENBACH, Hans. Elements of Symbolic Logic Macmillan Co. Dover: 1980.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/0486240045>.
7. SWAN, Michael. Practical English Usage, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 653.
8. MOISE, monah. Sfântul închisorilor: mărturii despre Valeriu Cafencu, Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2007. Pp. 336.
9. HERMANDEZ, Jose Esteban. Present Perfect Semantics and Usage in Salvadoran Spanish: Citat sept. 2014. Disponibil: <http://www.Jstorg/stable/41678354>.