

## INTRODUCING THE PAST PERFECT

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The past perfect has traditionally been described as one of the twelve tenses in English. A strictly grammatical definition of this verb form is inadequate for two reasons. First, the past perfect is not only a tense, but also an aspect. Often not explicitly stated, the interpretations dictated by the aspectual system are an integral part of past perfect meaning. Second, its use is often optional when contextual clues provide the relevant tense and aspect related information. Students may come to rely on these clues and fail to develop a complete understanding of this verb form.

In this paper I will show the necessity of supplementing descriptions of the past perfect as a tense with consideration of its aspectual meaning. Exercises which focus on both tense and aspect, without relying on redundant contextual information, will be presented.

Definitions which describe the past perfect emphasize its temporal function. Close (1975) refers to the past perfect as indicating a transference either (a) of the present perfect to the past, or (b) of the simple past to a previous past. Thomson and Martinet (1980) define the past perfect as the past equivalent of either the simple past or the present perfect. Ogawa et.al. (1975) describe the past perfect as indicating an event which occurred before a certain fixed time in the past.

The actual presentation of the past perfect gives further evidence that the emphasis is on tense related usage. When giving examples of the past perfect, Close (1975) presents contextual

clues which clearly mark the point in time from which we view the past perfect. For instance, in demonstrating the transference of the present perfect to the past perfect:

Hello George. I haven't seen your sister yet.  
I saw George on Friday. I hadn't met his sister yet.

In demonstrating the transference of the simple past to the past perfect:

I opened my eyes again. The snake had disappeared.

These descriptions, based on absolute time differences, mask some rather important features of the past perfect. For instance, I studied and I had studied both mark actions which take place in the past. Therefore the difference between them is not merely one of time. The aspectual system provides a way of describing this difference on a basis distinct from time.

Comrie (1976:3) defines aspect as "a different way of viewing the internal temporal consistency (ITC)" of a situation. Walker (1967) uses an interesting analogy to illustrate this difference in ITC. If a time indicator attached to a sentence includes the present (for instance, lately, so far, since), then the time-frame is open. If a time indicator shows the event to be absolutely in the past (last week, yesterday), then the time-frame is closed. In both cases the event took place in the past, but an open time-frame indicates that the event is still relevant. In Comrie's terms, the ITC is relevant. When the time-frame is closed, however, the ITC is not relevant and Walker

says that the action is completely divorced from the present.

The time-frame of the past perfect is open, so we must consider its ITC. It is not just the situation, but also our viewpoint of the situation which is important. Our perspective is shifted from the event to the span of time leading up to the event.

This change in perspective leads us to another feature which distinguishes the simple past from the past perfect, continuing past relevance. In sentences without sufficient contextual clues, the relevance is implicational. In I had eaten lunch and I ate lunch, the perfect implies, for instance, that the speaker was no longer hungry at a point in time prior to the utterance. The simple past, however, is more likely to be a simple statement of fact.

Two conceptions, ITC and continuing past relevance, help us show that the perfect is not just a tense. We will now look at the four functions of perfect use as defined by the aspectual system. It should be clear that the description of such functions depends first on the establishment of the proper time-frame, then on possible interpretations as dictated by the aspectual system.

Comrie (1976) has outlined the four types of perfect usage. The first is the perfect of result. In the case of the past perfect, some state in the past is explained as being the result of some action earlier in the past. Owen (1967) calls this the cause and effect function. The main problem in teaching this function of the past perfect (or any of the perfect forms) is

that the verb itself doesn't give any hint as to what the result might be, i.e., what the current relevance is, only that such a result exists. In Walker's terms, the time-frame is open and we expect some action to complete the situation. Thus John played tennis and John had played tennis while both stating the same fact, might carry quite different meanings. John had played tennis suggests perhaps that he was tired, or that he didn't want to play again. The important point is that John's playing was finished at a time in the past, and therefore a period exists between that point and a later point in the past for some other event to occur. John played tennis, on the other hand, is a finite event, and we might expect it to be followed by some adverb clearly marking the time, e.g., John played tennis yesterday.

The experiential perfect indicates events that happened at least once in the past prior to a certain time in the past. Comrie (1976) gives an example of the difference between the experiential and the resultative perfect. Bill had gone to America implies that he was still there (resultative), while Bill had been to America only suggest that he had had such an experience. In general, Comrie adds, English does not have distinct forms for this experiential perfect. Such a meaning must be indicated elsewhere. I had seen many UFOs, so I was frightened (resultative) and I had seen many UFOs before I began this job (experiential) is an example of this.

A third perspective associated with the perfect is what Comrie

calls the perfect of persistent situation. This is called the habitual perfect by some grammarians. The difference between the perfect of persistent situation and the experiential perfect is most clear if we look at a stative verb. I had lived there certainly implies a continuous state of affairs, leading up to some point in the past, whereas I had shopped there is more ambiguous. I had always shopped there represents a persistent situation, while I had shopped there once before is clearly experiential.

The perfect is also used when the relevance of a past situation is based only on temporal closeness. Comrie notes that this usage is gradually fading out in English, and in fact doesn't exist at all in some Romance languages. The reason for this is that the perfect covers two tenses, but not necessarily equally. In I have learned that the match is to be postponed, the learning definitely takes place in the past, not the present. The temporal closeness might be indicated by an adverb if the simple past is used, i.e., I just learned... The same adverb, or one like it (e.g. recently) can also be used to indicate temporal closeness with the perfect (I have just learned...).

By itself, the perfect implies that something has or had happened since the event to change the situation. This change is expressed in the aspectual meaning of the verb. There are two potential problems for learners here. First, the aspectual meaning is sometimes unmarked, or marked redundantly. This redundancy is often necessary in English. For instance, the

resultative and experiential usages in English are distinct only for the verbs go and be. This distinction was demonstrated above (Bill had gone (been) to America). All other verbs require contextual clues to make the distinction, as in the I had seen UFOs example above. In the absence of these clues, the complete meaning is impossible to determine. Second, the time-frame might also be marked redundantly. For instance:

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The movie had started before I arrived.

In such cases, a student will rely on contextual clues, and not learn to recognize meanings that are inherent in the verb form itself. One option might be to present sentences in the past perfect without contextual clues. Being aware of both tense and aspect, consider the following sentences:

The cat had spilled the milk,  
I had raked the leaves yesterday.  
Henry had jogged all afternoon.

Although these sentences are grammatically well-formed, I suspect that a native speaker would immediately make inferences to provide context for each sentence. Isolated sentences in the past perfect seem to demand such inferences. On the assumption that learners of English are not prepared to provide the necessary contextual inferences, we might be tempted to supply them. Unfortunately, giving the context makes the past perfect optional:

The cat (had) spilled the milk, so the floor was dirty.

I (had) raked the leaves yesterday before it rained.

They (had) hung the prisoner before the stay was received.

If such examples are used, the student is only learning an alternate way of expressing an idea. McGhie (1978) cautions against this type of learning, saying that it is better to learn to express ideas which could not be expressed before, rather than just learn new ways of expressing the same thought. McGhie is concerned about overuse of the past perfect, a likely result if it is taught as a substitute for the simple past.

I suggest that students must first be able to comprehend the appropriate temporal relationships between event before attempting to draw aspectual implications. In the initial stages, both events are stated and the aspectual implications are clear. When the later event is deleted, students will surmise that something is missing, and perhaps make inferences themselves.

The best example of past perfect usage, which provides critical information about tense and also forces students to make aspectual distinctions, occurs when it is used in conjunction with an adverbial clause beginning with when:

Two events described in the simple past may be combined with when if the order of events is clear.

When he called her a liar she hit him.

He had a party when he graduated.

We assume in these sentences that the second event (the main clause) was caused by the first event (the subordinate clause), and followed it closely. However, sometimes it might appear that the events are simultaneous, or there may be confusion about the actual order of events:

The thieves went when the police came.

He left when she called.

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In such cases, either the past perfect or the preposition before or after are clearer indicators of the time relationship.

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A. The thieves had gone when the police came.

The thieves went away before the police came.

The thieves had gone before the police came.

The thieves went when the police came.

B. He had left when she called.

He left before she called.

He had left before she called.

He left when she called.

The important point to understand is that the first three sentences in each group convey the same information. The third sentences contain redundant information: either the past perfect or before is playing an emphatic role only. In such cases the time relation between events is clearly marked. The fourth sentence in each group is much different. If our analysis of



when clauses is correct, the coming of the police was followed by the thieves running away, and we can assume that the going followed the coming quite closely.

The following exercises are designed to show students the clear difference in meaning between the simple past and the past perfect. The questions, besides showing whether the student has understood the time relationship, also give the student some suggestions about what aspectual implications may be drawn from past perfect usage.

Did we see the start of the movie?

The movie started when we arrived.

The movie had started when we arrived.

Was the baby asleep when I last saw her?

When I last saw the baby, she was crying herself to sleep.

When I last saw the baby, she had cried herself to sleep.

Did he watch the sunset at home?

When I got home yesterday afternoon, the sun set.

When I got home yesterday afternoon, the sun had set.

Was I late for class?

The class began when I got into the room.

The class had begun when I got into the room.

Did we all eat together?

Everyone ate dinner when we arrived at the party.

Everyone had eaten dinner when we arrived at the party.

Further exercises are used to teach students to recognize necessary uses of the past perfect. Students should read each sentence and decide if the past perfect is necessary, or redundant. Also, students might indicate the sequence of events for each sentence.

I had left before he called.

John had died when the doctor came.

The train had left when I arrived.

I arrived after the train had left.

When we got to our seats, the curtain had risen.

After the train had left, we went home.

As students begin to understand the tense-related effect of the past perfect, aspectual inferences should start to develop. For instance, in the first sentence above, it should be clear that something was missed by having left, namely the call.

The perfect of result is best illustrated in sentences containing because. If the result is in the past tense, past perfect in the following clause is probably obligatory, even if the simple past in such situations is understandable. Regardless, given the clear cause and effect relationship (which clearly shows the sequence of events) the use of the past perfect should not be considered unnecessary in this case. Exercises such as the following deal directly with both tense and aspect.

I was thirsty because...(weather is hot)

He was late for school because...(missed the bus)

I was laughing because...(hear a joke)

I had a bad sunburn because...(fall asleep in the sun)

I couldn't play well because...(be sick)

The past perfect partakes of both tense and aspect. It is critical to understand its position in time first. Once this is understood, aspectual features take over. In the case of complex sentences, the relationship between the verb in past perfect form and the other events might be clear. In isolated sentences, the student must be aware of the void which the past perfect creates. Students trained to expect such a void will be less apt to confuse the past perfect with the simple past, and more apt to provide the correct interpretation of the events described.

The implications of this paper may be rather limited. Ota (1963) found that the past perfect accounted for less than 0.5% of the verb forms in a large number of unrehearsed conversations and television programs. The percentage in written material was somewhat higher (3.4%). This data indicates that the past perfect is a formal phenomenon and is relatively uncommon in both written and spoken discourse. Further research should be directed in two areas. First, in what percentage of these cases is either the tense or the aspectual implications marked redundantly? Second, how does that percentage compare with the percentage of times the simple past is substituted for the past perfect because of such redundancies? The necessity of developing a clear theoretical understanding of the past perfect as an aspect depends on these results.

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