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The present perfect in English media discourse in the UK.[1]

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Abstract

This article explores a non-standard use of the present perfect which has hitherto received little attention in the literature. After first reviewing recent changes in English usage, we examine general rules for the use of the present perfect in standard English, noting that the "rule" that the present perfect may not co-occur with past time adverbials is often flouted. The novel use of the present perfect is then addressed, using examples from UK media. It consists of employing the present perfect, together with the past simple, to narrate events within a past time frame. It is argued that the perfect is deployed to render certain narrative episodes more vivid; it is not susceptible to standard explanations, and is currently only available in non-standard English. Whether it will move from this point to be accepted into standard English remains to be seen.

Keywords: present perfect, standard English, aspect, vivid narrative, media.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el uso no estandarizado del pretérito perfecto que hasta ahora ha recibido poca atención en la bibliografía. Tras revisar los cambios más recientes en el uso del inglés, examinamos las reglas generales para el uso del pretérito perfecto en el inglés estándar, teniendo en cuenta que la "norma" de que el pretérito perfecto no puede aparecer simultáneamente con adverbios de tiempo pasado en ocasiones se incumple. Nos ocupamos pues del uso novedoso del pretérito perfecto utilizando ejemplos de medios de comunicación del Reino Unido. Consiste en emplear el pretérito perfecto, junto con el pretérito indefinido para narrar acontecimientos en un marco de tiempo pasado. Sostenemos que el pretérito perfecto se utiliza para que algunos episodios narrativos resulten más vívidos; no se presta a explicaciones estándar y

[1] I should like to thank David Crystal, Geoffrey Leech and Ann Williams for their comments on an early draft of this article. Any infelicities are, of course, my own.

actualmente solamente se acepta en inglés no estándar. Si va a evolucionar desde este punto hasta ser aceptado en inglés estándar es una cuestión que queda por ver.

Palabras clave: pretérito perfecto, Inglés estándar, aspecto, narrativa vívida, medios de comunicación.

1. Introduction

Defining the features of standard British English as the native variety of a particular group has always been a difficult undertaking, since one is attempting to describe as a stable system what is in reality a dynamic process. Furthermore, the process of language change in the UK seems to be accelerating with the increasing pace of social change, facilitated by economic deregulation, the proliferation of broadcast media outlets, and exposure to international varieties (Crystal, 2003). Speakers of non-standard English have in the last two decades had far more access than previously to air-time on radio and television, while broadcasts themselves have become more informal (Williams & Kerswill, 1999: 162). One effect of media deregulation in the UK, in particular the ending of the monopoly over broadcasting which the BBC used to enjoy, is a decrease in the socially dominant "establishment" class's power of legitimisation over English usage. Non-standard forms of language, and also non-standard meanings of standard forms, have in recent years been appearing in public broadcast media to an extent that was not previously the case. However, this has had consequences, for as Milroy & Milroy (1991: 79) point out "Standardisation aims to promote uniformity", and the lack of uniformity following the liberalisation of the airwaves has unsettled adherents of standardisation. Such lack evokes criticism from many quarters: thus Marshall (2001: 2) bemoans the fact that British soccer players speaking on television have exposed him to "many mysterious novelties" which he regards as an "infection" in the English language. Marshall is in a long and recurring tradition of complaint about the decline in standards of English, with the media in recent years frequently targeted as "linguistic criminals" (Aitchison, 1998: 15). "Change" has many interpretations in sociolinguistics (Docherty and Foulkes, 1999: 71), and the appearance of non-standard language usages previously absent from the media does not of itself necessarily constitute change in standard English. Nonetheless, the frequency of non-standard varieties in the media is certainly evidence that the "public face" of English in the UK is changing. However, Marshall and the "purists" tend not to distinguish between changes in standard English on the one hand, and the fact that non-standard varieties now "usurp" the standard by appearing in public domains, on the other.

Many changes currently observable in English in the UK are occurring at the levels of phonology, lexis and syntax. Among the most obvious at the phonological level are: TH-fronting where /ð/ and /q/ become /v/ and /f/ in words such as *weather*, *nothing*; glottalisation of /t/ in intervocalic and word final position; vocalisation of /l/ in final position, and the raising of the vowels of standard English *two* and *coke* in the direction of those in *tea* and *cake* respectively[2]. These changes have become categorical in the speech of many young people throughout southern England and are spreading north (Foulkes and Docherty, 1999: 11; Williams and Kerswill, 1999: 142).

On the lexical level change is occurring through semantic extension[3], lexical confusion, and neologisms. Semantic extension refers to the extending of a lexical item's meaning while retaining crucial semantic features: *aggravate* for example, has now come to mean *irritate*. Lexical confusion or malapropism is very productive in meaning changes: *infer* threatens to take over from *imply, mitigate* often replaces *militate* (again there is often a semantic, as well as a phonological commonality). Neologisms have, as everyone knows, proliferated in electronic communication, from *fax* onwards, and these will be part of the English lexis for the foreseeable future.

Given the importance for communication of stability in the syntactic system, variation in this area might be least expected, and yet it seems to be occurring. Furthermore, it does not seem to be widely studied. Cheshire, Kerswill & Williams (2005: 135), point out that studies of phonological and phonetic variation have yielded a great deal of knowledge "about how sound changes typically spread through a speech community" but go on to say "sociolinguistic analyses of variation […] especially in syntax, remain relatively scarce". The more noticeable variations are those involving: (a) prepositions, especially *around*; (b) reflexive pronouns (c) conditional and "unreal" sentences.

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2 This has led to an attested instance of two "southerners" in the north of England being told, in response to a request for "Two cokes", that the establishment didn't serve "Tea cakes".

3 Terms of approbation and disapprobation seem particularly prone to youth-inspired fashions in semantic "polar opposite" extension: *bad* as a term of approval is now passé, and *wicked* seems about to follow it, with *savage* possibly making an entrance - such usages are probably best regarded as non-permanent group-restricted innovations (c.f. Milroy: 1992: 204), similar in motivation to anti-language (Mesthrie, 2000: 337).

The preposition *around* frequently - and in the speech of certain individuals, categorically - follows nouns such as *issue, question, discussion*[4] rather than the previously preferred *about*. It does, however, seem to be variation in standard English, if the speech of educated native speakers is to be defined as such. On the other hand, non-standard use of reflexive pronouns, exemplified in *I'm ever so pleased that we got in touch with yourselves* (BBC Radio 4)[5] would appear to be a non-standard variant used to mark formality. The third, and most striking syntactic variant which has emerged recently in broadcast media, is *if*-deletion, together with the use of the present simple form in both protasis and apodosis clauses of sentences referring to unfulfilled past conditions. Examples from BBC television post-football match discussion[6] include: *He pushes it a bit harder, it goes over the line* (rather than "*If he had pushed it a bit harder, it would have gone over the line*" "He" refers to the player, "it" to the football). Current evidence suggests that this usage only occurs in spoken interaction where the participants already share the "true" information, and therefore readily apply abductive "after the fact" reasoning.

An even more striking syntactic "novelty" is the use of the past simple with reference to an "unreal" event in the past, as in this comment from a member of the public after a football match (Reading Local Radio, 20/01/01): *I think it was an evenly fought match. A draw was good result.* In fact, one team (Reading) had won 1-0, as the speaker was fully aware, and the normal standard English version would be: *A draw would have been a good result*. In such instances as this, the selection of the past simple could be quite misleading for all who do not already possess the "real" information[7].

Such verb usages as those described above are not at present frequent in English broadcasts on British media. However, a far more common variation from Standard English occurs with the present perfect, a "novel" meaning of which is emerging in British media, and particularly broadcast media. In order to appreciate the extent to which this may, or may not, be "novel", a brief exa-

4 More rarely with verbs, although I have attested in conversation *We were talking around the question last night*, where there is clearly an ambiguity with the more normal *about*.

5 *Moneybox*, BBC Radio 4, 6/1/01

6 BBC TV *Match of the Day*: in both cases the speaker was the Scotsman Alan Hanson, but the use is not confined to him.

7 It may be that in such cases the unfulfilled element is signalled through stress and intonation: more research is called for.

mination of the various explanations of the present perfect in standard English is in order.

2. The present perfect in standard English

Standard explanations for the use of the present perfect[8] (HAVE + *past participle*) is that it is connected to "current relevance" (e.g. Twaddell, 1965: 6 cited in Palmer, 1987: 48). Quirk et al (1972: 91) say "It is past with 'current relevance'." This orthodox view is, however, acknowledged to be a rather vague explanation (c.f. Palmer, 1987: 50; Miller, 2000: 328). Attempts to be more precise have resulted in subdivisions of the notion of "current relevance". McCawley (1971) subdivides it into four, as follows:

(i) the universal: "I'*ve known* Max since 1960" which indicates "that a state of affairs prevailed throughout some interval stretching from the past to the present"

(ii) the existential: "I'*ve read* 'Principia Mathematica' five times" which indicates "the existence of past events"

(iii) the stative: "I can't come to your party tonight - I'*ve caught* the flu" which indicates that "the direct effect of a past event still continues"

(iv) "hot news": "Malcolm X *has just been assassinated*." which is self-explanatory

Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 51 ff.) have a three-part division:

(i) State present perfect: We *have lived* in Amsterdam for five years.

(ii) Event present perfect: The Republicans *have won* the election.

(iii) Habitual present perfect: Socrates *has influenced* many philosophers.

A similar sub-division is made by Michaelis (1998: 115), although she employs different labels:[9]

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8 Whether the present perfect is to be regarded as an aspect or a tense (Declerck, 1989: 9) is not an issue I propose to explore. I regard it as a combination of present tense and perfect aspect: it is "present" (*have* as opposed to *had*), and "perfect" (incorporating HAVE + past participle), as opposed to "non-perfect". See also Palmer (1988: 35).

9 I have reversed Michaelis' presentational sequence to match that of Greenbaum & Quirk. Among others with a similar three category analysis is Finn (1987: 132), who labels his categories "continuative, experiential and resultative".

(i) Continuative: The store's *been* here for five years.

(ii) Resultative: The police *have arrested* the men responsible.

(iii) Existential: Harry *has visited* twice this week.

While the lack of consistent terminology across analyses is unfortunate (especially in that McCawley's "stative" differs from Greenbaum et al.'s "state"), it seems clear that McCawley's (iii) stative and (iv) "hot news" are accommodated by Greenbaum et al.'s "event" (Michaelis' "resultative"). McCawley himself subsequently (1981) admits that his "hot news" should be absorbed by his "stative", and seems to incline towards the latter being analysed as "existential". This collapsing of categories is well motivated, since there is often ambiguity between cases of "the direct effect of a past event" and of "the existence of past events", the difference being one of degree rather than kind (c.f. Miller, 2000: 328-331). The pragmatic categories of the present perfect have thus been reduced to two,[10] namely:

(i) duration-oriented, where a state of affairs has prevailed from a past point to the present. The state of affairs might be expressed by a "stative" verb, for example, *Jane's known Tom very well for years*, or a "dynamic" verb, in which case the progressive aspect is normally marked into the verb phrase, as in *They've been painting that house all morning.*

(ii) result-oriented, where the present result of a past activity may be inferred, for example *Someone's broken the window.*

The result-oriented use accords with the so-called "indefinite past" explanation (c.f. Elness, 1997: 230; Leech, 1971: 32; Tregidgo, 1984: 287) where, if neither the utterance nor the context provide a time in the past when the event or state occurred, then the present perfect is used. However, if an adverbial of

10 This is also the preferred analysis of Michaelis (1994). Elness (1997: 76) on the other hand, argues that since the distinction between the two senses is not always clear cut, and since they have "their temporal range in common", then the present perfect in English can be seen as "one unitary semantic category". However, the difference is clear if we consider the contrast between the answers in these two cases:

(f:i) Has Tom got a job these days? Yes, he's worked as a taxi driver for the last 2 years.

(f:ii) Does Tom know his way round the town? Yes, he's worked as a taxi driver here in his time.

Such instances do of course point to an ambiguity in the present perfect, which like lexical ambiguity, is in general readily resolved through reference to contextual factors (c.f. Michaelis, 1994).

past time is used, then the past simple is used rather than the present perfect, to yield *Someone broke the window yesterday* and not **Someone has broken the window yesterday*. Palmer (1987: 49) claims that English "might be the richer" if sentences such as the latter were possible, combining information about a specific period in the past, with the current relevance of that information, while Comrie (1976: 54) claims that languages other than English do indeed allow such combinations. Likewise, in cases of duration-oriented present perfect, the temporal perspective (where the time period covered by the verb phrase includes "time-up-to-the-point-of-speaking"), is incompatible with adverbials of past time, disallowing: **Jane's known Tom very well three years ago* in favour of *Jane knew Tom very well three years ago.*

In short, there is a widespread view that the present perfect cannot co-occur in clauses scoped by adverbials that refer to a point or period of time in the past (see *inter alia* Bardovi-Harlig, 2000: 108-109; Elness, 1997: 9; Palmer, 1987: 50; Greenbaum et al., 1990: 52;). This view is reflected in a prime domain of Standard English, namely English language teaching materials: Swan & Walter (2001: 56) exercise a degree of caution saying "We don't *normally* use the present perfect with words for a finished time" (my italics); Leech (1989: 381) opts for pedagogic simplicity, in his claim that "The present perfect *cannot* go with an expression of past time" (my italics). Leech's view has not gone unquestioned: Miller (2000: 326) suggests that the present perfect is "supported and protected by codifiers of written standard English", while a number of linguists have claimed that past time adverbials are not in fact incompatible with the present perfect (see below).

We shall also review a more intriguing set of cases which has not attracted as much attention, and which suggests that the present perfect is increasingly employed to relate past tense narrative, in a function that systematically contrasts with the past simple. These two types of "rule breaking" are not subject to the same explanation, although the cumulative effect might indicate that the past simple in the UK is loosing some ground to the present perfect (c.f. Comrie, 1976: 53 footnote 2).

3. Present perfect with past time adverbials

In the first type of "rule breaking" the present perfect in its resultative use occurs in clauses which are scoped by past time adverbials. Rastall (1999: 80) and McCoard (1978: 128) are among those who provide many examples, while instances such as the following occur on a daily basis in the UK media, both spoken and written:

(1) *The Charlton supporters* ***have given*** *their players a hard time* ***at the time****.* (Garry Hill, Manager Dagenham FC, BBC Radio 4, Today, 17/01/01)

The following is from a financial programme, generally in a more formal register than post-match football discussion:

(2) *I'm sorry but we'****ve overpaid*** *you* ***three years ago*** (BBC Radio 4, Money-box, 06/01/01)

The next two examples are from news bulletins, which again usually employ a formal speech style:

(3) *Two children* ***have died when a car burst into flames yesterday.*** (BBC Radio 4 News at 8.00, 1/02/02)

(4) *Anyone who* ***has seen*** *Damilola wearing this jacket* ***on that day****, please contact us.* (Police spokesman, BBC Radio 4 News at 14.00, 02/12/00)

The same usage occurs in writing, although the majority of cases I have recorded are quotations in direct speech (however quotations are usually "idealised" in other respects). Sir Geoffrey Howe's resignation speech as reported in "The Times" (13/11/90) provides a number of examples, including:

(5) *Now as the Prime Minister* ***has acknowledged two weeks ago****, our entry into the exchange rate mechanism can be seen as an extra discipline for getting down inflation.*

The following is an example of similar use in writing that does not seem to originate in spoken language:

(6) *The role of the family doctor* ***has changed*** *almost beyond recognition* ***in the last century.*** (Radio Times, 3-9 February, 2001. p. 113)

All of the above examples could be accounted for on an *ad hoc* basis by claiming that the past time adverbials are "in parenthesis" or "afterthoughts", and as such do not directly scope the present perfect verb phrase (c.f. Crystal, 1966: 19). This would interpret (6) as *The role of the family doctor has changed almost beyond recognition [and by the way, this happened in the last century].*

This *ad hoc* explanation is less convincing in cases where the past time adverbial precedes the present perfect in the sentence, as in example (7) below (the "Jill" referred to, had died in the previous year; the "the last few months" therefore occur in a past time frame, and do not run up to the moment of utterance):

(7) ***In the last few months*** *Jill's* ***never mentioned*** *anything like that* (Nick Ross, ITV Tribute to Jill Dando, 26/04/99).

A further explanation is that the use of the present perfect in such cases is simply a performance error. Tregidgo (1984: 288) refers to such cases as "marginal" but adds "though I am more inclined to regard them as accidental". This is a view that is increasingly difficult to sustain: so many "slips" are being made and going unnoticed, that they can now only be regarded as such from a highly prescriptive viewpoint. Miller (2000: 240) providing similar examples, asks "how many 'slips' constitute a regular pattern", while, Hughes & Trudgill (1979: 9), and Trudgill (1984: 42) pointed out some two decades ago that use of the present perfect with past time adverbials was on the increase. McCoard (1978: 128 ff.) cites examples from Erades (1956), and Maurice (1935), who are both of the view that such present perfect usage is acceptable. This usage may be explained in terms of syntactic semantics by appeal to the result-oriented use of the present perfect, which in these cases "overrides" the past time adverbial (c.f. Miller, 2000: 327). While the use of the present perfect in clauses scoped by past time adverbials may not find favour with all grammarians, it is not - *pace* Palmer, 1987 - wholly excluded from speech or writing, and would effectively appear to be part of standard British English today.[11]

4. Present perfect in past narrative discourse

The second type of apparent "rule-breaking" occurs when the present perfect is used to relate past time narrative sequences, contrary to the rules provided in descriptive grammars, and contrary to the current usage of standard English speakers (including Marshall [2001: 2] for whom one of the "mysterious novelties in the English language" is "the adoption, in post-match description of earlier completed event, of the perfect tense (*sic*) in place of the past historic"). Marshall provides a plausible concocted example. Examples which I have taken from the broadcast media include:

(8) *I'**ve put** the ball on the spot, I'**ve looked** to his left and right, and I'**ve put** it right down the middle.* (Phil King, Soccer Heroes, Carlton TV, 2/03/01)

11 Such use has a long history: Elness (1997: 248) has numerous examples from Old and Middle English and cites an example by Brunner (1962: 300) taken from the 8-th century epic *Beowulf* (lines 407 f.):

Ic eom Higelaces mæg ond mago-þegn

***hæbbe** ic mærða fela **ongunnen** on geogoþe.*

(Tr: I am Hygelac's kinsman and thain

*I **have attempted** many glorious actions **in my youth)***

This was said by a football player recounting an episode several years after the event, and without television "action replay".[12] The next example is from a snooker player (the fact that only the first verb phrase in this sequence displays the present perfect is a point we shall return to):

(9) *I'**ve missed** on the green, then I potted on the black.* (BBC2, Dave Harold, following Snooker Championship Semi-final, 09/02/01)

We also find the present perfect used in recounting non-sporting narrative:

(10) *I'**ve heard** "crash", I'**ve looked up** and it was unbelievable.* (BBC, Newsroom South East, eyewitness to scaffolding collapse, 23/01/01)

The usage is also found in written English, although, as in the case of Howe's resignation speech above, the examples below are quotations of what was originally spoken:

(11) *Once I was getting a bottle out and caught it on the bar. It's **taken** the bottom clean off, and the whole of the bottle **has gone** straight over the customer.*

(A Life in the Day of a Barman, Sunday Times Magazine, 26/11/00, p. 78)

This usage is not exclusively British, and the following is one of many examples from Australia provided by Ritz & Engel (2000):

(12) *[A]nd she said "Can you sign this?" and I said "Oh, OK, one final signing and will you go away?" And she said "Yeah, yeah". So I'**ve got** a texta (felt tip pen), I'**ve held** her head straight, and I'**ve written** on her forehead "Hi, mum, I've tried drugs for the first time".* (Triple J Radio, Sydney, Australia, 7/3/00)

Obviously such sequences of present prefect use cannot be accommodated by the "resultative override" argument: the cases of present perfect in the "texta" episode are telling us what happened next in a past time frame, and have no current inferential significance (c.f. Michaelis, 1994: 149 ff.). While such examples may have had inferential significance *at the time of the event*, this is clearly not an explanation which accords with the descriptive rules of standard English, where the present perfect is supposed to have *current* relevance, i.e. to the time

12 Rastall (1999) providing similar instances of the present perfect in television action replay from football games, says it is used where "the outcome of each action is already known and has current relevance to the next action or the present (i.e. the outcome of the entire event)". This explanation does not account for examples 8-12, all of which occurred without action replay, and where outcomes were not known.

of the utterance, not to the time of the event. However, as in the case of the present perfect scoped by past time adverbials, there is evidence that the present perfect in narrative sequence has a long history. McCoard (1978: 224) cites numerous historical examples from Visser (1966), including the following, which again feature a combination of both past simple and present perfect in a narrative sequence:

(13) *His bowe he* ***bent****, and* ***sette*** *ther-inne a flo (arrow).*

And in his ire his wyf thanne ***hath he slayn****.*

(Chaucer, c. 1386)

(14) *Sir Bleoberis* ***ouerthrewe*** *him, and sore* ***hath wounded*** *him.*

(Mallory, Morte d'Arthur, 1470-85)

Visser's (1966) view (cited in McCoard, 1978: 224 - 225) is that past simple and present perfect were virtually interchangeable in Middle English, and could be selected according to the demands of rhyme or metre (c.f. Mustanoja, 1960: 507, cited in McCoard, 1978: 255). However, since present-day spoken English is hardly subject to mediaeval rhyming and metrical demands, the question facing us is "What are the rules for the use of the present prefect in past time narrative?"

The answer proposed here is that this use of the present perfect is employed for specific purposes in narrative discourse, but that this use is currently not available in standard English. First, the past simple is obviously the unmarked preference for relating a sequence of events in the past, in both standard and non-standard varieties. However, if the narrators wish to present certain events in the discourse sequence as particularly vivid, there is no syntactic device available in standard English which enables them to do so economically. In non-standard spoken English, however, there is such a device, namely the present perfect, which is deployed in this function precisely to contrast with the past simple, the latter being used for verbs which the speaker does not wish to highlight. Thus if the above Australian "texta" narrative is rewritten, and the verbs in the present perfect are changed into the past simple, it would read:

(15) *[A]nd she said "Can you sign this?" and I said "Oh, OK, one final signing and will you go away?" And she said "Yeah, yeah". So I got a texta, I held her head straight, and I wrote on her forehead "Hi, mum, I've tried drugs for the first time".*

In this rewritten version, the past simple is employed to tell us "what happened next" - the unmarked narrative function. However, all the verbs are

now of equal status, and none distinguish "what happened next" as part of the narrative discourse, from "what happened next" as emotionally vivid and dramatic elements in the narrative from the speaker's perspective. In the above example it is proposed that "*getting*" "*holding*" and "*writing*" are such elements, whereas "*saying*" is not, and the speaker marks them as such by using the present perfect.

The present perfect in this use accordingly allows speakers to incorporate into the verb phrases of the narrative their own attitude, and mark what they consider to be significant episodes. This use of the present perfect is not therefore a "mistake" but constitutes the deliberate deployment of a formal resource which *contrasts* with the past simple. It therefore has a discourse function, and cannot be adequately explained without recourse to extralinguistic factors. It is not a variable as normally understood in sociolinguistics, since it is not possible to establish consistent functional variants (in this respect it resembles focus marker *like*: see Kerswill & Williams, 2002: 103). While *simply* or *just* with the past simple may perhaps fulfil a similar function in standard English discourse, (*I simply got a texta etc.*), the equivalence is debatable, and these adverbs cannot be deployed felicitously with a series of consecutive verbs, whereas the present perfect can be so deployed.

5. Conclusion

In the public use of standard English in the UK, the situation with respect to the two "novel" uses of the present perfect, in summary, is as follows:

(i) High inferential significance of an action or state indicated by a verb may allow for "overriding" of past time adverbials: this results in the present perfect being used rather than the past simple, which is contrary to many grammarians' rules for standard English, but sufficiently frequent in practice to warrant inclusion as standard.[13] This usage does not appear to be stigmatised, and has been remarked upon for several decades by linguists.

(ii) The present perfect may also, under personally dramatic conditions, take over the narrative sequence function of the past simple. This is contrary to both stated descriptive rules, and to normal practice in standard

[13] The trend the US seems to be in opposite direction, with Michaelis (1994: 125) saying that in the US the past simple "appears to be expanding its semantic range" at the expense of the inferential present perfect. See also Vanneck (1958: 237), Visser (1966: 754), Elness (1997: 218), and Comrie (1976: 53, footnote 2.

English. In recent years, however, this use of the present perfect has received greater exposure in the UK, because of access to broadcast media by social groups who were previously almost entirely excluded. It is therefore not a change in standard English that is occurring, as Marshall (2001: 2) implies, but rather that people who speak English according to different norms from Marshall now have access to the broadcast media. Most prominent among these in the UK are people in sport, and particularly footballers. (We may speculate that use of the narrative present perfect in Australia, reported by Ritz & Engel (2000) is possibly related to the incorporation into Australian English of "mainly London features" (Trudgill, 1986: 137); although Trudgill is speaking of phonology, there is no reason why discourse features should not also have been incorporated. This must, however, remain speculation for the present.)

This "vivid narrative present perfect" (VNPP), represents a discrete third use of the present perfect, to be added to the temporally-oriented and result-oriented uses. It differs from those two, however, in that it is a discourse feature of a non-standard variety, the deployment of which is entirely up to individual speakers of the variety. While it is not dissimilar to the "conversational historic present" or CHP (see Wolfson, 1979), available evidence suggests that CHP does not occur in past narrative discourse of non-standard speakers in UK media; more generally, the motivation for the deployment of CHP seems less obvious.

Any prediction as to the acceptance of the VNPP into standard British English is hazardous. Bauer (1994: 171) claims that changes "are more likely to spread from less formal styles to more formal styles, and from lower to upper classes". Certainly the VNPP is spreading in the sense that it seems to appear more frequently on broadcast media in the UK than previously. Whether it is spreading in the sense of being incorporated into the language of speakers who have hitherto operated according to standard norms is difficult to determine without further detailed research. Williams & Kerswill (1999) and Timmins & Stuart-Smith (2001) believe that radio and television may play a role in the spread of non-standard elements; Trudgill, on the other hand (1990: 11), is sceptical of the spoken media's potential to influence people's "accents or the grammatical structure of their dialects" although he agrees that they do influence "the words and phrases people use" (see also Trudgill, 1986: 40-41).

The use of the present perfect in narrative discourse would appear to be largely unremarked by the general public (Marshall, 2001, being an exception), possibly because, as Aitchison (1981: 77) observes, "people do not pay much attention to the behaviour of others unless it is dramatically different from the norm". Kerswill and Williams (2202) in a more detailed investigation of salience as an

explanatory factor in language note that "salience is not shared across the community" and that "middle-class non-users often do not recognise local features" (Kerswill & Williams, 2002: 104). Both Aitchison and Kerswill *et al.* are primarily referring to linguistic form not discourse function. However, Kerswill & Williams (2002: 104) note that discourse features may occur "in prosodically and pragmatically prominent positions", illustrating with medial focus marker *like* (as in *I'm like real tired when I get in*). However, since the VNPP is, with respect to standard English usage, a novel meaning, rather than a novel syntactic form, it may not be highly salient to typical non-users. Such speculation is of course amenable to empirical investigation.

While the public *appearance* of VNPP is a superficial indicator of greater social inclusivity and mobility, the population which uses it in these public domains seems currently to be restricted to those of working-class origin. VNPP is not, as far as I can ascertain, used by middle class speakers. Two methodological points arise here, both related to data. The first concerns the fact that data utilised in this investigation are the result of "noticing" and deliberate selection, rather than obtained from samples based on structured data collection. However, structured data collection (for example, based on samples from older and younger males and females representing middle and working classes) might well yield very few, if any, instances of VNPP. Cheshire et al (2005: 128) point out that syntactic variables are more difficult to elicit than phonological or phonetic variables. This is even more true of discourse variables. Further, this study is concerned with the emergence into the *public media* of a non-standard usage, in other words, it is restricted to data that has naturally occurred in the media. For relatively infrequently occurring data, where the concern is to establish the occurrence of a language phenomenon, then "noticing" examples on an opportunistic basis is a valid method. As for evidence that VNPP does not occur in current standard British English, the fact that it is not commented upon in any of the linguistic studies of present perfect in current English cited in the above introduction is sufficient indication. It may be, of course, that the relative infrequency with which VNPP is used militates against its adoption by the middle classes (the assumptions here being that middle classes speak standard English, and that frequency is a factor in convergence c.f. Cheshire et al. 2005: 139). We might also note in passing that the very function of the VNPP requires it to be infrequent – since it highlights vivid events, overuse would lead to "usage inflation", thus rendering it discoursally valueless (one may speculate of course, that such inflation might come about over the long term, leading to the displacement of the past simple by the present perfect).

The second point concerning the comparability of data across social classes is that, as Carter & McCarthy (1999: 55) point out (with respect to the *get* passi-

ve), what constitutes noteworthiness or vividness is socially constructed. In the case of the VNPP, what is noteworthy emerges in the recounting of the narrative. Thus different social classes may not only favour different discourse genres, which is one source of difficulty in making comparisons, but in addition they might have differing views of what constitutes noteworthiness, which renders comparisons even more difficult.

However, even if the VNPP were to be accepted into the language system of standard English, this might simply indicate that the middle classes had appropriated it, confirming thereby what is already known (e.g. Cheshire et al, 2005), namely that language variables permeate class boundaries, rather than an indication that the "classless society" is coming into being. As far as the relationship between social change and language change in the UK is concerned, one should not overinterpret such "novelties" as the VNPP. "Change" has many interpretations in linguistics (Docherty & Foulkes, 1999: 71), and the appearance in the media of non-standard language usages previously absent from those media does not constitute change in standard English. However, the frequency of non-standard varieties in these media indicates some shifting in attitudes, and is evidence that the "public face" of English in the UK is changing.

In conclusion, it seems that the VNPP is on a sociolinguistic cusp – it gains public exposure through the media, does not seem to be overtly stigmatised, and is rarely remarked upon. Whether it is a sociolinguistic marker, in the sense of being a variable to which speakers pay more or less conscious attention (Labov, 1972), or simply a class-based discourse variable normally deployed by non-standard English users, is not entirely clear. Perhaps the safest answer to Elness's 1989 title *The English present perfect: has it seen its best days?* still remains "Wait and see".

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