Talking Perfectly

Discourse Origins of the Present Perfect

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1. Introduction

As an investigator of child language, I have repeatedly been struck by parallels between developmental patterns in language history and in children. Such parallels, of course, have been noted by generations of linguists and philologists, with numerous arguments about the role of acquisition as a determinant of language change. My goal here, however, is to make use of child language study as a field from which to glean hypotheses about processes that may be at work in language change — but without attributing a causal role to children in diachrony. The domain I wish to consider is the perfect — or, more precisely, a developmental path that gives rise to forms such as the present perfect in English. The historical details are not completely clear or adequate, and we shall probably never have sufficient data to solve some continuing disputes, not to mention the permanent critical lack of data from preliterate periods. So I shall present somewhat of an idealization. As for child language — though there is no lack of living data sources, the body of recorded, transcribed, and analyzed materials is still quite small, and, again, I shall have to present an idealized picture. The

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Richard Franklin Cromer, who, in his brilliant 1968 Harvard doctoral dissertation, was the first developmental psycholinguist to analyze the development of the present perfect in English; and who, until his all-too-early death in June 1990, contributed so much to understanding the great issues of language and cognition.
value of acquisition data is two-fold: (1) We are likely to catch the ‘core meanings’ of grammatical forms in their youngest uses (e.g., Bowerman, 1989; Slobin, 1985). (2) We can study the interpersonal functions of grammar in dialogue — a luxury almost totally lacking in historical studies.

In broadest outline, the developmental paths in question are parallel in diachrony and ontogeny: a resultative participle goes from a meaning of ‘accomplished state’, with focus on the undergoer, to ‘completed action’, with focus on the actor. In the process, the form takes on the characteristics of ‘the continuing present relevance of a past situation’, to use Comrie’s (1976:52) general definition of the perfect. This is the present stage of English.¹

2. Acquisition of the present perfect by English-speaking children

To begin with, consider the developmental picture in Modern English. We will have to turn to British data, since in American English, the present perfect has become too marginal for adequate analysis of its early functions. The findings of Cromer (1968) and Nussbaum and Narremore (1975) indicate that the form does not achieve significant use in American children until about age 5. In Britain, however, Fletcher (1981) and Gathercole (1986) report frequent use by 3-year-olds, and I will report data from British 2-year-olds.

The most detailed study is Virginia Gathercole’s work in Scotland. She found that children as young as 3;0 used the present perfect in immediate resultative contexts, which she defined as utterances in which “the speaker was referring to an event or change of state that he or she had just witnessed or performed” (p. 544). This is the only perfect function used by all 12 of the children in her sample, ranging in age from 3;0 to 5;1, and it is the predominant use in the 2-year-old English data of Gordon Wells that I have been working with.² Since the resultative also seems to be the diachronic starting point of perfects, these child data are of special interest. We know from crosslinguistic developmental research that ‘results’ are particularly salient to 1- and 2-year-olds, even before the emergence of grammar (e.g. Gopnik & Meltzoff 1986). As I have reported earlier (Slobin 1985:1181): “In all languages for which there are relevant data, whenever there is an acoustically salient past-tense or perfect marking on the verb, its first use by the child seems to be to comment on an immediately completed event that results in a visible change of state of some object.” But an attention to immediate results is not sufficient to differentiate the present perfect from the preterite in British English. Gathercole found that although Scottish adults, in speech to children, use the present perfect for immediate results far more frequently than for any other function, they also use the preterite for that same function. In an attempt to find possible “subtle meaning or distributional differences” between the two forms, Gathercole listed the verbs used by adults in present perfect and preterite to express immediate result. Finding considerable overlap between the two lists, she rejected the hypothesis of semantic contrast, concluding that resultative present perfects are acquired first due to an interaction of high frequency and cognitive simplicity.

However, I think there is another factor to be considered in addition to verb semantics — namely, the functions of grammatical forms in dialogue.³ When the child hears the same verb in two grammatical frames, both referring to a past state with resultant consequences, he or she has no recourse but to try to differentiate the forms on discourse pragmatic grounds — on the assumption that grammatical choice is ‘motivated’, and that only pragmatic distinctions remain if lexical choice is held constant. In making this claim, I base myself on what Eve Clark (1988, 1990) has characterized as a pragmatic ‘Principle of Contrast’ underlyng language acquisition and language change:

The principle of contrast, in its most succinct form, goes as follows: Every two forms contrast in meaning. This principle has been assumed, tacitly or explicitly, at least since Bréal (1897) and Paul (1898) in their work on language change, as well as by de Saussure (1919/1968) in his synchronic analysis of language use. This principle captures the insight that when speakers choose an expression, they do so because they mean something that they wouldn’t mean by choosing some alternative expression. Speaker choices in any domain mean what they do in part because they contrast with other options both in that domain and in the language as a whole. As a result, speakers do not tolerate synonyms in language. This principle applies to words, affixes, grammatical functions, and even constructions (1990:417).

Consider the following dialogue, in which Mother is interacting with two children — older Tom, who is drawing, and younger Benjamin:

(1) Mother (to Tom): You did all that writing, did you? Well you are a clever boy. Is it a monster? Did you draw a monster? I’m frightened.
(Tom pretends that his monster will bite Mother, and they engage in laughing play.)
Mother: Oh, he bit me!
Benjamin: Don’t be silly!
Mother (to Benjamin): He’s drawn a monster, Benjamin, and it’s going to come and bite you. Here comes a monster coming to bite a Benjamin!

Note the contrast between Mother’s did you draw a monster to Tom and he’s drawn a monster to Benjamin. These are both comments on what Gathercole has called “an event or change of state that [the speaker] had just witnessed,” using the same verb. In the first instance, Mother simply notes what Tom did, using questions in the preterite about the nature of the completed activity. Only afterwards does Mother introduce this established information into a new interaction. However, in the interchange with Benjamin, Mother is apparently challenged by Benjamin’s rejection of the pre tense, and presents the event as one that has an immediate consequence: He’s drawn a monster…and it’s going to come and bite you. The present perfect focuses attention on the right boundary of an event as the point of departure for a subsequent event. In fact, it might be more appropriate to characterize the two conjoined clauses as part of a single ‘episode’: the emergence-and-threat of the ‘monster’. The present perfect thus seems to have a pragmatic function of packaging sequences of clauses into an ‘event-consequence episode’. I suggest — applying the Principle of Contrast — that this pragmatic factor will function developmentally to differentiate the conversational uses of preterite and present perfect.

Let us examine several interchanges in an attempt to pinpoint the relevant pragmatic factor. The data come from Gordon Wells’ (1981) recordings of British families, stored in the CHILDES computer archive (MacWhinney & Snow 1985). Thus far, I have examined the speech records of four children, in the age range of 1;5 to 5;0.4 The children hear both preterites and present perfects in the speech of other family members, and use both forms in their own speech as early as 1;11. Since the children use and hear both forms, their task is to infer the speaker’s communicative intent in using a perfect rather than a preterite.

The present perfect is first used, by both child and mother, with telic verbs in contexts where the completion of one action provides the grounds for a subsequent action. There are two major types of such uses: ‘negotiations of consequences contingent on completed activity’ and ‘attention to results’.

Negotiations have to do with sequences of activities, both immediate past and planned. In the following example, Mother wards off a child’s demand for repetition by noting the immediate completion of an activity. Here, the perfect is oriented to the immediate past, with consequences for the immediate future.

(2) Jonathon (age 1;11): Read that one Mum.
Mother: I’ve read it.
Jonathon: Read it again, Mum.

To use the terminology of Geis & Zwicky (1971), Mother’s use of the present perfect ‘invites an inference’ — something like: “She told me she’s read it because she doesn’t want to read it again.” Note that the invited inference adds the consequence, just as the consequence was explicitly spelled out in Mother’s comment to Benjamin in (1).

The present perfect is used in similar fashion by children to negotiate sequences of activities. Note the following example, in which a child aged 2;2 projects a perfect of result into a future sequence:

(3) Mother: Pick the bricks up, and then you go to bed.
No more pies this morning.
Jonathon: Only one?
Mother: No.
Jonathon: When I’ve picked the bricks up?

Here the invited inference is something like: “He wants more pie after he has finished his task.” Again, the inference adds a consequence that is contingent upon the completion of the situation presented in the present perfect.

The other main early discourse context for early perfects of results is to draw the hearer’s attention to a result. Again, the focus is on the right boundary and its consequences, but here there is no negotiation. Abigail, at age 1;5, goes into the garden with no shoes on and steps in a puddle, much to Mother’s dismay:

(4) Mother: Goodness sake, you’ve come out in your tights.
After I’ve just dressed you — taken ages to get you ready.

The present perfect apparently is intended to invite the inference that the immediately preceding events have a current consequence — namely,
Mother’s emotional/evaluative response to Abigail’s actions. That is, the relevant consequence is Mother’s attention to the situation.

Again, children also use the present perfect to attract the hearer’s attention. In such instances, the attention itself seems to be the intended consequence: “I’ve done something, so attend to me.” Such utterances often occur in contexts where an expectation for an action has been set up; the child then acts, using an utterance in the present perfect to evoke the consequence — namely, the adult’s attention. For example, Jonathon, at 2;6, shows Mother that he’s done what she requested:

(5)  Mother: You draw a letter for me.
Jonathon [draws letter]: I’ve drawn a letter for you.

3. Acquisition of the present perfect by the English language

English, like many related and unrelated languages, apparently acquired its present perfect by reanalysis of an attributive construction. Traditionally, the mechanism proposed for the diachronic change has been a cognitive inference to the effect that possessing something in a resultant state implies that a past process brought about that state. One of the earliest formulations of this process was offered by William Dwight Whitney in 1875 (and repeated or rediscovered in countless formulations up to the present day):

Present possession often implies past action: habeo cultellum inventum, habeo virgulam fissam, habeo digitum vulneratum. “I possess my knife found (rediscovered after loss), I possess a twig that is split, I have a wounded finger:” here the several conditions have been preceded by the several acts, of finding, splitting, wounding. On this absurdly narrow basis is built up the whole immense structure of the “perfect”-tense expression: the phrase shifts its centre of gravity from the expressed condition to the implied antecedent act; and I have found the knife, ich habe das Messer gefunden, j’ai trouvé le couteau, become indicators of a peculiar variety of past action contemplated as completed... (p. 91).

Whitney’s formulation — like its many successors — seems to present a jump from resultative to preterite or even perfective. However, the hallmark of the perfect is its Janus-like attention to both past process and present circumstance. It is this dual focus that has made it impossible for linguists to agree as to whether the perfect is a tense, an aspect, or something else. I will opt for the ‘something else’, following the hint from mother-child dialogue that the key lies in the speech contexts in which the perfect is used. Linguists have always noted that the use of the perfect brings some past event into relation with the present. As early as 1789, James Pickbourn noted in his A dissertation on the English verb: “In general, this tense may be applied wherever the action is connected with present time” (p.33). The perplexing issue, however, is to be clear about what is meant by “‘connected’ with present time,” and here we have a plethora of formulations of what has generally come to be called ‘current relevance’.

A useful phrase appears 175 years after Pickbourn, in Martin Joos’s 1964 book, The English verb. Joos distinguishes between the ‘event’ and its ‘effects’: “the event is not mentioned for its own sake but for the sake of its consequences” (p. 140). What is critical in his formulation is his attention to the ‘intent of the speaker’ in choosing the perfect rather than the preterite — which is not separately oriented to event and consequences. This is the same issue which we have seen at play in acquisition, and it must have played a role as soon as the ancestor of the perfect contrasted with the preterite in given speech contexts. I would like to suggest that those contexts were the same in Old English as they are today.

I offer this suggestion as an addition to the growing interest among historical linguists in the role of the hearer in contributing to grammaticalization through the process of ‘conventionalization of conversational implicature’ (e.g., Traugott 1989; Traugott & König 1990). Most recently, Kathleen Carey (1990), in a presentation to the Berkeley Linguistics Society, has used such arguments to determine which use of the perfect may have been the first to arise in English. She considers three broad types, following Brinton (1988):

(6)  a. Resultant State Perfect: past action with present results.
I have eaten lunch. (and am therefore not hungry now)
He has caught a cold. (and cannot come to work)

b. Perfect of Experience: a situation that occurred once or more in the past within a span of time construed by the speaker as continuing up to the present.
I have been abroad several times.
I have read that novel.

c. Continuative Perfect: a situation which began in the past and persists until the present.
We have known him since he was a child.
He has sung in the choir for years.
Carey reasons that the Resultant State Perfect represents the only use of the perfect that could have arisen from a previous adjectival structure. That is, this must have been the diachronic core meaning of the perfect (just as it seems to be the ontogenetic core meaning today). Consider her example from Old English (from Traugott, to appear), offered below with both an adjectival and a perfect construal:

\[ (7) \quad \text{ÆCHom 1, 31 458.18} \]

\text{Ic hæbbe gebunden fone feond þe hi drehte.}

\text{ADJECTIVAL: “I have that enemy bound that afflicted them.”}

\text{PERFECT: “I have bound that enemy that afflicted them.”}

The situation can be construed in both ways, with focus on the state of the bound enemy (adjectival) or the action of the first-person subject (perfect). If the hearer is led to the perfect construal, this is an opening wedge for reanalysis of the possessive construction. Carey argues, convincingly, that telic verbs in the adjectival construction allow for the invited inference that the resultant state of the object is due to the past agency of the subject. Such inferences can give rise to Resultant State Perfects, but not to Perfects of Experience or Continuative Perfects. Her verb counts from Old English prose show, indeed, that \textit{have + past participle} constructions were overwhelmingly made up of telic verbs (165/167).

This position represents a skilful combination of verb semantics and conversational implicature. The cognitive inference — from resultant state to antecedent process — is the same one that has been proposed for child language acquisition in a number of languages. It is a short step from perception of a consequence to recall of its cause, and this natural mental process helps to explain why results are starting points in the development of the grammar of tense/aspect in child language and history.

Beyond the cognitive, however, a pragmatic factor is needed. Carey (1990) makes a suggestion about the role of the speaker, in addition to the inferencing ability of the hearer:

\text{In most contexts in which the adjectival construction would be uttered, the subject is the agent of the process, and consequently, these contexts satisfy the truth-conditional requirements for the perfect meaning (p.375).}

Unfortunately, we cannot retrieve Old English conversations to verify this suggestion, but, if they were like contemporary conversations, we can add the element of dialogue that is missing in historical accounts — thereby attributing roles to both speaker and hearer. That is to say, in order to flesh out these intriguing pragmatic additions to the standard account of the origins of the perfect, we need a better understanding of the interpersonal contexts in which adjectivals could be construed as perfects.

In accounts of Modern English resultative perfects, linguists often have recourse to parenthetical extensions to indicate that the past situation referred to might have consequences that make it worth mentioning, such as Brinton’s (1988:10) examples cited by Carey, and given in (6a) above. These parenthetical extensions represent the same consequences for continued interaction” that we have seen in the British mother-child dialogues. In Modern English, the invited inference is that something follows, in the present discourse, on the basis of the report of a past circumstance. This inference is now conventionally signaled by the choice of perfect morphology, but similar contexts must have been present in preliterate Old English conversations when the original attributive form was used. Consider the sentence in (7). The speech act of the adjectival construal may well have been a kind of ‘report’: “I inform you that the enemy is bound and in my possession.” The perfect construal may well have expressed a kind of ‘claim’, or ‘negotiation of consequences’, with expectation of an explicit following act with regard to the captive: “It is I who captured the enemy, so give me my reward.” Or perhaps: “Here he is, so now we can execute him, torture him, offer him for ransom,” etc. (This analysis also suggests that the perfect construal would have arisen in first- and second-person contexts.) In addition, the \textit{have + past participle} construction contrasted with a preterite, the equivalent of \textit{I have bound the enemy}, which focuses only on the subject’s past agency, and not the present state of the enemy. So the Old English hearer, in drawing an inference from the possessive construction, must also have had a background knowledge of the contrasting option of the preterite, putting him or her in the position of making use of the Principle of Contrast — just as does a modern-day child.

The full setting for an invited inference, then, is more than a verb of a particular semantic type in a particular grammatical frame, such as constructions with have and the past participle of a telic verb. We must add to this description an account of the speech act represented by the sentence, along with the presuppositions and expectations that are at play in the communicative context in which the sentence is used, against the background of the array of alternative constructions available for related expressive functions.
Such analysis requires extended texts — ideally, representations of dialogue in plays, novels, court proceedings, and the like — unfortunately, the sort of historical data that are rarely available, and are often artificial. But the following example from Shakespeare suggests that the discourse factors proposed for the Resultant State Perfect can be readily identified in dramatic texts. In the second part of *King Henry IV* (Act 4, Scene 4), the King awakens to find his crown missing. He speaks of this event using the verb *take* in both preterite and present perfect:

(8) King Henry: *Where is the crown? who took it from my pillow?*  
Warwick: *When we withdrew, my liege, we left it here.*  
King Henry: *The prince hath ta'en it hence: — go, seek him out.*  

(after the prince is discovered with the crown)  
King Henry: *But wherefore did he take away the crown?*

Just as in modern mother-child dialogues, King Henry uses the present perfect when there is a consequence to a past event with a present result. Here the consequence need not be added parenthetically by the analyst; Shakespeare gives it to us directly: “The prince hath ta'en it hence: — go seek him out.” By contrast, in the two preterite sentences, the King is asking a question, seeking a cause of the past event.6

4. Probing the parallels between ontogeny and history

So far, patterns and processes of child language development have presented themselves as useful to diachronic analysis. In conclusion, however, I want to return to the question of causality, because I do not believe that children are responsible for the sorts of historical changes considered here. That is to say, the parallels are, in a sense, illusory.

It is not surprising that the core meanings of grammatical forms are such “concrete” notions as visible resultant state and inference to immediately preceding process. Children start with such notions because they are cognitively most simple, natural, and accessible. Older speakers, in the process of grammaticalization, play out the metaphoric and metonymic extensions of basic meanings simply because those are the only available materials for such extensions, and not because they are ‘recapitulating’ developmental processes from early childhood.

The conversational inferences proposed above are accessible to speakers of all ages, although I have come upon them in the reading of mother-child dialogues. When we go beyond the Resultant State Perfect, we find uses that are later to develop in childhood. If Carey is right, the Perfect of Experience and the Continuative Perfect arose later than the Resultant State Perfect. In Gathercole’s data, the Continuative Perfect (her ‘perfect of persistent situation’) does not appear until almost age 5. The Perfect of Experience appears earlier but, as she points out, children may not command all of the requirements for its use. These acquisitional facts have to do with cognitive factors. Young children cannot easily deal with the present relevance of past events that do not have an obvious consequence at the moment of speaking. These uses of the present perfect require the ability to conceive of a time span that includes the present, containing past events whose consequences are important for the structure of the conversation, rather than the negotiation of actions and attention to results. Their development thus depends on maturing abilities to ‘construct texts’ and to take the linguistic world of conversation as a world in and of itself.

The same uses of the perfect arise later in history also — but for other reasons. The perfect must first be conventionalized as a Resultant State Perfect before it is available for more extended uses with atelic and iterative verbs. The historical developments are not attributable to cognitive maturation of the speakers, but to the possibilities of grammatical extension and reanalysis. That is, historically, there was a period in which only the core meaning of Resultant State was grammaticalized, and it provided the basis of extension to the Perfect of Experience and the Continuative Perfect. The modern child, however, is presented with the entire range of grammaticalized uses of the perfect, but does not have cognitive access to all of them at first. The child, then, begins with the core meaning because it is cognitively most salient and accessible, while the language community begins with the core meaning because it is the only available starting point, given the complex of semantic and pragmatic factors discussed above.7

In brief, although the diachronic and ontogenetic developments appear to be parallel, they seem to result from different processes. New meanings of grammatical forms arise in adult language use on the basis of pragmatic inferences drawn from existing referential and propositional meanings. Preschool-age children are not yet able to draw most of such inferences, and are limited to core semantic concepts and pragmatic functions. With increasing pragmatic and cognitive competence, they are able to com-
Prehend the extended pragmatic meanings intended by older speakers, and come to express these functions in their speech. I propose, then, that children come to discover pragmatic extensions of grammatical forms, but they do not innovate them; rather, these extensions are innovated diachronically by older speakers, and children acquire them through a prolonged developmental process of conversational inferencing.

Notes

1. In some other Germanic languages (Yiddish, Afrikaans, Southern German dialects), as in French, the erstwhile perfect has gone on to become a past tense, but this cannot be included in studies of diachrony and ontogeny, since there is no attested parallel development from perfect to pretense in children's acquisition of contemporary Germanic or Romance languages (such as Spanish) in which the perfect still has some of its 'current relevance' functions. In Turkish the perfect went on to become an evidential, becoming the past tense for nonwitnessed events inferred from their consequences or gained through hearsay (Slobin & Aksu 1982), and there is evidence (Aksu-Koç 1988) that children follow the same path in the course of acquisition.

2. Gathercole also found that all of her Scottish children used the possessive have got (e.g., I've got one); but this usage lies outside of the constraints of the perfect considered here. As Fletcher (1981) suggests, this form may simply encode a present state. All but two of her children (one of 3;3 and one of 3;7) used the 'experiential perfect', which she characterizes as: "Verb form used in reference to an event or state that occurred or existed at some unspecified time in the past" (e.g. Adult: Have you ever been to a circus?) (p. 544). However, she notes that the child may use the present perfect for this function "without recognizing that the present perfect entails present relevance, in that the use of the present perfect requires that the action or state be repeatable" (p. 555).

3. I wish to thank several colleagues for having carried on extended dialogues with me in which I came to understand the importance of such factors — especially: Nancy Budwig, Susan Ervin-Tripp, Suzanne Fleischman, Julie Gerhardt, John Gumperz, and Bambi Schieffelin.

4. The children are Abigail: 1;5 — 3;3; Benjamin: 1;5 — 5;0; Elspet: 1;8 — 5;0; Jonathan: 1;6 — 4;7. I am grateful to Lisa Dasinger for assistance in retrieving examples from the CHILDES Archive; to Marc Edwards for computer assistance in accessing the Archive; and to the Institute of Human Development and the Institute of Cognitive Studies, University of California, Berkeley, for material support.

5. Brinton (1988) notes that in the earliest written records, have + past participle constructions can be construed as both possessives and perfects, and concludes: "There is no reason to believe that these collocations originally expressed possessive meaning" (p. 102). However, I would argue that we have ample crosslinguistic evidence that perfects do arise in possessive collocations, even including Northern Russian dialects with a genitive possessive and participle, rather than a verb of possession (e.g., u nego napita "at he written" = he has written) (Trubimskii 1984:139). It would seem that possession of an accomplished circumstance is a natural cognitive source of perfects, and I will assume that it existed in preliterate English.

References


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