

## Preference and Reluctance for the Present Perfect

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There are, at least, two big concerns with the present perfect --- (i) current relevance and (ii) difference from the past tense. In previous studies, researchers more or less reached out the consensus that English present perfect says something about the past and the present, but “it is difficult to pin down the nature of this ‘current relevance’ in a way which is both explicit and able to account for the full range of data (Portner 2011: 1225).” As for the difference from the past, some researchers consider that the present perfect is marked and is therefore used where one cannot use the past tense (Stump 1985; Schaden 2009). In order to discuss these problems, one needs data which meet the criterion of observational adequacy. By analyzing a corpus which represents contemporary American English (The Corpus of Contemporary American English; COCA), this presentation points out that (i) there are several verbs which seem to be reluctant to be used in sentences expressing current relevance and (ii) the selection of the present perfect over the past tense is both lexically and pragmatically motivated.

**1. Quantitative Observation** The two figures on the next page --- (i) the scatterplot (Figure 1) and (ii) the ranking of the verbs with high Information Gains (Figure 2) --- reveal that the distributional patterns are highly predictable by the semantic class of the verbs. First, some verbs which involve a certain change (e.g., *evolve, achieve, improve, ...* etc., shown as “A” in Figure 1) are preferred to be used in the present perfect. Second, some verbs which concerns a simple event (e.g., *scream, nod, smile, ...* etc. , shown as “B”) are reluctant to be used in the present perfect, though they are frequently used in the past form. Third, it is also less common for such verbs as involving emotion and mental activity (e.g., *remember, like, wish, ...*etc. , shown as “C”) to be used in the present perfect and it is also relatively rare for them to be used in the past. In this way, this study shows a set of verbs which are informative in the sense that they maximize the difference between the past and the present perfect.

**2. Qualitative Observation (I)** The reluctance of the Type B and Type C verbs is also confirmed when one qualitatively examines a few cases where they are used in the present perfect. For example, *scream*, the verb with the highest Information Gain, is used in such an environment as shown below (although this verb is observed 4,216 times in this corpus, this is the only example where this verb is used in the present perfect):

- (1) A psychologist who believes that a depressed woman needs immediate hospitalization to prevent her from committing suicide must either call her to discuss treatment options or threaten her with forcible admission to the hospital if she does not do it herself by the end of the day. Police take a man to a psychiatric emergency room after he *has screamed at* and threatened his wife for several hours from the sidewalk in front of their apartment.

Even in this case, it is difficult to conclude that the intrinsic meaning of *scream* is well-compatible with the present perfect, because, together with a preposition *at* and coordinated with a transitive verb *threatened*, this *scream* is (re-)interpreted as (a part of) a transitive verb (or, phrase). In this way, qualitative consideration also suggests that the use of the present perfect is semantically motivated.

**3. Qualitative Observation (II)** Although the distribution seems to be, more or less, semantically *motivated*. does this mean that the use of the present perfect is semantically *determined*? There are, at least, two objections to this conclusion. First, there are also some verbs that *do* involve a certain change but do not show any strong preference to the present perfect (e.g., *realize*). If the use were semantically determined, all the verbs involving a change would have the

Figure 1. Partial Correlation Plot between the Present Perfect and the Past (The effect of the total frequency in the corpus is controlled)

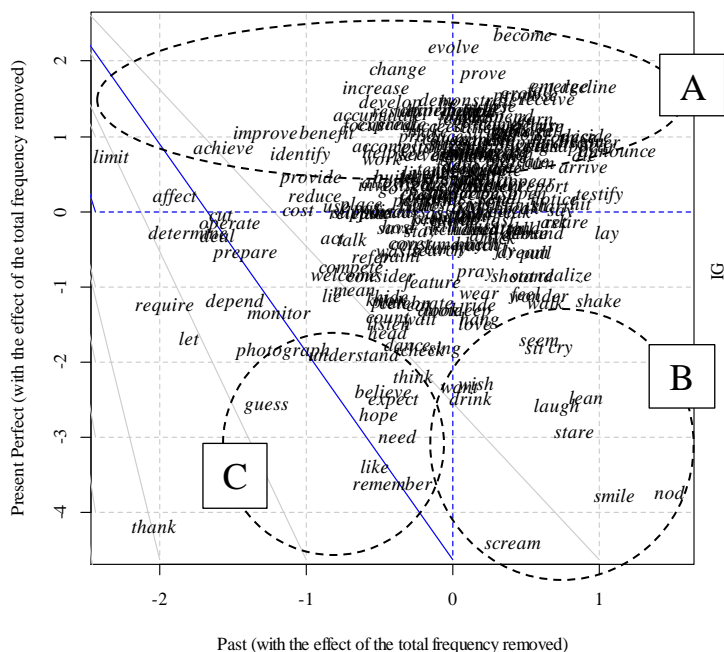
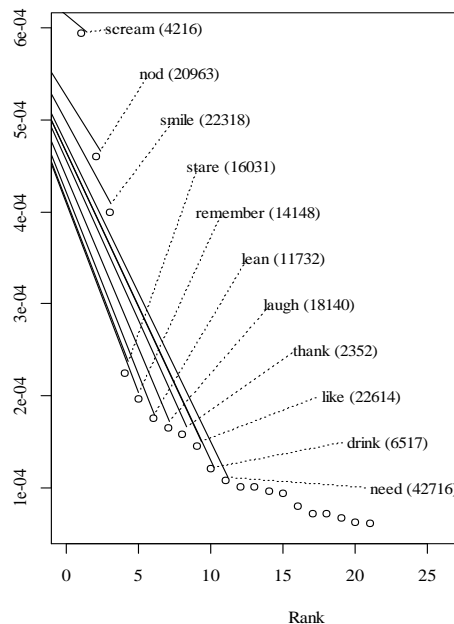


Figure 2 Verbs with high Information Gains (Descriptive Statistic)



preference to the present perfect, which is not correct. Second, even such verbs which show the reluctance to the present perfect can, of course, be used in the present perfect. For example, *smile* is such a verb. Just as in the case of *scream* mentioned above, this verb, too, is less likely to be used in the present perfect, and in most cases where they are used in the present perfect form, they are used as a part of a phrasal verb, as shown in (2)a.

- (2) a. when good things happen, we are certain fortune *has smiled on* us.
- b. Though his expression is serious now, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes make me think *he has smiled* a lot. He looks kind.

However, this verb *can* stand alone with the present perfect, as shown in (2)b. What is relevant here is the pragmatics: the *discourse topic* is playing an important role here. The current relevance seems to be established, not from the lexical meaning of the verb *smile* but from the coherent relation with the discourse topic (Portner 2003). That is, in this case, the main goal of this discourse is to express the speaker's impression on the man described in this passage --- an impression that he looked kind. The choice of the present perfect is positively motivated by the discourse, because *his laughing* contributes to the conclusion that he is a kind person, making the discourse coherent.

**4. Conclusion and implication to the theories** In this way, this presentation discusses that (i) the preference and the reluctance to *the present perfect* are highly predictable from the verb's meaning, but (ii) even the verbs which show a strong reluctance to the present perfect can be used in this form, when one can give relevant information to the discourse. This empirical study supports (i) the view of the markedness of the present perfect (basically it is not used unless there is a particular requirement; this is why *scream* and *smile* are mostly used in the past tense) and (ii) the proposal that the present perfect is required to provide information strongly relevant to the discourse topic (this is why *smile* can be used in this form in (2)b).

Portner, Paul (2003) The temporal semantics and modal pragmatics of the perfect. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 26, 459–510. Portner, Paul (2011) "Perfect and progressive." *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. (eds.) Claudia Maienborn, Laus von Heusinger and Paul Portner. 1217-1261. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. Schaden, Gerhard (2009) Present perfects compete. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 32, 115–141. Stump, Gregory T (1985) *The Semantic Variability of Absolute Constructions*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.