THE PRESENT PERFECT TENSE CONTRASTED TO THE PAST SIMPLE TENSE

Elena Mărăscu

Lecturer, PhD, University of University of Craiova

Abstract:The similarities between present perfect and past simple tense determine students to make confusion between them. If we think strictly in term of time both present perfect and past simple places the events prior to the moment of speaking on the timeline. In other words they both give a retrospective view on the events; but with the present perfect is not so much about the time.
The past simple creates a retrospective axis of orientation, the past axis, having no connection to the present; it is viewed as separated from the present. The present perfect is a subtle retrospective aspect instead; on the timeline it is placed prior to the moment of speaking (as the past simple is) but it has connections with the present; it views the action as either occurring in a time-frame leading up to the speech time (or around the moment of speaking) , or implies a current relevance.

Keywords: Present Perfect, Past Simple, tense, contrast, confusion.

There are major differences between Present Perfect Tense and Past Simple Tense, and these may be considered as being in the placement of the event on the timeline and subsequently in the nature of event.

To take them step by step we may say firstly that the opposition between past simple and present perfect is identified/non-identified time. To say this in another way, we may assert that although both tenses place the actions or events prior to the moment of speaking on the axis of orientation; the past simple refers to identified time in the past while the present perfect refers to unidentified time in the past. To refer to identified time in the past means that the event is located at a specific time in the past (the past simple is deictic) even though it is not expressed explicitly; the speaker thinks about a certain time or moment in the past only.

Opposite to this is the present perfect; referring to an unidentified time in the past means that the event isn't located at a specific time (non-deictic)- although in the past- but relates to present (within the extended now); so that the speaker thinks about past and present connected. For example sentences like 1 and 2 below may create confusion among students:

1. Sarah joined to the Youth League. I spoke to Sophia.
2. Sarah has joined to the Youth League. I have spoken to Sophia.

Some students might ask what accounts for the differences between them. Although the use of tenses is not always accepted without time reference, even so, from the first sentence we draw the conclusion that the event took place with a certain occasion or at a definite moment in the past while in the second sentence we may conclude that the event took place within the extended now and the speaker wants to refer to the anteriority of the event rather than to the actual time at which the event took place. With the examples as above or other similar to them would be difficult for some foreign language learners to feel the real meaning of the sentences and the differences between them. Therefore the use of time adjuncts would help students

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determine easily whether to use the past simple or the present perfect as they know that the use of specific past time adverbials (yesterday, last week/month…, two/three…hours /weeks… ago, last May, in 1999, at Christmas, at 6 o'clock, etc.) makes the past tense obligatory, and the use of indefinite time adjuncts (recently, lately, already, yet, just, etc.) implies the use of present perfect. Thus sentences like these:

1. Sarah joined to the Youth League last week. I spoke to Sophia two hours ago.
2. Sarah has just joined to the Youth League. I have just spoken to Sophia.

would better argue identified-unidentified opposition for the students.

Sometimes, even if there isn't any specific past time adverbial present, to mention the place where the action happened would help students in identifying tenses. Thus in sentence like this *I spoke to Sophia at the Conference*; the student would set in his mind the time when the Conference held and he would know that time was unique (in a similar way we may have *Sarah joined to the Youth League at their meeting*).

Or, there are situations when the use of the past simple or present perfect is implied by the context as follow:

1. a What time did you visit Ralph? b. Have you visited Ralph?
2. a. What time did you finish your homework? b. Have you finished your homework?
3. a.When did they arrive? b. Have they arrived?

In sentences like 1a, 2a and 3a the definite time is implied by the adverbs; because adverbs like these require a specific time when the events happened. However the adverb "when" can accompany the present perfect tense in subordinate clause of time with future reference (future perfect) and it doesn't implied a specified time: I'll send you a copy when I have finished it.

Another example of the opposition between the two tenses is the remoteness of the event -with a frame time which extends up to now implied by the contexts. This can be seen in the following examples:

1. a. Whitney Houston released many albums. b. Enrique Iglesias has released many albums.

The difference between the two sentences is that the singer in the first sentence is dead; so her life spam is over while the singer in the second sentence is still alive; and this opposition requires the use of past simple and respectively present perfect .But even if Whitney Houston is dead we can say that: Millions of people have listened to W. Houston's songs (There are certainly many people from all over the world.) In the opposition above the two values compared are those of neutral past and perfect of persistence. An apparently similar example is the following: *Jonathan worked as a teacher all his life./ Jonathan has worked as a teacher all his life*. I said apparently because with the first sentence it doesn't necessarily mean that Jonathan's life spam is over; it may also imply that Jonathan is retired. It is not the case with the second sentence that implies that Jonathan has changed his job but he may return to his old job anytime. However we can draw the conclusion that if the time frame is over, we use past simple tense; otherwise we use present perfect tense. Some time adjuncts accompany the present perfect tense to refer to a period of time that is still open at the speech time, but they can also be used with the past simple tense in which case the period of time is considered as being closed. Let us argue with the following examples:

1.a. Did you see Lauren today? b. Have you seen Lauren today?
2.a. Temperatures dropped dramatically this winter. b. Temperatures have dropped dramatically this winter.
3.a. The sale of the tickets for Scorpions' concert increased in March. b. The sale of the tickets for Scorpions' concert has increased in March.

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In sentences 1a, 2a the speaker places himself at the end of the day, winter; so today, this winter are considered as finished. It is not the case in sentences 1b, 2b when the speaker is probably placed at the beginning or middle of the period in each case, so there is enough time that things go on; the period is open in other words. The situation is similar in sentences 3a and 3b to those described above , but besides this we may find ourselves in the impossibility to buy tickets (if there isn't any ticket left) even at the middle or why not at the beginning of the period ; in that case the period is considered as being closed as there aren't any tickets.

Another difference between past simple tense and present perfect is that the event is disconnected from the moment of speaking in the case of past simple while the event has current relevance in the case of present perfect. By current relevance we understand that the event referred to is connected to the moment of speaking in that either it has a relevance or result in the present or it is still important to the speech time; so our attention is shifted from event itself to its consequences. In terms of current relevance one important question arises: how can we decide what is relevant and what is not relevant? To answer the question we may consider the following example to clarify what relevance does imply: *Maria has bought a new car.* This sentence and others similar to it should determine students think twice; they should look for the real meaning of the sentence and for the circumstances in which it is uttered. So, (because there are two possibilities) the students may ask themselves what accounts for this sentence to be taken as having current relevance. If this Maria's new car is displayed at the moment of speaking, so that we can see it; it is clearly a relevant situation. Or it may have implication like this: *Maria has bought a new car. She won't go by bus from now on*; in which case the effect of the fact that she has bought a new car is that she will go by car to and fro and not by bus .Otherwise,-if neither is implied-, there is no relevance; it just points to the anteriority of the event - the perfect of recent past- and we found out that recent past does not necessarily imply current relevance. The same action can be reported by the past if it happened with a certain occasion: *Maria bought a new car from the car factory.* In this case the speaker reports the sentence in the past because he thinks at that time when she was at the car factory.

Like English tense, Romanian tense represents the moment when the action takes place. If we place the "now" moment on the timeline representing Prezent, we can either move from this point backwards to Trecut or forwards to Viitor. Prezent, Trecut and Viitor are Romanian basic tenses corresponding to Present, Past and Future. But besides these, there are nuances of these tenses. Because Romanian tenses corresponding to present perfect and past tense are timpuri trecute(past tenses), I'll insist in this sub-chapter on these tenses. Perfect compus, perfect simplu, imperfect and mai mult ca perfect are Romanian past tenses. Mai mult ca perfectul is the corresponding tense to past perfect in English so, the equivalent tenses in Romanian for past simple and present perfect in English are perfect compus, perfect simplu, imperfect and present in case of present perfect with "for" and "since". The origin of Romanian language is Latin, and "perfect" in Romanian comes from Latin "perfectus" and means finished, completed. So, by definition perfect compus and perfect simplu express finished actions while imperfect expresses unfinished actions.

Perfect compus

Perfect compus is used to express an action that happened and finished in the past; it is perceived as a remote tense. On the timeline is behind the present and is usually accompanied by "ieri"(yesterday), "ieri seara/ de dimineata…"(yesterday evening/morning…), "saptamana trecuta"(last week)," luna trecuta"(last month), "anul tercut"(last year), "Joia trecuta"(last Thursday), "acum doua/ trei…zile/ saptamani…"(two/three... days/weeks…ago) , "in 1999" (in 1999), etc.

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Perfect compus
timeline ——————————————————→
Am terminat proiectul ieri.(I *finished* the project yesterday.)
A anuntat-o, dar *n-a venit* la conferinta.(He *informed* her, but she *didn't come* at the conference.)
So, the distinctive mark for perfect compus is the auxiliary "have" ("am, ai, a, am, ati, au) which is usually put in front of the main verb, but perfectul compus may appear in inverted form contrasted with English past simple : *Terminat-am* proiectul ieri.
In its form it resembles with present perfect in English as they both have the auxiliary "have" and participle of the main verb; but in its meaning it corresponds both to past simple and present perfect in English.
Nu l-*am vazut* de cand *a parasit* orasul. I haven't seen him since he left the town.
Am spalat masina.(E curata.) I have washed my car.
In Romanian sentence we have *perfect com*pus, but the corresponding tenses for it are *present perfect* and *past simple* in English.
This tense has almost the same meaning with English past simple and it is mainly used in narratives:
"S-a dus singura sa mi-l aduca. *A venit*, mi-*a pus* paharul pe masa. Dupa aceea *a soptit*:... ."
(Mihail Sadoveanu, "Creanga de Aur")
"She *left* herself to bring it to me. She *came back, put* the glass on the table for me. After that she *whispered*:… ."
"Cind Maria *si-a scos* broboada, *s-a descatusat* din strinsoare un nimb de aur care era parul, si-am avut inca un indemn sa cred ca pogorise din ceruri."
(RaduTudoran, "Casa Domnului Alcibiade")
"When Maria took off her handkerchief, it unfettered from pressure a golden halo which was her hair, and I had one more impulse to think that she had gone down from Heavens."
" Acum citeva zile m-am intilnit cu fiul cel mare al lui Lica. I-am spus ca planul cel mare al lui Szentessy a fost al unui singur om.Nu m-a crezut."
(FranciscMunteanu, "A venit un om")
" Two days ago I met Lica'eldest son. I told him that Szentessy's greatest plan had been of a single man. He didn't believe me."
In literature the perfect compus is used in dialogue in order to evoke the conversation in a better way:
-Draga mea, tu ai avut incredere in mine si m-ai ajutat, de aceea cand m-ai chemat, eu am venit.
-My dear, you trusted in me and helped me, that is why I came when you asked me to.

Other values of the perfect compus
Yet, the problem arises because perfect compus in the Romanian language can acquire other values, especially in spoken language. It can be used with adverbials that generally indicate present actions but the context more than the adverbials requires the use of past tense.
Acuma, chiar c-*am plecat*. (I really left now.)
-Nu mai vorbi! (- Stop talking!
-*Am tacut, am tacut*. –I stopped talking, stopped.talking)
Sometimes the perfect compus in Romanian can accept adverbials specific to future actions such as "deseara", " dupa amiaza" in order to express the speaker's certitude regarding an action which has been planned in advance thus acquiring a future shape: *Dupa amiaza am si plecat*. This action is considered so well-planned that the speaker considers that nothing can prevent it from happening. This makes the speaker to consider it as completed even if in reality it hasn't

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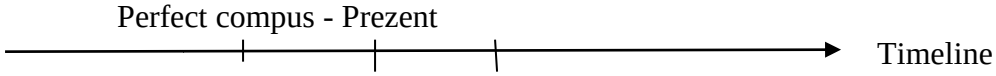
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taken place. In this case the time is provided by the adverbial and not by the form of the verb. This specific characteristic of the perfect compus in Romanian language corresponds to present continuous (future value) in English language; there isn't any past correspondent for this characteristic in English.

I am leaving in the afternoon. – this sentence emphasizes that the action is planned in advance.

Perfect simplu

It is used to express an action that happened and finished in the past and it is perceived as closer to the moment of speaking. In a way, of that of meaning it corresponds to present perfect in English, and on the timeline it is one step behind the present.



Perfect simplu

Perfectul simplu is used in speaking by people from some districts of the country(South-West) to express a past action that finished before the moment of speaking or the time span extends during the current day(as it was said above it corresponds to present perfect in English).

Vorbii cu Maria -I have spoken to Mary.

Il intalnii pe Romeo azi. - I have met Romeo today

Ma trezii de vreme azi .- I have waken up early today.

The perfect simplu was replaced by the perfect compus by people from the rest of the country. In written language it is used by writers from all over the country to express a finished past action not a recent past action. In this case, it is used with adverbials specific to perfect compus; "a doua zi", "peurma", "apoi", "deodata", ' tarziu", etc.

" A doua zi, hotarit sa ajunga la un rezultat, porni spre casa lui Cringas. "
(FranciscMunteanu, "A Venit un om")

The past simple tense renders perfectly this action in English.

"The next day, determined to come to an end, he walked to Cringas'."

Perfect simplu is used as a tense of narratives and there is no correspondent in English for perfect simplu except past simple tense which can successfully be used , and the effect is as strong in English as it is in Romanian.

"Cind ajunse in dreptul portitei de lemn, deschise cu piciorul, fara sa scoata mina din buzunar. Urca scarile cerdacului, tropaind tare sa-l auda cei din casa. Spre mirarea lui, nu-i iesi nimeni in intimpinare. Intra in bucatarie, dar nici aici nu era nimeni. Iesii iar in cerdac, si atunci, …."

(FranciscMunteanu, " A venit un om")

"When he arrived in front of the wooden gate, he opened it with his foot, without taking hand out from his pocket. He climbed the stairs of the veranda, tramping loudly to be heard by people in the house. To his surprise, nobody welcomed him. He came into the kitchen, but nobody was there. I went out to the veranda, and just then…."

" Preasfintitul episcop saluta pe moarta si ramase la capataiul ei, cu ochii pe jumatate inchisi, soptind o rugaciune pentru sufletul care trecea la judecata. Breb se opri in partea cealalta,la picioare, ca sa poata privi drept pe zeita adormita."

(Mihail Sadoveanu, "Creanga de Aur")

"The Holy Bishop said good-bye to the dead woman and stood by her, with half closed eyes, whispering a prayer for the soul that was going to the Judgement Day. Breb stopped on the other side, at her feet, so he could see directly the sleeping goddess."

The perfect simplu is frequently used to introduce in the narrative a character's retort or to begin a dialogue.

" Goldis se infurie.

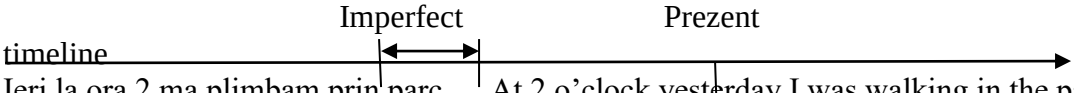
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-Unde-i cheia?
-De unde sa stiueu? raspunse cu glas moale grajdarul.”
“ –Prostii, -dadu Varzaru din mina,….
- Ce prostii? Se rasti un taran scund si indesat, cu mustatile negre.”
(FranciscMunteanu, “ A venit un om”)
“Goldish got angry.
-Where’s the key?
-How should I know? answered softly the stable man.”
“- Nonsense, - Varzaru shook his hand, …
-What nonsense? shouted out loudly a fat and short peasant with black moustache.”

Imperfect

It is generally used to express a durative action in the past. It is generally used –but not always- with adverbs such as: “ ieri pe vremea asta”, “ lunea trecuta la ora 6 seara”, din cand in cand”, etc. or it’s followed by a clause with a past verb. The English correspondent of imperfect is past progressive tense which accurately renders an action in full progress.



Ieri la ora 2 ma plimbam prin parc. At 2 o’clock yesterday I was walking in the park.
Intr-o sambata dupa amiaza ma plimbam prin parc cand am auzit o pocnituri. “
One Saturday afternoon I was walking in the park when I heard a bump.

Imperfect is used to express repetitive actions in the past whenever it meets in context an adverb denoting repetition. The emphasis is not on the duration of the action as it usually happens with imperfect, but on the action itself which happens more than once in a given interval in the past, thus corresponding to past simple in English.

De la o vreme purta doar pantaloni negri si bluza rosie. For a while she wore only black trousers and red blouse.

The imperfect is sometimes used in children’s language when they play different games thus passing from reality to fiction, having a present value.

Eu eram mama si tu erai tata. I was the mother and you were the father.

Imperfect can acquire a perfect value and it’s used in lyrical ballads.

“Mesterii grabea, “ The craftsmen worked hardly,
Sfarile-ntindea, Stretched ropes tightly,
Locu masura, Measured out the place,
Santuri largi sapa, Dug out deep ditches,
(VasileAlecsandri, “ Mesterul Manole”)

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