

Characterizing the Type of Outcome Evoked by the Perfect Simple and the Perfect Progressive in English

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Article abstract

Many grammarians of English agree that the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect evoke outcomes of different kinds. Thus for example in: *I have mowed the lawn* the Perfect Simple evokes a completed activity and so points to the present state of the lawn, whereas its progressive counterpart, *I have been mowing the lawn*, evokes an incomplete activity and so could readily be used as a means of explaining why the subject is perspiring, for example. Obvious though this difference may be, no grammarian has yet been able to characterize these outcomes and explain how each is produced by the verb form. This, then, is the aim of the present paper.

CHARACTERIZING THE TYPE OF OUTCOME EVOKED BY THE PERFECT SIMPLE AND THE PERFECT PROGRESSIVE IN ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

THE PERFECT SIMPLE and Progressive are compound verb forms that have long drawn the attention of scholars. Many grammarians of English have tried to describe the outcomes produced by these two verb forms, some being more successful than others. The vast majority of them agree that the two forms of the Perfect evoke outcomes of different nature. This difference is particularly striking in the following minimal pair:

(1) I have mowed the lawn.

(2) I have been mowing the lawn.

Hirtle (1975), p. 118

where the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect express radically different outcomes (consequences following on from the activity) and so could only be used in different contexts of utterance. For example, the simple form here would be used to point to the present state of the lawn resulting from the completion of the activity, whereas the progressive could be used to explain why the subject is perspiring, for example. Obvious though this difference may be, no grammarian has yet been able to characterize it and explain how each type of outcome is produced by the verb form. This, then, is the aim of the present paper. However, before moving on to my analysis of the two types of outcome, I will first examine the views of other grammarians who have tried to characterize their aftereffects to see how they approached the problem. Once these views have been examined, I will present my approach to the problem, beginning with an analysis of the components of the Perfect forms. This in turn will lead to a characterization of the aftereffects under study.

2. Grammarians' Views

In this section we shall examine two main trends which provide a faithful reflection of how most grammarians view an aftereffect evoked by the Perfect simple and progressive respectively.

2.1 *Emphasis-On-The-Activity-Not-Result Approach*

This represents the first trend, among whose supporters we find Roggéro (1979, p. 93), who remarks:

Cependant, il faut tenir compte de cas où l'association parfait + progressive s'applique effectivement à des événements terminés, c'est alors une différence de point de vue (donc d'aspect) qui est exprimée par la présence ou l'absence du progressif. La forme combinée met l'accent sur le déroulement concret du procès, le parfait seul ne considère que le résultat présent.

In order to set off the distinction between the two types of outcomes evoked, Roggéro adduces the following minimal pair:

*I've **been cutting** salami for the sandwiches.*
*I've **cut** salami for the sandwiches.*

and points out:

Dans les deux cas évoqués par ces phrases, l'action est la même, la durée et le moment sont identiques. La première informe l'interlocuteur de ce qu'on a fait pendant une certaine période de temps, et peut servir à expliquer un fait présent, par exemple pourquoi le locuteur a le poignet fatigué, ou les doigts gras. La seconde annonce un résultat présent: le saucisson est prêt, on peut faire les sandwiches.

Although faithfully bringing out the expressive effects produced by each form of the Perfect, Roggéro's analysis fails to characterize the nature of the two outcomes. Indeed his opposition "fait présent" (Perfect Progressive) "résultat présent" (Perfect Simple) can hardly be felt to disambiguate the two types of aftereffect since the greasy fingers and the presence of slices of salami all ready to be used for making the sandwiches may both be considered as "faits présents" or "résultats présents". This is not to say, however, that the two forms of the Perfect are interchangeable since in uttering the sentence *I've been cutting the salami...* the speaker can only be pointing to the causative event responsible for the greasy fingers, something the simple form *I've cut the salami...* could not convey since it would inevitably refer to the presence of the slices of salami all ready to be used for making the sandwiches.

The idea that the Perfect Progressive lays emphasis on the activity, while the Perfect Simple stresses the result also finds support in Fenn (1987, p. 55-56) who remarks:

However, the SF [Simple form] versions appear to function in context as more of a “concluding” or summarizing reference, placing the stress on the idea of a whole unit of time filled with the activity. The EF [Expanded Form] seems to emphasize the activity itself; whereas the SF reference is more “static”, “factual”, the EF seems to shift the focus on to the ongoingness of the activity, and thus lend the reference more of a dynamic quality.

Indeed his idea of a “concluding or summarizing reference” for the Perfect Simple as opposed to a dynamic reference for the Perfect Progressive does not go very far toward differentiating the effects produced by the two verb forms. To be sure, his idea of emphasis on the “whole unit of time filled with the activity” is ambiguous at best since it might easily apply to the progressive form of the Perfect, an impression borne out by Roggéro (1979, p. 93) when he points out that in *I’ve cut/ been cutting the salami for the sandwiches* “l’action est la même, la durée et le moment sont identiques.”

We have seen from the views examined so far that some grammarians are sensitive to the impression of ongoingness and conclusiveness evoked by the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect respectively¹; yet they fail to qualify the type of aftereffect resulting from these two different impressions. As we shall see in the following section, other grammarians are sensitive to the impression of completeness and incompleteness and endeavor to account for the imperfective character of the event in cases where the activity has come to a definite conclusion.

2.2 Activity-Continuing-Into-its-Results Approach

Among the supporters of this approach we find Poutsma (1921, p. 64), who remarks:

We append a few quotations in which the expanded form denotes an action which has, indeed, come to a definite conclusion, but is continued, so to speak, in its consequences or results.

Among other examples he adduces:

(3) «His bruised face and torn clothes showed that he had been fighting.»

¹ Cf. also Bache (1985, p. 182-183), Leech (1971, p. 46), Ota (1963, p. 105), and Scheffer (1975, p. 35).

Most obviously, Poutsma is trying to explain how an event that is now over can be viewed as incomplete and so brings out a paradoxical state of affairs. As Defromont (1973, p. 66) points out:

Il semble y avoir en TO' 49 ['She has been crying'] contradiction entre le fait que le procès est [sic] achevé et l'emploi du participe présent crying, qui suggère qu'il ne l'est pas. Mais en réalité, ce que le participe présent indique ici, c'est qu'il n'y a pas coupure entre l'événement et ses suites immédiates, que cet événement, pour ainsi dire, se prolonge dans ses résultats, qu'il aurait pu se poursuivre et durer encore [...].

The problem with such an approach is that it is, in one way too restrictive, while being too general in another. First, Defromont's claim to the effect that the activity continues, as it were, into its results suggests that the whole burden of justifying the imperfective character of the activity is brought to bear solely on the result phase of the event which is then felt as opening up a stretch of time in which the activity can continue under the guise of a result. This misinterpretation arises from overemphasizing the grammatical meaning of the lexical event, i.e. the imperfectivity of the foregone event, without considering its conditioning effects on the outcome persisting in the present of speech, something that will be thoroughly examined below. Consequently, such a view of the compound verb can only be seen as very restrictive and so unsatisfactory². Second, by proposing that there is no break between the activity and its result phase, Defromont is alluding to the idea of 'current relevance' in English, something that undoubtedly encompasses both the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect since in either case the impression is that of persistence of some outcome – though different in nature (cf. Roggéro's minimal pair, for example) – in the present of speech. Consequently, Defromont, like Poutsma, is not specific enough here in his approach to account for the incompleteness of an activity that has come to a definite conclusion.

In all the comments that have been examined so far, we have seen that, though sensing a difference in the type of outcome produced by the two forms of the Perfect, all grammarians have failed to provide a neat characterization of the two types of outcome, something that I intend to do in the following pages. However, before moving on to my approach, we shall examine the elements composing the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect.

² For similar comments, see also Garnier (1975, p. 179), and Jolly & O'Kelly (1990, p. 296).

3. The Components of the Perfect Simple and Progressive

One of the best ways to describe a compound verb is to analyse the temporal make-up of each of its components and bring out the relationship that holds between them. Thus in *I have mowed the lawn* the speaker, aware of the state of the lawn, evokes, by means of the auxiliary *have*, a position after the event expressed by the past participle *mowed* whose content is always represented “as complete, as forming a whole”, cf. Hirtle (1975, p. 103) and so points to the existence of an outcome, namely here the resulting state of the lawn. However in *I have been mowing the lawn* the speaker, being aware of the persistence of an outcome in the present, evokes a position after the event expressed by the present participle *mowing* whose content is always represented “as being somehow incomplete”, cf. Hirtle (1975, p. 103) as a means of accounting for his perspiring. As is evident from the examples, the outcomes persisting in time are of different nature; but what is the difference between the two types? This point will be taken up in the next section.

4. Fully Conditioned Outcome vs Partly Conditioned Outcome

As pointed out in the analysis of the temporal make-up of the lexical events expressed by the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect, the past participle is a verb form the content of which is always represented as complete, whereas the present participle always presents us with an incomplete lexical content. Most obviously, these different representations of the duration of the event have a direct bearing on the type of outcome produced since they are seen as conditioning their very nature, something we shall now examine.

In my analysis of the conditioning of the outcome by the lexical event, I will begin by examining the effects of the past participle, then move on to those expressed by the present participle, and compare the two.

As example (1) above clearly shows, the whole of the duration of the event expressed by the past participle is represented as actualized and so is felt as conditioning the outcome persisting in time. Thus here, the mowing, being represented throughout its duration, is seen as conditioning the outcome through a *complete* lexical content, hence the evocation of a *fully conditioned outcome*. This impression of complete conditioning of the outcome makes us view the latter as the necessary or inevitable result of the prior conditioning activity. Another relevant example is:

- (4) *«I want you to attend the sale for me. Look, I've marked the lots I want, and put my outside offer against each.»* Sayers (1977), p. 12

where the marking and the putting are represented throughout their duration and so are felt as conditioning the outcomes, namely here the presence of marks and figures, through a complete lexical content, hence the evocation of fully conditioned outcomes. As Korrel (1988, p. 109) pointed out, in this instance

the listener is invited to look at the marks and the figures directly resulting from marking and putting: if the two actions are completed, these results necessarily follow.

This impression of complete conditioning of the outcome making us view the latter as the inevitable consequence of the prior activity is also dominant in the following examples:

- (5) *«I see Mrs. Cutts has given you a cup of tea.»* Sayers (1984), p. 152
- (6) *Boyd is expected to receive 1.1 million. Boyd has lost the use of his legs and has only restricted movements in his arms. Boyd's backbone was severely damaged when he was thrown out of a car near Lachute.*
The Gazette, 24.2.85
- (7) *«How can I find words? Poets have taken them all and left me with nothing to say.»* Sayers (1982), p. 288

where the representation of all the lexical impressions of the event suggests in (5) that the addressee now has a cup of tea; in (6) that Boyd can no longer walk and in (7) that there are, in the speaker's opinion, no words left to express himself, all of which are felt as necessary consequences of their respective prior conditioning activities.

In the following example the evocation of position after the conditioning event can only suggest that the speaker has now gained a thorough understanding of the "fact", that he is very cognizant of it, an inevitable outcome of the activity of *mastering*:

- (8) *This is a fact that I have only recently mastered.*
Jespersen (1961), p. 63

Likewise in:

- (9) *«But, God, it's taught me something and I don't think I like what it's taught me. From now to eternity I'll be looking at every guy I meet and wondering if he wants me or all that lovely dough.»*
Bagley (1981), p. 53

the evocation of all the lexical impressions of the teaching indubitably points to an inescapable result thereof (fully conditioned outcome), namely here that the speaker now knows “something”, is now aware of it.

In the next two instances the idea of complete conditioning of the outcome suggests present knowledge or experience:

(10) *Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes have seen that charming and instructive sight—an upper middle-class family in full plumage.*
Zandvoort (1932), p. 14

(11) *«I suppose he told you that the address was simply an accomodation address.»*

«Yes. Wasn't it? I went to see the place once.»

«I've been there. It's not exactly an accommodation address.»

Sayer (1978), p. 276

Thus here the impression of ‘present knowledge or experience’ can only be felt as having arisen from a complete conditioning and so be seen as the inevitable outcome of the activities of *seeing* and *being*. As we shall now see, however, the progressive form of the Perfect depicts quite a different state of affairs.

Unlike the Perfect Simple, the Perfect Progressive evokes the transcendence of only *part* of the event, namely one where some but not all of the lexical impressions are represented as actualized. Thus in (2) above, the mowing, an event represented only in part, is felt as conditioning the outcome through an *incomplete* lexical content, hence the evocation of a *partly conditioned outcome*. This impression of incomplete conditioning of the outcome makes us view the latter as a spin-off or accompanying effect of the activity. Thus in our example the perspiring is felt as a spin-off effect of the mowing, namely one which arises somewhere during the event’s developmental phase. In like fashion we have:

(12) *«Hullo!» he said, and then hurriedly, «why, what has been happening to you?»*

Harkness stepped forward into the room. «To me?» he said.

«Why, yes. You're sweating. Your collar's undone. You look as though you had run a mile.»

«Oh, that!» Harkness blushed, fingering his collar that had broken from its stud.

«I've been dancing.»

Walpole (1925), p. 112

(13) *Félice sat up on the sofa and motioned her visitor to a seat.*

«Forgive me that I do not rise,» she begged. «I have been sleeping and I am still very lazy.»
Oppenheim (1929), p. 144

(14) «Then why are you limping?» [...]

«I'm a bit stiff,» I said «I've been sitting.»

«And sitting makes you stiff, does it? You octogenarians! It's always your joints that go back on you.»
Wodehouse (1959), p. 165

where the sweating, the laziness, and the stiffness are all felt as having arisen somewhere during the activities of dancing, sleeping, and sitting respectively. Being represented only in part, these activities can only be felt as having conditioned the outcomes through an incomplete lexical content, hence the impression of concomitant effects or partly conditioned outcomes. Other examples depicting outcomes arising from only part of the conditioning event are:

(15) *But in the days that followed she seemed to grow more and more frightened, and one day I could tell from her red eyes and puffy white cheeks that she'd been crying. She didn't seem so pretty that day.*

Hinde (1965), p. 212

(16) *We dropped Tom at Playstow House, and saw him let in by Roger, whose ruffled hair and wild eye suggested that he had been writing poetry.*

Mackenzie (1934), p. 99

(17) *The door opened, Dawn stood there and they became abruptly silent as they saw from her white finger-smudged face that she had been crying.*

Hinde (1975), p. 172

where the red eyes, puffy white cheeks, ruffled hair, etc. are the result of incomplete conditioning and so can only be felt as offshoots of their respective activities.

In the following example the concomitants of the activity are of an olfactory nature:

(18) *That seemed the end of that. It was, in fact - I was gazing round for want of anything to say - a model of a room, new, bright, shining, with seats at a good rake and windows taking up the two side-walls. On the blackboard behind the table Howard had been writing: the smell of chalk hung in the air.*

Snow (1963), p. 100

where the smell of chalk hanging in the air is felt as the spin-off effect of the writing.

In the next two instances the accompanying effects are of a psychological nature:

- (19) *«Now don't go away,» the stranger begged. «It's so refreshing to meet something alive in this wilderness of death. I've been inspecting a grave for a friend who is abroad, and I'm feeling thoroughly depressed.»*
Mackenzie (1921), p. 126

- (20) *«I've been talking to a clever woman friend of mine this afternoon. Hence the brightness of my conversation at this late hour.»*
Mackenzie (1937), p. 498

Here both the depressive state of mind and the brightness of conversation are felt as having arisen somewhere during the unfolding of the events, an impression calling for the progressive form of the Perfect.

In the next instance the speaker represents part of the lexical impression of the event as a means of explaining his presence on the premises:

- (21) *The sound of his voice had a remarkable effect on the athlete. Sir Buckstone stopped in mid-stride as if he had been hit by a bullet, then bounced toward him with consternation written on his every feature.*
«Joe! What are you doing here?»
«I've been paying my bill, and am now waiting for a cab to take me up the mountainside.»
Wodehouse (1956), p. 9

Thus here the speaker sees his being on the premises as a concomitant effect of paying his bill and so uses the progressive form of the Perfect. The Perfect Simple *I have paid* would not be possible here since it would depict all the lexical impressions of the event as actualized and so could only refer us to the inevitable outcome of paying a bill, i.e. a paid bill. As a consequence, the form could not serve to explain the subject's presence on the premises.

Likewise in:

- (22) *«Dahlia!» he exclaimed. «I thought I heard your voice. What are you doing up at this hour?»*
«Bertie had a headache,» replied the old relative, a quick thinker. «I have been giving him an aspirin. The head a little better now, Bertie?»
Wodehouse (1962), p. 111

the speaker represents the giving as incomplete as a means of explaining why she is up at this hour. In other words, the speaker sees her being up at this hour as an accompanying effect of giving Bertie an aspirin and so represents the activity as incomplete in order to evoke an spin-off effect thereof (partly

conditioned outcome). Here again the Perfect Simple *I have given* could not be used since it would refer us to the necessary outcome of the event, i.e. a swallowed aspirin and so could not account for the subject's being up at this hour³.

This brings to a close our examination of the outcomes evoked by the simple and progressive forms of the Perfect. We have seen that variations in the amount of the lexical impression represented as actualized in the foregone event will give rise to outcomes of different nature. A representation of all the lexical impressions will call forth a fully conditioned outcome (necessary outcome of the event), whereas the evocation of only part of the event's lexical content will give rise to a partly conditioned outcome (accompanying effect).

These impressions of partial versus complete conditioning of the outcome were hinted at by Jespersen (1961, p. 196) when he said that "the expanded perfect is, of course, excluded when the final result is thought of" and by Fenn (1987, p. 125) when he observed:

The difference is seen clearly particularly in terms of the consequential overtones a perfect suggests in favourable contexts: with the SF [Simple form of the Perfect] the consequence is a consequence of one completed occasion [my emphasis] of the act; with the EF [Expanded form of the Perfect] the consequence is a consequence of the act's having been in progress [...].

where Fenn's "consequence of one completed occasion," like Jespersen's "final result," ties in with the idea of a fully conditioned outcome, whereas the "consequence of the act's having been in progress" definitely points to the partly conditioned nature of the outcome.

5. Conclusion

As this study has showed, the problem most grammarians have encountered in characterizing the type of outcome produced by the two forms of the Perfect arises from their failing to see the incidence of the conditioning effect of the lexical event on the outcome. Sensitive though they may have been to the idea of *imperfectivity* suggested by the progressive, they nonetheless failed to make this crucial link between the grammatical meaning of the notional event (completeness or incompleteness) and its effects on the outcome persisting in the present of speech. As we have seen this led some grammarians to posit that the progressive form of the Perfect was more activity-oriented than its simple form which seemed to lay more stress on the result, while others, endeavoring

³ See appendix for other relevant examples.

to solve the paradox between incompleteness and result, claimed that the activity continued into its results. As the analysis presented here has showed, however, it is neither an idea of emphasis on the activity nor one of activity continuing into its results that is foremost in the speaker's mind when he uses the Perfect Progressive in cases where the activity is over, but rather something that strikes him as having arisen somewhere within the event's coming-to-be phase, i.e. an outcome conditioned by only part of the event.

Appendix

- (1) One evening, he seemed more haggard than usual and talked much less: by the twitching of his nostrils he had been dosing himself hard with cocaine. Mackenzie (1921), p. 232
- (2) In another moment they heard him and turned in surprise. Certainly she had been crying; her eyes were swimming in tears, and the other man in brown looked exceedingly disconcerted. Wells (1913), p. 89
- (3) I noticed then for the first time that he had probably been drinking too much. Not that he was drunk. Certainly not. He was completely in command of his faculties, but there was a slight exalted shining in his eyes, a faint breath emanating from him, a suggested, rather than positive, uncertainty about his body. Walpole (1942), p. 45
- (4) Mrs. Jenning ran and picked her up.
«Elsie, stop that silly noise.» She shook her and Elsie stopped.
«What do you smell of? Elsie, what have you been eating? Elsie, you've been drinking.» Hinde (1952), p. 123
- (5) At three o'clock this morning, Mr. O'Neill was advised by the night-clerk that the occupants of every room within earshot of number 618 had 'phoned the desk to complain of a disturbance, a noise, a vocal uproar proceeding from the room mentioned. Thither, therefore, marched Mr. O'Neill, his face full of cheese-sandwich (for he had been indulging in an early breakfast or a late supper) and his heart of devotion to duty. Wodehouse (1965), p. 140
- (6) In the morning, grey and dark, we sat over our breakfast. He had been dreaming, he said, and he looked absent, as though still preoccupied and weighed down by his dream. Snow (1964), p. 124

- (7) His mood was attuned to meditation, for he had been lunching with Sibley Swan at the Café Crillon. Galsworthy (1924), p. 284
- (8) There was nothing in the little round room except a box of ammunition for the sten gun, a small wooden bed, and two packs hanging on a nail. A couple of pans with the remains of rice and some wooden chopsticks showed they had been eating without much appetite.
Greene (1962), p. 90
- (9) Mordred mastered his voice.
«I was smoking, and I suppose I threw my cigarette into the wastepaper basket, and as it was full of paper...»
«Full of paper? Why was it full of paper?»
«I had been writing a poem.»
Wodehouse (1957), p. 179
- (10) «And another thing! You been using my fountain pen again! Oh, I can tell! The cap was on loose.» Lewis (1938), p. 17
- (11) He was about to give an order when for the second time he noticed that her apron was wet in several places.
«Why is your apron all wet?» he demanded sharply.
«Is it?» she faltered, looking down at it. «So it is! I've been doing things.»
(She appeared to have dropped the «sir» completely.)
The fact was that she had been sponging Joe. Reference lost
- (12) They had apparently been breakfasting out in the patio, for there was a white-clothed table in the middle by the goldfish pond. It bore the remains of a meal, and it was with a rush of emotion that I perceived that on a dish in the centre there was lying a derelict sausage.
Wodehouse (1959), p. 85

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