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The Present Perfect and Preterite in British and American English

Summary

The objective of our article is to present the selected results of the research which was conducted for the purpose of our master's thesis. We focused on the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the preterite in informal British and American English. We put together a British and an American corpus and analysed the differences and similarities between British and American English in this transfer. We examined some factors that may influence this transfer either in American or British English, or in both varieties. The major factors will be presented in this article. The results show that the differences between both varieties mostly occur in the frequency of this transfer. Moreover, in American English there are more significant factors than in British English. Nevertheless, we can observe that the general tendency is the same in both varieties. This fact may indicate that this phenomenon, which was first noticed in informal American English, is spreading to informal British English.

Key words: the present perfect, preterite, transfer, British English, American English.

Dovršni sedanjik in navadni preteklik v britanski in ameriški angleščini

Povzetek

Namen našega članka je predstaviti izbrane rezultate raziskave, ki je bila narejena za namen naše magistrske naloge. Osredinjali smo se na prehod funkcij dovršnega sedanjika v domeno navadnega preteklika v neformalni britanski in ameriški angleščini. Sestavili smo britanski in ameriški korpus besedil in analizirali razlike in podobnosti med britansko in ameriško angleščino pri tem prehodu. Pregledali smo dejavnike, ki lahko vplivajo na ta prehod bodisi v ameriški ali britanski angleščini bodisi v obeh variantah. Glavne dejavnike bome predstavili v tem članku. Rezultati kažejo, da se razlika med variantama pojavlja predvsem v pogostnosti tega prehoda. Nadalje je v ameriški angleščini mnogo več statistično pomenljivih dejavnikov kot v britanski angleščini. Vseeno pa opazamo, da se pojavlja enaka težnja v obeh variantah. To dejstvo lahko nakazuje, da se ta pojav, ki so ga najprej opazili v neformalni ameriški angleščini, začne širiti tudi na neformalno britansko angleščino.

Ključne besede: dovršni sedanjik, navadni preteklik, prehod, britanska angleščina, ameriška angleščina.

The Present Perfect and Preterite in British and American English

1. Introduction

1.1 General

Our article aims at presenting the selected results of the research which was conducted for the purpose of our master's thesis. We focused on the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the preterite in informal British and American English. The following subsection presents the research done by other linguists dealing with the same phenomenon. It also focuses on their varying views on this transfer.

1.2 Literature review

The review of the general literature shows that grammarians do not pay a great deal of attention to the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the preterite in either AmE or in BrE. Comrie (1976, 53–4) mentions it only in one of his footnotes. We can find some information in the grammars of Quirk *et al.* (1985, 194–5), Leech (1987, 38–9), Leech and Svartvik (1994, 70) and Greenbaum (1996, 272) and the encyclopaedias of McArthur (1992, 39) and Crystal (1995, 225, 311). One claim that they have in common is that the tendency of replacing the present perfect by the preterite occurs above all in the resultative and experiential meaning of the present perfect (i.e. in indefinite meaning). This tendency extends also to non-American varieties (Crystal 1995, 225) and is considered substandard (McArthur 1992, 45). McArthur (1992, 39) also claims that the transfer in AmE mostly occurs in situations that lead up to the present moment (i.e. in continuative meaning).

A detailed treatment of this transfer can only be observed in the linguists who explicitly deal with this phenomenon (e.g. Vanneck 1958; Peterson 1970; Dušková 1976; Marshall 1979; Richards 1979; Sheen 1984, 1994; Elsness 1997;). Some of them mainly focus on AmE (e.g. Vanneck 1958; Peterson 1970; Richards 1979; Marshall 1982; Sheen 1984;), whereas some others do make mention of an important grammatical difference between AmE and BrE in the use of the present perfect and preterite (e.g. Dušková 1976; Sheen 1994; Elsness 1997).

As was discerned by Vanneck in 1958, there is a tendency towards replacing the present perfect by the 'colloquial'¹ preterite only in spoken AmE, whereas there is no such tendency in written BrE and AmE and also spoken BrE. Vanneck (1958, 238) emphasizes that "the colloquial preterite is a genuine preterite, not a perfect with the auxiliary slurred or omitted". He focused on the everyday speech of educated native-speakers of American English. He finds that very few speakers of AmE are aware that their use of the present perfect differs from that of BrE speakers. He does not mention which meanings are replaceable; however it is apparent that he has the resultative and experiential present perfect (i.e. indefinite meaning) in mind.

¹ 'Colloquial' preterite: a term used for the preterite that behaves as a free variant of the present perfect.

On the other hand, Marshall (1979) believes that the distinction between formal and informal AmE is far superior to that between the spoken and written AmE. The object of her study was spoken AmE and she included people of different social classes and ages into her research. Her research shows that speakers use the colloquial preterite to a large extent; however they themselves judged it to be less correct and acceptable than the present perfect.

Peterson (1970) deals exclusively with AmE. She analysed ten American plays and divided them into constructions according to the presence of adverbials. She finds that the transfer can occur in both constructions. Though Peterson does not explicitly mention the meanings where this transfer is possible, it is evident that the author has the resultative and experiential meaning (i.e. indefinite meaning) in mind. She does not define her concept of continuative meaning, and we therefore suppose that she assigns this meaning to the constructions with the adverbials *for...*, *since...*, *in...* and *all*. She claims that they are used with the present perfect because their use with the preterite would change the meaning. Peterson (1970, 5) believes that “(...) the choice between the present perfect and simple past seems to involve style rather than any rule of grammar”.

This transfer is treated in a similar way by Peterson and Dušková (1976), the only difference being that the latter includes BrE besides AmE into her research. The object of Dušková's study is both the traditional and the colloquial preterite. She finds that the preterite is more frequent in AmE than in BrE, which could indicate that in AmE it takes over some functions of the present perfect. Dušková focuses above all on temporal modifiers (i.e. temporal adverbials), an initiative for her article being that of Vanneck (1958), which, as she claims, needs certain corrections. Her research shows that the use of the colloquial preterite is not only typical of spoken AmE, but also of spoken BrE. In the latter the preterite is used above all with *just*, *never*, *ever* and *always* although this phenomenon is more frequent in AmE (Dušková 1976, 59). Dušková (1976, 54) adopts the traditional approach in the treatment of the differences between these two tenses. She focuses on temporal modifiers. As she claims, the use of a certain tense with a temporal modifier becomes redundant if the part of the meaning, usually expressed by the tense alone, is expressed semantically. When the semantics of temporal modifiers is sufficient to indicate the temporal reference intended, the use of the present perfect is redundant and consequently it can be replaced by the preterite. This occurs more frequently in AmE than in BrE. When the semantics of temporal modifiers is not sufficient, then the present perfect's and the preterite's functions are kept well apart in both varieties. It is apparent that the transfer frequently occurs in resultative and experiential meaning (i.e. indefinite meaning). However, she also traces the continuative meaning, which is only rarely used with the preterite in the constructions with *since...*, *in...* and *for...* As to be considered is that the preterite with continuative meaning can be used with temporal modifiers as *all my life* and *all these years*. It follows that the meaning does not have an important role in the transfer. According to her claim (1976, 58), the fact that the period that leads up to the present is established semantically (i.e. by temporal modifiers) is of crucial importance in the transfer.

Sheen's research from 1984 focuses on AmE, whereas his research from 1994 focuses on the difference between BrE and AmE in this transfer. He finds that the transfer also occurs in BrE. The use of the preterite with the adverbials *ever* and *never* in BrE has long existed according

to him. However, his research of BrE reveals that this transfer extends to other adverbials. The difference between BrE and AmE lies above all in the frequency of this transfer, this transfer being of a less frequent occurrence in BrE. Sheen presumes that BrE may be under increasing influence of AmE. According to him, the finding that the colloquial preterite is more frequent in the spoken than in written language is not correct since there is a frequent occurrence of the colloquial preterite in the sports pages of newspapers.

Richards (1979) claims that the resultative meaning of the present perfect is the only one that can be expressed by both the present perfect and the colloquial preterite. According to him, all other meanings remain in the domain of the present perfect. It is worth mentioning that he does not recognize that the colloquial preterite can take over the functions of the present perfect of experience – this being a disadvantage of his analysis, which has been stressed by Sheen (1984, 377), who finds that the colloquial preterite may also convey other non-resultative meanings. Besides, Sheen (1984, 1994) concentrates on the constraints of this transfer. He is interested in under what circumstances the transfer is not possible. The essential role in the interpretation of this transfer, as he claims, may be given to Current Relevance Theory (henceforth: CRT). However, he is convinced that CRT is not sufficient in this interpretation; therefore the combination of CRT and the theory of redundancy must be taken into consideration. In his model, current relevance (henceforth: CR), a basic feature of the present perfect, becomes redundant when it is established either by the context (i.e. linguistic context) or the situation (i.e. extra-linguistic context). The temporal adverbials are a typical example of the linguistic context. They are supposed to create redundancy of conveying CR by the present perfect so that they themselves establish a period that leads up to the present and in this way also convey CR. This approach is very close to Dušková's (1976), who claims that the period must be semantically established.

Furthermore, Sheen (1984, 379) finds the importance of “situational redundancy” (i.e. the extra-linguistic context) in the transfer. In his conclusion, he says that the colloquial preterite takes over the functions of the present perfect both in spoken and also informal written language, albeit under certain constraints. According to his findings (382–3), only the present perfect is used: (1) “In verbal forms expressing a state which still exists at the time of speaking.”; (2) “In verbal forms used with *since*, *for*, and *now* and in subordinate clauses containing *when*, *after*, *before*, *until*, and *as soon as*; and (3) “In verbal forms in situations where the use thereof creates a state in the light of which future events must be viewed.” His article (1994, 45) brings additional finding: (4) in the present perfect constructions without temporal adverbials if the replacement with the colloquial preterite would denote a past situation without CR.

Hence it follows that the phenomenon of “free variation”, as it is called by Sheen, is possible in indefinite and continuative meaning with an exception in constructions with *for...*, *since...* and *now*. Other situations, as in constructions with *always* and *ever* that can lead up to the moment of speaking, can be used with the colloquial preterite.

In his extensive research composed of three parts, Elsness (1997, 229), among other issues, studies the difference between the present perfect and the preterite in BrE and AmE. He finds that the

present perfect is more frequent in BrE than in AmE. In his elicitation test, which was designed to find the difference between the BrE and AmE use of the colloquial preterite, he observes that the preterite is more acceptable in AmE, whereas in BrE it is the present perfect. The difference mostly occurs in borderline cases, which are, as he claims, the situations that do not lead up to the deictic zero-point and are not tied to the anchor that denotes a clearly distinct definite time in the past. Borderline cases have anchors that are mostly temporal adverbials which express unclearly distinct recent indefinite time where the separation from the deictic zero-point is not clearly indicated. These adverbials are *just, recently, always, never, ever, already* and *yet*. Elsness does not base his interpretation of this transfer on CRT, but on different temporal schemata of these two tenses. He finds that the difference between both varieties occurs in the borderline cases where speakers of BrE and AmE take a different choice.

Elsness (1997, 229–36) studies a great many factors to find the difference between the present perfect and the preterite in BrE and AmE. Moreover, Elsness finds that CR does not play a significant role in distinguishing the differences between the varieties, although CR may gain a certain effect when there are no other factors that could affect the tense choice in a construction or in the wider linguistic or extra-linguistic context. As he finds, the important factor may be the structure of the verbal phrase and its immediate surrounding. This can especially be applied to the spoken language where the distinction between these two tenses is not entirely clear-cut. His elicitation test demonstrates that in instances when it would be unusual to use the auxiliary in its uncontracted form (i.e. in affirmative constructions) and when the forms of the preterite and past participle are identical, speakers of BrE and AmE frequently choose the colloquial preterite. On the other hand, speakers of both varieties choose to use the present perfect when the uncontracted auxiliary is acceptable even in informal speech (i.e. in negative and interrogative constructions) and when the forms of the preterite and past participle are different.

2. Materials and methods

The research was done for the purpose of our master's thesis, where we focused on the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the colloquial preterite. We put together a British and an American corpus, excerpting the material from plays. Each corpus consists of 360 constructions with the present perfect or the colloquial preterite. We sought out the first 60 constructions of these verbal constructions in each play. The original intent was to analyse 6 British and 6 American plays (i.e. 360 constructions in each corpus). However, some of the chosen American plays were too short; thus some additional were necessary to obtain 60 constructions. The present research focuses on the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the colloquial preterite in informal BrE and AmE and is limited to finite perfect and preterite constructions. Non-finite perfect constructions are excluded from the coding. Modal auxiliaries are also not the subject of this research. We put the corpus material into the computer programme Microsoft Excel 7, then determined the categories (factors) and values of all categories. We used the tools of the Microsoft Excel 7 for counting the constructions, percentage calculations and shaping of the tables and figures. We chose the Pearson's χ^2 -test (95% significance level) (Ferligoj 1995, 160–6) to check the statistical significance of the factors

that were supposed to affect the frequency of the transfer. When the factor was statistically significant at 99% significance level, this information was also noted.

3. Results and discussion

To achieve our basic aim we sought and analysed:

- (1) the differences and similarities between BrE and AmE in the transfer of the present perfect into the domain of the colloquial preterite, and
- (2) the factors that affect the transfer in order to be able to compare the varieties.

Above all, it is worth emphasizing that discussing adverbials is not the subject of this article. As a consequence they are not dealt with in the following sub-sections. Our research definitely includes both those constructions with and without adverbials (i.e. adverbials were not eliminated from the research). However, we made a decision to examine some other factors that affect the frequency of this transfer rather than adverbials. The reason for that choice lies in the fact that we observed (see Section 1) that the majority of linguists puts a great deal of emphasis on adverbials. As far as adverbials are concerned, our results are similar to those of the above mentioned linguists. The major aim of this article is to examine this transfer from a slightly different perspective. Hence it follows that this article also deals with other factors which are rarely mentioned in linguistic literature. Our article thus provides a new insight into this phenomenon by treating it from a slightly different perspective.

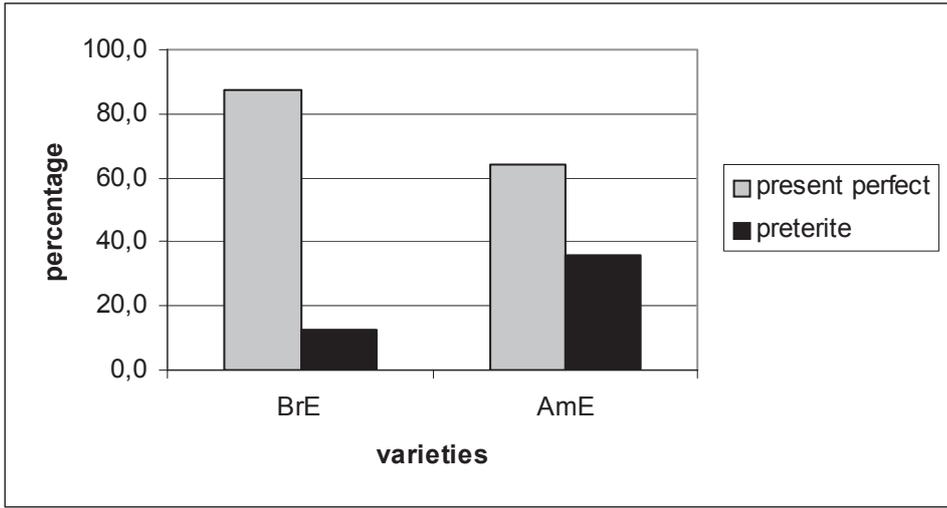
This section is divided into seven sub-sections. Hence it follows that we examine seven factors that may affect the frequency of this transfer.

3.1 General: The present perfect and the colloquial preterite in British and American English

	BrE		AmE	
	no.	%	no.	%
present perf.	314	87.2	232	64.4
preterite	46	12.8	128	35.6
Sum	360	100	360	100
perf.:pret.	6.8		1.8	
χ^2	s.l.> 99 %			

Legend: s.l.- significance level (henceforth: s.l.). (Žetko 2003)

Table 1. Distribution of the present perfect and the preterite in the British and American corpora. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance.



(Žetko 2003)

Figure 1. Percentage of the present perfect and the preterite in the British and American corpora.

The data in Table 1 show that the colloquial preterite takes over the functions of the present perfect in both varieties. The difference occurs in the frequency of this phenomenon. We try to find whether the factor of the variety affects the frequency of the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the colloquial preterite by using the chi-square test (henceforth: χ^2 -test). The variety proves to be a statistically significant factor (with more than 99% significance level) that affects the frequency of the transfer, i.e. the transfer is more frequent in AmE than in BrE. These findings confirm the findings of the other research into this phenomenon as those of e.g. Dušková (1976), Sheen (1994) and Elsness (1997). The colloquial preterite which behaves as a linguistic variant of the present perfect is illustrated in the following examples taken from our corpora:

- (1) BrE
You mean it's you buying the house? It's all you, Marion, is it? *I always hated you*. You horrible bitch, you cunt cunt cunt-
(Churchill 1973)
- (2) BrE
I was never a lazy girl, Marion tries hard. I work like a dog. Most women are fleas but I'm the dog.
(Churchill 1973)
- (3) BrE
So you read the treatment?
(Elton 1991)
- (4) AmE
We just got here.
(Shepard 1978)

(5) AmE

My television is dead...My television...Is this Sandy?...*My television died.*

(Simon 1972)

(6) AmE

Listen, *I changed my mind.* I'm not doing it.

(Simon 1972)

It is worth mentioning that the above constructions are entirely replaceable by the present perfect from the temporal-referential point of view, e.g. the construction *I always hated you* is replaceable by *I've always hated you*, i.e. the temporal meaning is the same irrespective of the use of the tense or the construction *So you read the treatment?* by *So you've read the treatment?*, *My television died* by *My television has died* and *Listen, I changed my mind* by *Listen, I've changed my mind*, etc.

The colloquial preterite constructions fulfil all the criteria of the temporal-referential structure of the present perfect. However, we do emphasize that these constructions have unchanged meaning only from the strict temporal-referential perspective. The different connotations that the colloquial preterite denotes belong to an entirely different domain that has nothing in common with the temporal location.

3.2 Temporal meanings of the present perfect and colloquial preterite

At this point it is necessary to provide the definition of the indefinite² and continuative interpretation of the present perfect. The indefinite present perfect locates the situation in the period that reaches up to the time of utterance (henceforth: TU), whereas the situation itself lies wholly before TU according to Declerck (1991, 28). This interpretation does not require any explicit reference to a period that reaches up to TU. In indefinite interpretation this reference is usually made by the present perfect itself, which indicates that the period leads up to TU (e.g. *John has lived in Paris* → indefinite interpretation → no explicit reference). We consider indefinite interpretation to be more salient because it requires no explicit reference, whereas the continuative usually requires an explicit reference to a period that reaches up to TU. The continuative perfect indicates that the situation that is located in the period that reaches up to TU itself leads up to TU (e.g. *John has lived in Paris for some time* → continuative interpretation → explicit reference established by *for some time*).

We check the claim that the transfer especially occurs in the indefinite meaning, i.e. we check whether the meaning is a statistically significant factor that affects the frequency of the transfer in both varieties by using the χ^2 -test. The results are as follows:

² The majority of the above cited linguists do not use the concept of indefinite meaning, but they make mention of the resultative and experiential perfect, which roughly corresponds to the concept of the indefinite meaning.

British corpus

	indef.		cont.		other ³		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf.	236	85.8	71	91	7	100	314	87.2
Br. pret.	39	14.2	7	9	0	0	46	12.8
sum	275	100	78	100	7	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	6.1		10.1		-		6.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

Legend: *indef.* - indefinite meaning of the present perfect and *cont.* - continuative meaning of the present perfect. Note: We joined the categories *indef.* and *other* to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 2. Distribution of the meanings according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 test).

American corpus

	indef.		cont.		other		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
am. perf.	129	55.1	100	81.3	3	100	232	64.4
am. pret.	105	44.9	23	18.7	0	0	128	35.6
sum	234	100	123	100	3	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.2		4.3		-		1.8	
χ^2	s.l. > 99%							

Legend: *indef.* - indefinite meaning of the present perfect and *cont.* - continuative meaning of the present perfect. Note: We joined the categories *indef.* and *other* to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 3. Distribution of the meanings according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 test).

The test reveals that the factor of meaning is not of statistical significance in BrE. Despite this fact, the transfer is more frequent in the indefinite meaning. Conversely, it is less frequent in the continuative meaning. In AmE the factor of meaning is significant. It is more frequent in the indefinite meaning, whereas it is less frequent in the continuative meaning.

The above given data confirm the claims of some linguists that this transfer is especially frequent in the indefinite meaning. Meaning is a statistically significant factor that affects the frequency of the transfer in AmE, whereas this factor is insignificant in BrE – though this variety also shows the tendency of more frequent occurrence of the colloquial preterite in the indefinite meaning. This finding is logical if it is enlightened from the perspective of the different temporal-referential structure of the present perfect and traditional preterite.

³ Other: past in past and past in future expressed by the present perfect.

3.3 Regular and irregular verbs of the present perfect and the colloquial preterite

We use the χ^2 -test to check whether the factor of regular and irregular verbs significantly affects the frequency of the transfer in both varieties:

British corpus

	regular verb		irregular verb		indeter.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf.	86	78.9	226	90.8	2	100.0	314	87.2
Br. pret.	23	21.1	23	9.2	0	0.0	46	12.8
sum	109	100.0	249	100.0	2	100.0	360	100.0
perf.: pret.	3.7		9.8		-		6.8	
χ^2	s.l. > 99%							

Legend: indeter. - indeterminate Note: We joined the categories regular verbs and indeter. to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 4. Distribution of the regular and irregular verbs according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 - test).

The test reveals that in BrE the factor of regular and irregular verbs significantly affects the transfer, i.e. the transfer is more frequent in regular verbs than in the whole corpus, whereas it is less frequent in irregular verbs.

American corpus

	regular verb		irregular verb		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am. perf.	71	61.2	161	66.0	232	64.4
Am. pret.	45	38.8	83	34.0	128	35.6
sum	116	100	244	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.6		1.9		1.8	
χ^2	n.s.					

(Žetko 2003)

Table 5. Distribution of the regular and irregular verbs according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 - test).

The test shows that in AmE the factor of regular and irregular verbs has no statistically significant role in the transfer although the same tendency can be noticed as in BrE. The transfer is more frequent in regular verbs than in the whole corpus, whereas it is of less frequent occurrence in irregular verbs.

The results are surprising because the factor of regular and irregular verbs is the only one that affects the transfer in BrE only, whereas in AmE it is insignificant. The percentage indicates that there is the same tendency in both varieties. The transfer is more frequent in regular verbs. The reason may lie in the fact that all regular verbs have the identical form of the preterite and past participle. Nevertheless, we believe that the checking the effect of the factor of the identical and different forms is far superior because the preterite and past participle of some irregular verbs are identical in form, whereas the others are different. We examine this factor in the following Sub-section.

3.4 The identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle of the present perfect and colloquial preterite

In this sub-section we test Elsness's finding (1997, 235–6) that the transfer is more frequent when the forms of the preterite and past participle are identical, whereas it is less frequent when the forms are different. According to him, this is typical of both varieties, but the tendency is stronger in AmE. We examine whether the factor of the identical and different forms significantly affects the transfer in both varieties by using the χ^2 -test. The results of our test confirm Elsness's findings. The test reveals that the identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle is a statistically significant factor (with more than 95% significance level) in BrE, which means that the transfer is more frequent when the forms are identical, whereas it is less frequent when the forms are different.

British corpus

	identical		different		other		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf	177	84.3	135	91.2	2	100	314	87.2
Br. pret.	33	15.7	13	8.8	0	0	46	12.8
sum	210	100	148	100	2	100	360	100
perf.: pret	5.4		10.4		-		6.8	
χ^2	s.l. > 95%							

Note: We joined the categories different and other to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 6. Distribution of the identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

In AmE the results are similar as in BrE. Identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle is a statistically significant factor that affects the transfer with more than 99% significance level. The transfer is more frequent when the forms are identical. This factor has a statistically significant role in both varieties, but the difference appears in the level of reliability. In AmE this factor is significant, with more than 99% significance level, whereas in BrE it is so with more than 95% significance level. This finding is in accordance with Elsness's, who claims that this tendency is stronger in AmE.

American corpus

	identical		different		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am. perf	123	54.7	109	80.7	232	64.4
Am. pret.	102	45.3	26	19.3	128	35.6
sum	225	100	135	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.2		4.2		1.8	
χ^2			s.l.> 99%			

(Žetko 2003)

Table 7. Distribution of the identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

Our results thus confirm Elsness's findings and reveals that this factor is of statistical significance not only in AmE but also in BrE. In our view, these results are the proof that the distinction between the present perfect and traditional preterite is problematic even among native speakers. The preterite is chosen only because of the identical forms of the preterite and past participle, i.e. for practical reasons, which are formally grounded.

3.5 The form of the verbal phrase of the present perfect and colloquial preterite

As Elsness (1997, 236) claims, the transfer occurs more frequently in the affirmative form, whereas it is less frequent in both the negative and interrogative form. He believes that the transfer occurs less frequently in the negative and interrogative form because the auxiliary appears in its uncontracted form also in informal language. On the other hand, the transfer occurs more frequently in the affirmative form. In this form the uncontracted auxiliary appears infrequently in informal language. The uncontracted auxiliary *have/has* in the affirmative form would be very unusual in spoken language, whereas in the contracted auxiliary it is almost inaudible, this being the reason for the preference of the colloquial preterite in both varieties.

British corpus

	affirm.		negative		inter.		other		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf.	232	86.2	37	94.9	43	86	2	100	314	87.2
Br. pret.	37	13.8	2	5.1	7	14	0	0	46	12.8
sum	269	100	39	100	50	100	2	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	6.3		18.5		6.1		-		6.8	
χ^2										n.s.

Legend: *affirm.* - affirmative and *inter.* - interrogative. Note: We joined the categories *affirm.* and *other* to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 8. Distribution of form of the verbal phrase according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The test reveals that the factor of form of the verbal phrase is insignificant in BrE, but the transfer is more frequent in the affirmative and interrogative form, whereas it is less frequent in the negative form.

American corpus

	affirm.		negative		inter.		other		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am. perf.	163	62.0	41	87.2	27	55.1	1	100	232	64.4
Am. pret.	100	38.0	6	12.8	22	44.9	0	0	128	35.6
sum	263	100	47	100	49	100	1	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.6		6.8		1.2		-		1.8	
χ^2	s.l. > 99%									

Legend: affirm. - affirmative and inter. - interrogative. Note: We joined the categories affirm. and other to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 9. Distribution of form of the verbal phrase according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The results are different in AmE, in which the form of the verbal phrase is a statistically significant factor. The transfer is more frequent in the affirmative and interrogative form than in the whole corpus, whereas it is less frequent in the negative form. The difference between BrE and AmE occurs in the fact that this factor is of no statistical significance in BrE, whereas in AmE it is significant. Nevertheless, the tendency is the same in both varieties.

Our results are not in accordance with those of Elsness. Our test does confirm that the transfer is more frequent in the affirmative form in AmE, but it also reveals that it is even more frequent in the interrogative form. Thus the results show that the transfer occurs more frequently in the affirmative and interrogative form. The transfer is less frequent in the negative form. Unfortunately, we are not able to answer why the transfer also occurs in the interrogative form.

3.6 Number and person of the present perfect and colloquial preterite

Number

Elsness's findings (1997, 197–8) show that the ratio between the present perfect and traditional preterite is higher with plural than with singular subjects. We test whether number has a statistically significant role in the transfer. The test reveals that number is not a significant factor in either BrE or AmE. There is the same tendency in both varieties. The colloquial preterite occurs more frequently with singular subjects both in BrE and AmE, whereas it occurs less frequently with plural subjects.

British corpus

	sg.		unct.		pl.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf.	253	86.3	7	87.5	54	91.5	314	87.2
Br. pret.	40	13.7	1	12.5	5	8.5	46	12.8
sum	293	100	8	100	59	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	6.3		7.0		10.8		6.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

Legend: sg. - singular, unct. - uncountable and pl. - plural. Note: We joined the categories sg. and unct. to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 10. Distribution of number of the person according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

American corpus

	sg.		unct.		pl.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am. perf.	213	64	2	100	17	68	232	64.4
Am. pret.	120	36	0	0	8	32	128	35.6
sum	333	100	2	100	25	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.8		-		2.1		1.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

Legend: sg. - singular, unct. - uncountable and pl. - plural. Note: We joined the categories sg. and unct. to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 11. Distribution of number of the person according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

Number is insignificant in each variety, but the tendency towards the more frequent transfer in singular subjects occurs in both varieties. These results can be explained by the Naturalness Theory as formulated by Orešnik (1999). According to his claim, the present perfect is a compound tense and as such it represents a strong variant. It is typical of a strong variant that it first prevails in less natural environments. On the other hand, the preterite is not a compound tense, hence a weak variant, which first prevails in more natural environments. As far as number is concerned, Orešnik (1999, 91) claims that the singular is 'less marked' or 'more natural' than non-singular. Hence it follows:

>naturalness (singular, non-singular); after Mayerthaler 1987, 49.

This theory enables us to explain why the colloquial preterite occurs more frequently with singular subjects, i.e. since the preterite is not a compound tense, it prevails in more natural environments (i.e. singular). The present perfect, on the other hand, is a compound tense. As a consequence it prevails in less natural environments (i.e. non-singular).

Person

Elsness (1997, 197–201) finds that the ratio between the present perfect and traditional preterite is highest for the first and the second person, whereas it is lowest for the third person. According to his opinion (1997, 198), the reason lies in the fact that the first and the second person usually express extra-textual, situational reference, whereas the third person expresses anaphoric textual reference. Hence it follows that the traditional preterite is more frequently used with the third person. Our hypothesis is that the colloquial preterite behaves as if it were the present perfect and is therefore more frequently used with the first and the second person. The test reveals that person is insignificant in either variety. But varieties have different tendencies. In BrE the transfer is less frequent with the first and the second person, whereas it is more frequent with the third person.

British corpus

	1 st pers.		2 nd pers.		3 rd pers.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br.perf.	146	88	66	89.2	102	85	314	87.2
Br. pret.	20	12	8	10.8	18	15	46	12.8
sum	166	100	74	100	120	100	360	100
perf.: pret	7.3		8.3		5.7		6.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

(Žetko 2003)

Table 12. Distribution of person according to the present perfect and the preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The situation in AmE is different. Although person is not a significant factor, the transfer is the most frequent with the first person, whereas it is less frequent with the second and the third person.

American corpus

	1 st pers.		2 nd pers.		3 rd pers.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am.perf.	102	62.2	62	66	68	66.7	232	64.4
Am. pret.	62	37.8	32	34	34	33.3	128	35.6
sum	164	100	94	100	102	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.6		1.9		2		1.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

(Žetko 2003)

Table 13. Distribution of person according to the present perfect and the preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The results show that the transfer occurs most frequently with the third person in BrE, whereas in AmE it is with the first person, which confirms our expectation. We believe that these differences are not necessarily a reflection of the actual differences between the varieties because this distribution may be due to extra-linguistic factors such as the type and nature of conversations, which may dictate the use of person and number. It is true that the third person expresses anaphoric reference more frequently, but this is not necessarily always true.

3.7 Independent and dependent clauses

We check the effect of the type of clause on this transfer. We want to find whether the type of clause is a factor that has a statistically significant role in the frequency of the transfer by using the χ^2 -test. The results are as follows:

British corpus

	independent		depend.		indeter.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Br. perf.	227	85.7	85	91.4	2	100	314	87.2
Br. pret.	38	14.3	8	8.6	0	0	46	12.8
sum	265	100	93	100	2	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	6.0		10.6				6.8	
χ^2	n.s.							

Legend: depend. - dependent and indeter. - indeterminable. Note: We joined the categories independent and indeter. to perform the statistical test. (Žetko 2003)

Table 14. Distribution of the independent and dependent clauses according to the present perfect in preterite in the British corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The test reveals that the type of clause is not a statistically significant factor in BrE, but the results indicate that the transfer is more frequent in independent clauses, whereas it is less frequent in dependent clauses.

American corpus

	independent		depend.		sum	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Am. perf.	176	61.5	56	75.7	232	64.4
Am. pret.	110	38.5	18	24.3	128	35.6
Sum	286	100	74	100	360	100
perf.: pret.	1.6		3.1		1.8	
χ^2	s.l. > 95%					

Legend: depend. - dependent. (Žetko 2003)

Table 15. Distribution of the independent and dependent clauses according to the present perfect in preterite in the American corpus. Number, percentage, ratio and statistical significance (χ^2 -test).

The test reveals that the type of clause is a statistically significant factor in AmE. The transfer is more frequent in independent clauses, whereas it is of less frequent occurrence in dependent clauses.

The factor of the type of clause has a statistically significant role in the frequency of the transfer in AmE. This factor is of no statistical significance in BrE although the tendency is the same as in AmE. In both varieties the transfer is more frequent in independent clauses than in dependent ones.

Our results can be made explicable by means of the Naturalness Theory (Orešnik 1999). As Orešnik states, the present perfect is a strong variant and prevails in less natural environments. On the other hand, the preterite is a weak variant, which prevails in more natural environments. As far as a clause is concerned, Orešnik (1999, 23) claims that an independent clause is ‘more natural’ than a dependent clause. Hence it follows:
>naturalness (independent clause, dependent clause).

It is therefore obvious why the transfer is more frequent in independent clauses. The preterite is a weak variant and tends to occur in more natural environments and independent clauses are more natural than dependent ones.

4. Summary and conclusion

The main finding of our research was that the factor of the variety has a statistically significant role in the transfer of the functions of the present perfect into the domain of the preterite, i.e. this transfer is more frequent in AmE than in BrE.

Factor	Variety		Tendency
	BrE	AmE	
meaning: indefinite and continuative	n.s.	s.l. > 99%	same
verbs: regular and irregular verbs	s.l. > 99%	n.s.	same
identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle	s.l. > 95%	s.l. > 99%	same
form of the verbal phrase: affirmative, negative and interrogative	n.s.	s.l. > 99%	same
number of the person: singular and plural	n.s.	n.s.	same
person: 1 st person, 2 nd person and 3 rd person	n.s.	n.s.	different
type of the clause: independent and dependent	n.s.	s.l. > 95%	same

Table 16. Factors that have or do not have a statistically significant effect in BrE in AmE, comparison of the tendencies according to the percentages in both corpora.

The results of our research showed that the significant similarity between BrE and AmE (see Table 16) in the transfer occurs only in one factor, i.e. in the factor of identical and different forms of the preterite and past participle. This factor significantly affects the transfer in both varieties, i.e. the transfer is more frequent when the forms are identical and infrequent when the forms are different.

The research showed that the differences between BrE and AmE in this transfer mostly occur: (1) in the frequency of this transfer, (2) in the number of the statistically significant factors that affect the frequency of the transfer, (3) in the factor of meaning (indefinite and continuative), (4) in the factor of form of the verbal phrase (affirmative, negative and interrogative), (5) in the factor of verbs (regular and irregular), and (6) in the factor of type of clauses (independent and dependent clauses). There are only two significant factors that affect the frequency of this transfer in BrE, whereas there are more significant factors in AmE. The factor of meaning is not significant in BrE, whereas it is of statistical significance in AmE. This transfer is more frequent in indefinite meaning and infrequent in continuative meaning. Notwithstanding that the factor of meaning is not significant in BrE, the transfer is more frequent in indefinite meaning. The factor of form of a verbal phrase does not significantly affect the transfer in BrE. In AmE this factor is of statistical significance, i.e. the transfer is more frequent in affirmative and interrogative form, whereas in negative form it is infrequent. There is the same tendency in BrE. The factor of regular and irregular verbs significantly affects the transfer in BrE, i.e. the transfer is more frequent in constructions with regular verbs. In AmE this factor is not significant, but the tendency is the same. This factor is the only one that is significant in BrE but is of no significance in AmE. The factor of type of clauses (dependent and independent clauses) is not significant in BrE, whereas it is of significance in AmE, i.e. the transfer is more frequent in independent and infrequent in dependent clauses. There is the same tendency in BrE.

The factors that have no significant role in the frequency of this transfer either in BrE or in AmE are (1) the factor of number of the person (sg. and pl.), and (2) the factor of person (1st, 2nd and 3rd person).

In conclusion, although there is a considerable difference between BrE and AmE in the transfer of the present perfect functions into the domain of the colloquial preterite, we believe that both varieties are moving in the same direction and that the British variety is under increasing influence of AmE. Nevertheless, the general tendency is the same in both varieties. This fact indicates that this phenomenon, which was first noticed in informal American English, is spreading to informal British English. The question of whether or when this phenomenon enters the formal varieties cannot be answered for the time being.

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