

**In Perfect Shape:
Verb Semantics in the History of the English Present Perfect**
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The role of verbal semantics in the generalization of present perfect forms through the past temporal reference system is a mainstay of grammaticization research (Bybee et al. 1994). Most existing work on English, however, cannot consider the relative importance of verb effects within the overall system of language in use.

Grammaticization literature focusses on what percentage of perfect forms are from each verbal category (Carey 1995); historical linguists simply identify overall rates of present perfect use depending on variety, genre, era, co-occurring adverbials, and the like (Vanneck 1953, Elsness 1997); mainstream theoretical work assigns semantic value to hypothetical sentences (Chomsky 1970); and existing variationist studies are hampered by the infrequency of present perfects in sociolinguistic interviews (Tagliamonte 1991, Lawrence 2000). In fact, most studies suffer from too few tokens to permit concurrent analysis of verb effects and all the other factors proposed to condition present perfect use.

This paper addresses that problem through large-scale analyses (total N = 13,245) of the present perfect in data sets drawn from three corpora:

- all personal letters in the Helsinki Corpus of earlier English, 1420-1710;
- the Ottawa Repository of Early African American Correspondence, 1834-1866 (Van Herk & Poplack in press); and
- the Quebec English Project, 2002 (Poplack & Walker 2002).

Parallel verb effects are found in all three corpora, across genres, time periods, ethnicities, and geographic locations. The present perfect is favoured by all types of change of state verbs (especially in earlier periods) and perception verbs (especially in later periods), and disfavoured by reporting and cognition verbs.

Multivariate analyses confirm these effects. However, they also show that verb effects are at least partly due to certain verbs co-occurring with other linguistic factors. Some of these favour the present perfect -- continuing, vague, or recent temporal reference, negation, certain adverbials (deictics, *since, while, just, always, never*), *since* clauses, NP and *you/I* subjects, and plural and NP objects -- while others disfavour -- remote pasts, time-point adverbials, and *when/after/before* clause types.

The effects of these constraints are remarkably consistent across corpora, in some cases greater than verb effects. This argues that these present perfects perform fundamentally identical functions across corpora, no matter the rate of occurrence or the discourse or social characteristics of each corpus.

These findings confirm non-variationist claims that verb semantics play a role in the development of the perfect, and that, naturally enough, the expansion of a form's function proceeds through the extension of semantic domains. They also warn us, however, that such expansion does not operate in a vacuum, and that verb effects (and, for that matter, other proposed linguistic constraints) are interdependent with other, empirically determinable linguistic factors.

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