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Trabajo Fin de Grado

**The past and perfect
tenses. A diachronic and
synchronic overview**

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Abstract. This essay is aimed at explaining the past simple and perfect tenses and provides an overview of the changes which they have undergone through history (Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English periods) and also the differences and similarities between them. Past Simple and Present Perfect tenses share some similarities, since both tenses refer to the past time. Besides, they denote different meanings since the *past simple tense* (preterite) refers to an action which started and finished in a finished period of time, whereas the *present perfect* is used for an action which goes into the present moment, so that it can be considered as an inclusive time.

Key Concepts: aspect, future, grammaticalization, imperfect, inclusive present, modality, non-progressive, passive, past, phase, perfect, periphrastic, present, preterite, progressive, retrospective present, synthetic, tense, time, verb, verb phrase

Resumen. El principal objetivo de este ensayo es explicar los tiempos de pasado y perfecto y proporcionar una visión general de los cambios a los que se han sometido a través de la historia (inglés antiguo, inglés medio e inglés moderno), además de las diferencias y similitudes que hay entre estos dos tiempos verbales. Los tiempos de pasado simple y presente perfecto comparten algunas similitudes, ya que ambos se refieren al tiempo pasado. Sin embargo, tienen diferentes significados, ya que el pasado simple (o pretérito) se refiere a una acción que comenzó y terminó en un periodo de tiempo acabado, mientras que el presente perfecto se utiliza para una acción que va hasta el tiempo presente, de modo que puede ser considerado como un tiempo incluido.

Conceptos clave: aspecto, futuro, gramaticalización, imperfecto, presente incluido, modalidad, no progresivo, pasiva, pasado, fase, perfecto, perifrástico, presente, preterito, progresivo, presente retrospectivo, sintético, tiempo verbal, tiempo, verbo, sintagma verbal

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay deals with the past simple and perfect tenses and provides an overview of the changes which they have undergone over time and also the differences and similarities between them. Past Simple and Present Perfect tenses share some similarities, since both tenses refer to the past time, but they denote different meanings, as will be explained below.

This essay is divided into three different sections that explain and illustrate all of these changes, similarities and differences between both tenses. The first section, called *Important concepts*, introduces some basic concepts which will be dealt in the following sections, to wit, *tense and time*, *phase* and *aspect* (*perfect* and *imperfect/non-perfect*, *progressive* and *non-progressive*), *periphrastic* and *synthetic tenses*. The second section, named *Diachronic description of the Present Perfect and Preterite*, looks into the changes undergone by these two tenses through history, so that this section is divided into three subsections on the Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English periods. The third section, called *Synchronic description of the Perfect and Preterite*, deals with description of these two tenses in Present Day English. For that purpose, this section begins with a classification of the verb phrase where the opinion of four authors (Quirk *et al.* 1985, Palmer 1997, Biber *et al.* 1999 and Huddleston 2002) will be compared. Tense and aspect in Present Day English are described in detail including some differences between the *present perfect* and *past simple* tenses. In addition, the meanings of both tenses and the registers in which they are used, are developed and illustrated with examples.

As mentioned above, all of the concepts and explanations are illustrated by means of examples. The examples of the first and third sections are taken randomly from the internet and/or from one of the set readings in the English Studies degree, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Nevertheless, the examples of the second section are taken from different sources depending on the period they belong. The Old English examples are taken from Mitchell and Robinson (1992). The short references, however, are those of the *DOEC*. The Middle English examples are taken from Burrow and Turville-Petre (1992). Finally, the Early Modern English examples are taken from Nevalainen (2006).

2. IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

This section focuses on the definition of several terms which will be dealt in the following sections, to wit, tense, time, phase, aspect, perfect, non-perfect, progressive, non-progressive, periphrastic tenses and synthetic tenses. Besides, all of these concepts are illustrated with several examples.

2.1. TENSE AND TIME

Tense is a grammatical category used in the description of verbs, namely, those variations in the morphological form of the verb, such as the inflection of third person singular in present indicative, as in example (1), the past of regular verbs, as in example (2) and the past of irregular verbs, which involves a change in the stem, that is, vowel alternation, as in example (3). **Tense** is used to convey time, so that tense is connected with the concept of **time**. In some cases, there is no simple relationship between both concepts since the present tense can refer to future or past time (historic present) depending on context, as in examples (4) and (5), respectively (Crystal 2008: 479-480).

- (1) *The Winner Takes It All.* <goo.gl/eivC6v>
- (2) *From 1953 until 1995, the Generals **played** exhibitions against the Globetrotters, winning only six games.* <goo.gl/8hih>
- (3) *At least 17 people were killed when a ship carrying migrants **sank** Monday about 100 miles off southern Italy.* <goo.gl/PZ2qI5>
- (4) *Tomorrow, I'm **leaving**.* <goo.gl/xpMJqD>
- (5) *If the funeral had been yesterday, I could not recollect it better. The very air of the best parlour, when I went in at the door, the bright condition of the fire, the shining of the wine in the decanters, the patterns of the glasses and plates, the faint sweet smell of cake, the odour of Miss Murdstone's dress, and our black clothes. Mr. Chillip **is** in the room, and **comes** to speak to me. 'And how **is** Master David?' he **says**, kindly.* <goo.gl/Phsmbr>

Time can be represented with a simple line, as Quirk *et al.* (1985:176) did. This line can be divided into past, present and future time; or in two parts, past and future, and the present moment would be the point of division, as in Figure 1.

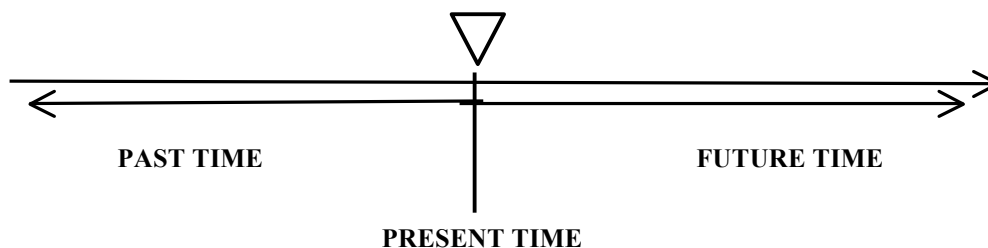


Figure 1. Time representation (Quirk *et al.* 1985:176).

Therefore, there are three different time zones in English: past, present and future. The present and the past times are often linked to the present and past tenses, which are expressed morphologically, that is, they are synthetic tenses, as in examples (6) and (7), respectively. By contrast, the future tense, which historically developed later than the present and the past, came to be expressed periphrastically by auxiliaries such as *will/shall* and *going to*, as in example (8), and not morphologically, as the present and past tenses. Besides, the auxiliary conveys other meanings at the same time, such as intention and obligation.

(6) *She suffers from asthma.* <goo.gl/B7UA7W>

(7) *He promised her the moon.* <goo.gl/ZOcPPA>

(8) *I'm going to tell you a secret.* <goo.gl/mL7fOl>

2.2. PHASE AND ASPECT

Phase is a concept related to the syntactic structure of the verb phrase. Phase is “a term used by some grammarians to refer to the contrast between perfect and non-perfect in the verb phrase. The term is intended to distinguish these forms from the progressive/non-progressive contrast within aspect, and also from contrasts of tense and voice” (Crystal 2008: 358).

Aspect is a more specific term which refers to a verbal category. “It designates the internal temporal organization of the situation described by the verb. The most common possibilities are *perfective*, as in example (9), which indicates that the situation is to be viewed as a bounded whole, and *imperfective*, as in example (10), which in one way or another looks inside the temporal boundaries of the situation. The latter may be divided into *habitual*, as in example (11) and *progressive*, as in example (12). These aspects are usually expressed by means of inflections, auxiliaries, or particles” (Bright 1992: 145).

(9) *I have written another four symphonies.* <goo.gl/zG8NXg>

(10) *I was writing another four symphonies.*

(11) *I wrote another four symphonies.*

(12) *I'm writing another four symphonies.*

2.2.1. PERFECT AND IMPERFECT/NON-PERFECT

Perfectivity refers to “an event’s being viewed in its entirety, that is, as a terminated event. This crucially entails that the speaker envisages the terminal point as an essential part of the event,” as in example (9) where the action has already finished (Bertinetto 2006: 266).

Imperfectivity refers to “the terminal point of the event not being envisaged. This may correspond not to less than two aspectual subspecifications: progressive and habitual,” as in examples (10) and (11), respectively, where the action started but it does not entail that the action has been completed (Bertinetto 2006: 66).

2.2.2. PROGRESSIVE AND NON-PROGRESSIVE

Progressive is “a term used in the grammatical description of verb forms, referring to a contrast of a temporal or durative kind.” “The usual contrast recognized is between *progressive* or *continuous*, as in example (12) and *non-progressive* or *simple*, as in example (11) (Crystal 2008:390).

2.3. PERIPHRASTIC AND SYNTHETIC TENSES

Periphrastic tense is a term used to refer to the use of separate words in the verb phrase instead of inflections to express the same grammatical relationship, as in example (13) where the verb phrase is composed by two words or free morphemes in order to express the future tense (Crystal 2008: 358).

(13) *Clinton has not said whether she **will run** for president in 2016.* <goo.gl/snvrv>

Synthetic tense is a term used to refer to the inflections in the verb phrase, namely more than one morpheme, which express time grammatical relationship, as in example (14) (Crystal 2008: 472).

(14) *He and his wife, Pauline, **had** eight children, the youngest two of whom **died** in infancy.*
<goo.gl/Lq2eDa>

3. DIACHRONIC DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT PERFECT AND PRETERITE

3.1. OLD ENGLISH PERIOD (450 – 1100)

In Old English (OE henceforth), there were only two tenses, the present and the preterite, as Mitchell and Robinson (1992: 108) note. Both are synthetic tenses.

The *synthetic present tense* can express:

- Continuous states, as in example (15).
- Actions in the present time, “now” (it corresponds to the progressive aspect in Present Day English (PDE henceforth)), as in example (16).
- Future actions, as in example (17). The only verb in OE with future forms is the verb “to be” (*bið* in OE).
- Actions in the future perfect, as in example (18).
- Eternal truths, as in example (19). Besides, the form *is* can be used in the same way as *bið* and has the same meaning, as in example (20).

(15) *Eadige synt þa ðe nu wepað forþam þe hi beoð gefrefrede. "Blessed are those who weep because they shall be conformed"* (Mt(WSCp) 5.5).

(16) *Hwæt þis folc segeð "What this people is saying, say now"* (Mald 42).

(17) *Ic arise of deað on ðæm þriðdan dæge "I will arise from death on the third day"* (AECHom I, 10 (259.27)).

(18) *Seþe þæt gelæsteð, bið him lean gearo "A reward will be ready for him who does (shall have done) that"* (Gen A, B 435).

(19) *Wyrð bið ful aræd "Fate is quite inexorable"* (Wan 5).

(20) *Heofena rice is gelic þæm hiredes ealdre "The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is an householder"* (Mt (WSCp) 20.2).

According to Mitchell and Robinson (1992: 109), the *synthetic preterite tense* was used in OE to express:

- Actions completed in the past time, as in example (21), where the verb in the main clause indicates a finished action.
- Actions that continued for a period of time in the past, as in example (21), where the verb in the subordinate clause expresses an action in progress in the past time.
- Perfect aspect, as in example (22), which corresponds to PDE present perfect.

- Past perfect, as in example (23).

- (21) *Sodlice þa ða men **slepon**, þa **com** his feonda sum* “Truly, while men **were sleeping**, one of his enemies **came**” (Mt (wscp) 13.25).
- (22) *Ic mid ealre heortan þe **gewilnode*** “**I have wished** for Thee (you) with all my heart” (ÆHom I, 4, 74.26).
- (23) *Sona swa hie **common** an Stufemþan, þa metton hie XVI scipu wicenga* “As soon as they **came** [had come] the Stuff estuary, then they met sixteen ships of Viking” (ChronA (Plummer) 885.7).

There was no **synthetic future tense** in OE. However, the present tense was used in some contexts to refer to future time, as in (17), as mentioned above, and also some future markers were reinterpreted from deontic modals into more general future markers, such as *sculan* (“must, have to”) and *willan* (“will”). Both were periphrastic auxiliaries expressing obligation, as in example (24), and desire or intention, as in example (25), respectively (Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 132).

Then, these future markers were used in contexts where the future time needed to be reinforced and finally, they were **grammaticalized**¹. For instance, *will* originally meant “want”, but it lost its semantic complexity and was grammaticalized as a future marker (Campbell and Mixco 2007: 73). Nevertheless, the grammaticalization process has not been completely reached in PDE since the PDE periphrastic future do not express just future time, but modal and lexical meanings, too.

- (24) *Se byrdesta **sceall gyldan*** “The wealthiest **must pay**” (Orl 1.15.17).
- (25) *Ic **wille secgan** sume feawa word* “**I will say** some few words” (ÆLet 4 (SigeweardZ), 950).

In OE, there were two structures composed by a participle (present or past) plus the verb “to be” (*beon* + **present/past participle**) or the verb “to have” (*habban* + **past participle**) where the participle functioned as an adjectival.

The verb “to be” plus the present participle seems to be formally equivalent to the continuous tenses of Modern English (MnE henceforth), as in example (26), where the

¹ **Grammaticalization** is “an evolution whereby linguistic units lose in semantic complexity, pragmatic significance, syntactic freedom, and phonetic substance” (Heine and Reh 1984: 15, in Campbell and Mixco 2007: 73).

participle is adjectival since it is declined for the accusative plural (masculine strong declension). However, this OE structure does not correspond exactly with the PDE usage, since its meaning is related to that conveyed by the PDE simple tense. Besides, the verb “to be” can appear together with the past participle in order to form what might apparently be considered as the perfect and past perfect of intransitive verbs, as in example (27), where the participle also functions as an adjective since it is declined for the nominative singular (feminine strong declension). However, in example (28), the construction “**habban** + **past participle**” does seem to be the ancestor of the perfect and past perfect PDE constructions. Nevertheless, the past participle is an adjectival (declined for the accusative plural in the masculine strong declension), which appears in final position, unlike PDE word order, in which the participle precedes the object (Mitchell and Robinson 1992: 111-112).

(26) *ƿa wæs se cyning openlice andettende þam biscope* “Then the king **was** openly **confessing** [**openly confessed**] to the bishop” (Bede 2. 10. 136. 20).

(27) *Swæ clæne hio wæ oðfeallenu on Angelcynne* “So completely it [**learning**] **was learning** **fallen** away [**So completely had it fallen away**] in England” (CPLetWærf 13).

(28) *He us hafað þæs leohtes bescyrede* “He **has** us **deprived** of that light” (GenA, B 390).

Therefore, the above-mentioned OE structures look like present perfect tenses, but they were not really perfect tenses in OE. They can appear together with the auxiliary “to be”, as in example (27), and with the auxiliary “to have”, as in example (28). The auxiliary “to be” was always used with intransitive verbs, while the auxiliary “to have” appeared with transitive verbs. However, this usage changed in Middle English (ME henceforth), when the auxiliary “to have” extended its domain in the perfect structure, as Fischer and van der Wurff (2006: 141) affirm. Besides, these structures are characterized in OE by the declension of the participle as an adjectival just as their final morphemes illustrate.

3.2. MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD (1100 – 1500)

In ME, there were two synthetic tenses just as in OE, **present** and **past** (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1992: 45).

The ***synthetic present tense*** was used to express:

- Habitual actions, as in example (29).
- General truths, such as proverbs, as in example (30).
- Actions in progress, equivalent to the PDE progressive, “*be* + *-ing*”, as in example (31).

- Future time, as in example (32).
- Historic present, which did not exist in OE, was commonly used in the fourteenth century in order to express past actions, as in example (33).

- (29) *Du **chaterest** so doþ on Irish prost “You **chatter** like an Irish priest” (The Owl and the Nightingale 322).*
- (30) *Wel **fīzt** þat wel **flizt** “Well **Fights** that well **flees**” (The Owl and the Nightingale 176).*
- (31) *Al **dares** for drede “They **are** all **cowering** for fear” (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 315).*
- (32) *We foure **rayse** it noȝt right to-yere “The four of us **will** not **raise** it upright this year” (The York Play of the Crucifixion 164).*
- (33) *Þer **hales** in at þe halle dor an anghlich mayster “There **comes** in at the hall door a fearsome knight” (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 136).*

According to Burrow and Turville-Petre (1992: 45-46), the **synthetic past tense** was used to express:

- Progressive and non-progressive aspect, as in example (34), where the verb of the subordinate clause uses the progressive aspect and the verb of the main clause employs the non-progressive aspect.
- The perfective, which corresponds to the PDE present perfect and past perfect. The perfective may refer to an action which continues until the present time (**have + past participle**) or an action which finished in a more recent past (**had + past participle**), as in examples (35) and (36), respectively.

- (34) *Do al þo þat þer in **sete**/þat it was King Orfeo **underȝete** “Then all those who **were sitting** there **understood** that it was King Orfeo” (Sir Orfeo 575-576).*
- (35) *Þy bone þat þou **boden habbes** “The request that you **have asked for**” (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 327).*
- (36) *Ne **isæh** nævere na man selere cniht nenne “No one **had** ever **seen** a better knight” (Lazamon: Brut 28).*

In addition, the perfective of intransitive verbs was composed by the auxiliary *be*, as in examples (37) and (38), just as in OE example (27). In narrative style, the perfective was used to express the consequences of actions, which are still developing at the present moment, as in example (39), so that the past events in narrative can be expressed by the perfective, historic present and simple past tense.

- (37) *He is nu supe acoled* “*He has now cooled off considerably*” (*The Owl and the Nightingale* 205).
- (38) *He watz flowen* “*He had fled*” (*Patience* 183).
- (39) *So long hap þe way ynome/ To Winchester he is ycome* “*So long has he taken the way that he has arrived at Winchester*” (*Sir Orfeo* 477-478).

In ME, there was no **synthetic future tense**, even though there were several auxiliaries used to express future time, which had been grammaticalized, such as *shall*, expressing obligation or necessity, as in example (40), and *will*, expressing wish or intention, as in example (41). Moreover, these auxiliaries can express future-in-the-past time, as in example (42). According to Burrow and Turville-Petre (1992: 46-47), *shall* became the general auxiliary to refer to the future time, while the auxiliary *will* entailed volition, as in example (43). However, these two auxiliaries sometimes appear as alternatives, that is, they are interchangeable since there is no difference in meaning, as in example (44).

- (40) *It schal be so!* “*It shall be so*” (*Sir Orfeo* 226).
- (41) *Ich wille bon of þe awreke* “*I intend to get even with you*” (*The Owl and the Nightingale* 262).
- (42) *þu clumbe [...] swulc þu woldest to hævene; nu þu scalt to hælle* “*You climbed as if you wished (to get) to heaven; now you shall (get) to hell*” (*Lazamon: Brut* 165-166).
- (43) *Wo schal us seme/þat kunne and wille riȝt us deme* “*Who is going to reconcile us, who is able and willing to judge us justly?*” (*The Owl and the Nightingale* 187-188).
- (44) *I wyl me sum oþer waye, [...] I schal tee into Tarce* “*I’ll go some other way, [...] I’ll travel into Tarshish*” (*Patience* 86-87).

In ME, the auxiliary *will* became more common than *shall* in the first person, since the first person tends to express intention, whereas the second and third person convey commands, instructions, etc., that is to say, something that does not express the will of the subject (Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 133).

Moreover, more markers of future tenses appeared in ME, such as *be about to* and *be going to*. Both underwent grammaticalization just as other markers were in OE. That is why their meanings have changed: *be about to* expresses an initial action, as in example (45), so that it has retained a more precise meaning, unlike *be going to*, which has become a general future marker, as in example (46) (Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 133).

- (45) *I was aboute to wedde a wyf, allas!* “*I was about to marry with a woman*” (Chaucer, *Wife of Bath’s Tale* 166; Mustanoja, 1960: 354).

(46) *Thys onhappy sowle...was goying to be brought into hell for the synne and onleful lystys of her body* “*This unhappy soul...was going to be brought into the hell for the sin and awful lust of her body*” (*Monk of Evesham* 43; Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 133).

Therefore, OE and ME periods have several features in common as regards the present and past tenses, as Table 1 illustrates.

	OE	ME
PRESENT SIMPLE:		
Habitual actions	✓	✓
Eternal truths	✓	✓
Future actions	✓	✓
Progressive meaning	✓	✓
Perfect meaning	✓	✗
Historic present	✗	✓
PAST SIMPLE:		
Past actions	✓	✓
Progressive meaning	✓	✓
Present Perfect meaning	✓	✓
Past perfect meaning	✓	✓

Table 1. Differences and similarities between the present tense and the past tense in OE and ME.

3.3. EARLY MODERN ENGLISH PERIOD (1500 – 1750)

In Early Modern English (eModE henceforth), there were only two tenses, **present** and **past**, just as in OE and ME (Nevalainen 2006: 92).

The *synthetic present tense* is unmarked in eModE since verbs are in their base forms and only the second person singular *-(e)st* and the third person singular *-(e)th/-s* are marked by person and number, as in examples (47) and (48), respectively. The second person singular morpheme was also joined to past tense, unlike the third person singular suffix, which was only attached to present tense. The first person singular and the whole of the plural were *zero*-marked. Nevertheless, there are two verbs which distinguish the first, second and third person in the singular, *be* and *have* (*am, art, is; have, hast, hath/has*). They are not only

lexical verbs, but auxiliaries in the continuous aspect (*be*) and in the perfect aspect (*have*) (Nevalainen 2006: 89-92).

- (47) *And also that thou **mightst** be satisfied that evil Men, who as thou **didst** complain went unpunished, do never indeed escape Punishment* (Richard Preston Boethius, 1695: 181).
(48) *Brother something **hath** offered it selfe which may prove of advantage to you, that **makes** it necessary for mee to have you here on Tuesday night next* (Samuel Pepys, 1670).

By contrast, the **synthetic past tense** was commonly marked by the *-ed* suffix, as in example (49). This suffix is attached to regular verbs, which were descended from weak verbs or from strong verbs that dentalized through analogy. However, irregular verbs from weak verbs that developed root vowel alternations due to regular phonetic processes are inflected throughout vowel gradation, such as *sink – sank – sunk*.

- (49) *Then they **enacted** that Edwi Brother of Edmund, a Prince of great hope, should be **banish't** the Realm* (John Milton, *The History of Britain*, 1670: 275).

In eModE, there was no **synthetic future tense**, just had been the case in OE and ME. The future time was expressed by using some auxiliaries of future, which had been grammaticalized, such as *shall* and *will*, as in examples (50) and (51), respectively, just had been the case in example (25) for OE, and in examples (40) and (41) for ME. The progressive construction *be going to* was used to indicate future time, as in example (52). It is another example of grammaticalization, since *be going to* lost its lexical meaning and was fixed in a specific grammatical function, as Nevalainen (2006: 95) affirms. Besides, the present tense was used to refer to the future time, as in (53), just as in example (17) for OE.

- (50) *Carleton bishop of Chichester **shall marrie** the Lady Nevil Sir Henries widow* (John Chamberlain, 1619).
(51) *What **will** you do when Sir Tunbelly calls for you to the wedd?* (John Vanbrugh, *The Relapse or Virtue in Danger*, 1699: 242).
(52) *Sr John Walter **is going to** be marryed to my Lady Stoel* (Anne Hatton, 1695: 214).
(53) *Yesterday the Quene feasted all that gave presents to her last bride, and on Shrove-Sonday she **marries** another of her maides* (John Chamberlain, 1614).

Nevalainen (2006: 92) distinguishes two different aspects, **perfect** and **progressive**. The perfect and progressive tenses were established in the eModE. The perfect aspect expresses a completed action and is composed by the auxiliary *be* plus the past participle (*be + -ed*) with verbs of motion, as in example (54), but it changed and the auxiliary *be* was replaced by *have*

in the Late Modern period; while the progressive aspect expresses an action in progress and is composed by the auxiliary *be* plus the present participle (*be* + *-ing*), as in (55).

The perfective structure in eModE differs from PDE since the auxiliary *be* was used to indicate a change of state and with verbs of motion, as in example (54), just as had been the case in example (27) for OE and in example (35) for ME. The progressive structure was consolidated in eModE, as in example (55). It may be connected with a construction with the verbal noun, where the preposition is followed by an *-ing* form, such as, *on reading*. Furthermore, the progressive aspect was introduced as a future marker in eModE, as in example (52). At the beginning, it was only used with verbs of motion, such as *enter*, *escape*, etc., and later on, it denoted planned activities or arrangements. In some cases, the simple present could express the progressive meaning, as in example (56), just as in OE example (16) and in ME example (31) (Nevalainen 2006: 94-95).

(54) *Al thes **are come** to see yow suffer deathe* “All of these **have come** to see you suffering death” (Thomas Mowntayne, *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation* 1553: 203).

(55) *Mis Ford. Mlstris Page, trust me, I **was going** to your house* (William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1624: 43.C2).

(56) *What **do** you **read**, my Lord?* (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1982: 191).

4. SYNCHRONIC DESCRIPTION OF THE PERFECT AND PRETERITE

4.1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE VERB PHRASE

The verb phrase is composed by the auxiliaries and the main verb. The verb phrase can be also classified regarding the distinction between finite and non-finite verb phrases, even though the description of verbs developed below only focuses on finite verb phrases. Some of the characteristics of finite verb phrases are the distinction between the present and past; the concord or agreement between the subject and the verb phrase in number and person; the possibility of the verb phrase appearing in independent clauses; and the use of modal auxiliaries in the verb phrase. Besides, the finite verb phrase can be simple, as in example (57), or complex, as in example (58) (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 149).

(57) *Communicating effectively with children **requires** specific skills.* <goo.gl/AhrHxY>

(58) *The destruction of jobs in Spain **has been widespread** – in four years in more than 2.6 million jobs **have been lost**.* <goo.gl/VA3RK3>

The complex verb phrase does not have just one classification, but several, depending on the author who categorizes it. In this case, the classification by three different authors will be dealt with and compared below.

According to Biber *et al.* (1999: 452), verb phrases are classified considering six structural distinctions:

- **Tense** (present or past), in which the *present tense* refers to the present time, “now”, while the *past tense* excludes the present moment, such as *play(s)* and *played*.
- **Aspect**: unmarked, progressive: *-ing* form, perfect and perfect progressive, such as, *play(s)*, *playing*, *has/have played* and *has/have been playing*.
- **Voice**: active and passive, such as, *play(s)* and *is played*.
- **Modality**: unmarked and modal, such as *play(s)* and *can/may/will play*.
- **Negation** (positive and negative), such as *play(s)* and *don't/doesn't play*.
- **Clause structure type** (declarative and interrogative), such as *you play* and *did you play?*

Huddleston (2002: 116) classifies the verb phrase into **tense**, **aspect** and **mood**. He differs from Biber (1999: 452) in the concept of *tense* and *aspect*, but they coincide in the concept of *mood*. Huddleston defines **tense** as a term used to locate a situation in a specific period of

time, so that he divides it into **primary tenses** (present and preterite), such as *look(s)* and *looked*, and **secondary tenses** (perfect and non-perfect), such as *have/has looked* and *look(s)*. Besides, Huddleston (2002: 117) defines **aspect** as a term “where the basic meanings have to do with the internal temporal constituency of the situation,” so that aspect is used to refer to progressive and non-progressive forms, as in examples (59) and (60), respectively.

(59) *She is studying Biology.*

(60) *She studies Biology.* <goo.gl/hq0j7h>

However, Quirk *et al.* (1985: 151) made a completely different classification of the complex verb phrase considering the syntagmatic criteria, namely the syntactic structure of the verb phrase, instead of paradigmatic criteria as the previous authors. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 151) divided the complex verb phrase into **modal**, **perfective**, **progressive** and **passive**. Thus these four constructions can be combined in different ways, as in Table 2.

MODAL	PERFECTIVE	PROGRESSIVE	PASSIVE
may	have read		
may	have been	reading	
may	have been	being	read

Table 2. Paradigm for the verb *read*.

Palmer (1997: 32) also made a classification considering the syntagmatic criteria, just as Quirk (1985: 151). Palmer divided the complex verb phrase into **tense** and **phase**, as Table 3 illustrates. *Phase* was a new concept introduced by Palmer, to denote both aspect and voice. In Table 3, the first column refers to tense and the rest is the phase, so that the second column indicates perfect and non-perfect forms; the third one is a distinction between progressive and non-progressive forms; and the fourth one represents the passive voice, which is composed by BE and *-en* form.

TENSE	PHASE		
	PERFECT / NON-PERFECT	PROGRESSIVE / NON-PROGRESSIVE	PAST PARTICIPLE
Had	been	being	looked

Table 3. Paradigm for the verb *look*.

4.2. TENSE

In PDE, there are two tenses, **present** and **past** (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 176). The **synthetic present tense** is unmarked morphologically, except for the third person singular, which is marked by

the suffix *-(e)s*, as seen in *works* [s], *does* [z] and *fixes* [iz]. As Quirk *et al.* (1985: 179-183) notes, the *synthetic present tense* expresses:

- A habit, as in example (60).
- A state, which can include “eternal truths,” as in example (62).
- Instantaneous present where the action began and was completed at the moment of the speech, as in example (63).
- Past actions (historic present), as in example (64).
- Future events, which is called “future present,” as in example (65).

(61) *Every year, authors, journalists, teachers, researchers, schoolchildren and students **ask** us for statistics about hunger and malnutrition.* <goo.gl/bo7g>

(62) *Water **is** the chemical substance with chemical formula H 2O.* <goo.gl/ZTrC>

(63) *We **apologize** for the inconvenience this may be causing.* <goo.gl/4JuPax>

(64) *Plane **lands** at wrong US airport.* <goo.gl/l5DhpGZ>

(65) *The plane **leaves** for Ankara at eight o'clock tonight* (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 182).

The *synthetic past tense* is composed by regular and irregular forms. Regular forms are characterized by the suffix *-ed*, such as, *talked* [t], *cleaned* [d] and *demande* [ɪd], whereas irregular forms are characterized by their vowel alternation, as mentioned above. The pronunciation of the past tense morpheme of the regular forms depends on the final sound of the word. The *synthetic past tense* can be used to express different meanings, as will be explained below.

However, as Quirk *et al.* (1985: 176) asserts, there is no *synthetic future tense* in PDE, even though there are several grammatical constructions used to the future time. The future time is marked by means of auxiliary verbs, such as *will*, *shall* and *be going to*, as in examples (66), (67) and (68), respectively. The auxiliary *will* tends to be used with subjects of all three persons, as Quirk (1985: 213) says, whereas the auxiliary *shall* is only used with first person singular subject, as in example (67). In addition, these auxiliary verbs are not only used to refer to the future time, but at the same time they express modality, such as volition in the case of *will* and intention in the case of *going to*, as in example (68).

(66) *He **will** sign a controversial association agreement with the EU on 27 June, as fighting rages in the east.* <goo.gl/opGPg1>

(67) *I **shall** not hate.* <goo.gl/8sSpLQ>

(68) *I'm never **going to** leave it behind.* <goo.gl/weS7CH>

4.3. ASPECT

Aspect is a verbal category which denotes perfect and non-perfect; and progressive (or continuous) and non-progressive (or simple), as mentioned above. Therefore, *aspect* can be classified into simple, progressive and perfect. The **simple aspect** refers to verbs which have not been marked for aspect, such as the present simple, as in example (69) and past simple, as in example (70). The **perfect aspect** denotes completed actions. It is marked by the auxiliary verb *have/has* + past participle, as in example (71). The **progressive aspect** designates an action in progress, so the action is incomplete. It is marked by the auxiliary verb *be* + *-ing* participle, as in example (72) (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 189).

(69) *Your smile **lights up** the world.* <gl/27hxlC>

(70) *Mr. Green **called** his show a “silent protest,” and though he **declined** to specify against what, the quiet purity of his collection **seemed** to stand against crass consumption.*
<goo.gl/J5qu2m>

(71) *In the past five years, the king of Morocco **has poured** resources into modernizing the city.* <goo.gl/7v8w8W>

(72) *The people of Tangier **are bustling** more than ever.* <goo.gl/7v8w8W>

4.3.1. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PRESENT PERFECT AND PAST SIMPLE TENSES

The *present perfect* and *past simple* are two terms referring to things that have some similarities and differences. That is why their use can be problematic for non-native English speakers.

In line with Fischer and van der Wurff (2006: 139), the **present perfect** and the **preterite**, are periphrastic and synthetic forms, as in examples (71) and (70), respectively. Both tenses can denote past time in PDE. The difference between them is that the **present perfect** refers to a situation which goes on until the present time, as in example (73), where Paulo still lives in hospital, whereas the **past simple** describes an event which started and finished in the past, so that it does no longer exist, as in example (74), in which Paulo does not live in hospital because he is probably dead.

(73) *Paulo Henrique Machado **has lived** almost his entire life in hospital.* <goo.gl/viwNZg>

(74) *Paulo Henrique Machado **lived** almost his entire life in hospital.*

As Huddleston (2002: 139) explains, both tenses are used to make reference to events or states in the past or during a past period of time, that is to say, there exists a temporal relation

of anteriority, as in example (75), just as the Figure 2 illustrates. The following examples refer to events in the present perfect and in the past simple.

- (75) *Greece has already been in recession for four years, and its economy is projected to **have shrunk** by a fifth between 2008 and the end of this year.* <goo.gl/j7ObEV>

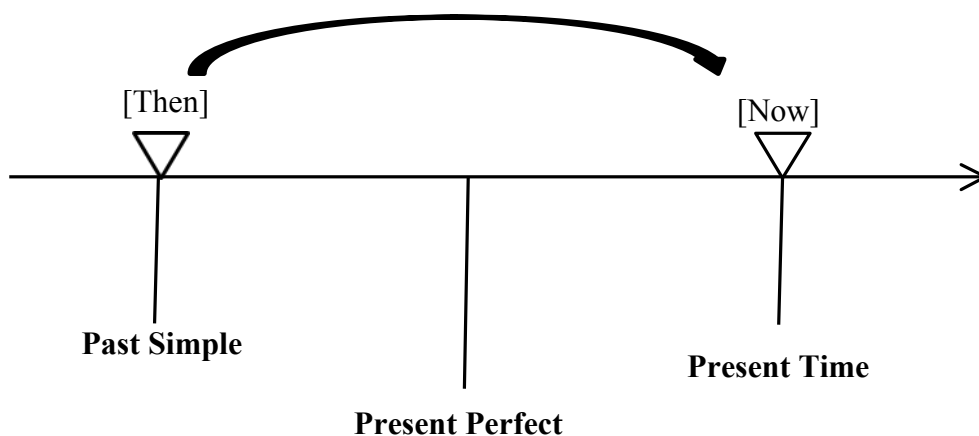


Figure 2. Differences of anteriority between the past simple and present perfect.

As mentioned above, the *perfect* connects the present time with the past. Thus, the perfect can be considered as a *retrospective present* or an *inclusive present* depending on the connection with the present time. **Retrospective present** refers to the present state, which would be the result of a past action, as in example (76), whereas **inclusive present** is something which started in past and continues in the present time, as in example (77) (Jespersen 1970: 47).

- (76) *More than three weeks **have elapsed** since news of the abduction first emerged.* <goo.gl/8aym59>

- (77) *At the present time, since its arrival [the illness] in New York in 1999, 38 states **have experienced** cases.* <goo.gl/Wg9Ols>

Therefore, the *present perfect* can be considered as an **inclusive time**, since it includes the present moment, as in example (78), where the speaker is still married. However, the preterite cannot be described as an inclusive time because the action started in the past and it finished in the past time, as in example (79), where the speaker is not married right now.

- (78) *I **have been married** for 29 years* <goo.gl/tCtHiU>.

- (79) *I **was married** for 29 years.*

This semantic difference between the two tenses can be reinforced by the use of adverbials too. The *preterite* tends to collocate with adverbials which indicate a specific period in the past, such as *yesterday, since, for, during, a month ago, the other day, then, in 2004, last*

week, this morning, etc., as in examples (80) and (81). The *perfect*, in turn, tends to be used with adverbials which refers to a period of time which lasts until the present time, such as *already, yet, just, today, this year, lately, recently*, etc., as in examples (82) and (83). There are also several subjuncts which can be used with both tenses since they are so close to each other, such as *before, always, never* and *ever*, as in examples (84) and (85). In example (85), the action includes the present time, whereas in example (84) the action started and finished in the past time.

These meanings of these subjuncts may vary depending on the tense which they have been used with (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 194-195).

- (80) ***This morning** I signed an executive order.* <goo.gl/RpkTio>
- (81) *They [skeletons] were discovered **in 2004** during an excavation of a site in the centre of Norwich.* <goo.gl/GTH1u>
- (82) *I've **already** won in a way.* <goo.gl/ccPLMG>
- (83) *The most Earth-like planet **yet** has been discovered, scientists report in the journal Science.* <goo.gl/mRMJTS>
- (84) *Christie's senior specialist in manuscripts Thomas Venning said **before** the BBC performance: "This is a very exciting rediscovery."* <goo.gl/5vTDCQ>
- (85) *I had never tried to diet **before**.* <goo.gl/LScZZQ>

4.3.2. PRESENT PERFECT

As was mentioned above, the *present perfect* aspect refers to an action that started in the past and has continued until the present moment. Thus, the *present perfect* refers to a past action with consequences in the present time, as in example (86), where the action lasts through a period of time, since the verb is dynamic, namely it suggests duration.

- (86) *People **have swum** from Cuba to the US, across the Bering Strait.* <goo.gl/HhTNmz>

Therefore, the *present perfect* conveys states, as in example (87), indefinite events, as in example (89) and habits leading up to the present, as in example (91), as represented in Figure 3 (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 192). Considering an event in the past, the *present perfect* in British English (BrE henceforth) may have different connotations, such as relevant periods reaching up to the present, recent events and the result of actions. Moreover, the *present perfect* can be used in different registers, such as news, as in example (95), academic prose, as in example (96) and conversation, as in example (97). This is presented and illustrated below.

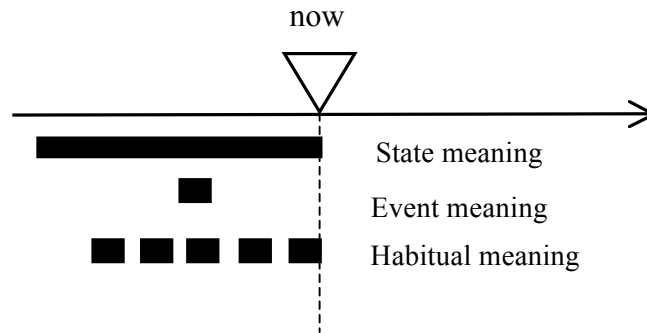


Figure 3. Meanings of the present perfective (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 192).

- ***State leading up to the present*** refers to a state which started in the past and continues into the present, as in example (87), where the action is not over yet. In this case, the *present perfect simple*, as in example (87) and the *present perfect progressive*, as in example (88) have similar meanings since both indicate an action which lasts until the present moment. The difference between them is that the *present perfect simple* tends to focus on the result of the state of affairs, namely, that these people have lived there a long period (20 years), whereas the *present perfect progressive* focus on the action itself, so that it does not emphasize if the action has finished or not.

(87) 120,000 people from Burma's Karen minority **have lived** in refugee camps for more than 20 years. <goo.gl/AtlQLv>

(88) 120,000 people from Burma's Karen minority **have been living** in refugee camps for more than 20 years.

- ***Indefinite event in a period leading up to the present*** corresponds to a past event taking place in an indefinite period, that is, it does not indicate the exact limits of time, but may include one's whole life, including the present moment, as in example (89). Unlike the *present perfect*, the *past simple* implies a definite period, that is, a fixed period of time, as in example (90), which may refer to last year, for instance.

(89) **Have you ever crossed** a river in a plastic bag? <goo.gl/WCCkzn>

(90) **Did you cross** a river in a plastic bag?

- ***Habits in a period leading up to the present*** denote actions which somebody did frequently over a period of time including the present time, as in example (91), where Durant started to participate in philanthropic causes during his career and still participates in these causes nowadays.

(91) *Throughout his career, Durant **has participated** in philanthropic causes.* <goo.gl/qjcg>

Therefore, the three different meanings of the *present perfect* mentioned above are very similar, but they differ in the type of verbs, since in example (87) the verb is a state, whereas in examples (89) and (91) the verbs refer to actions. Besides, the example (91) differs from (89) since in (91) the verb refers to a specific period of time, whereas in (89) the verb refers to an indefinite period of time.

Especially in BrE, there are some variants of the indefinite past meaning, as Quirk *et al.* (1985: 192) say.

- **Relevant period reaching up to the present**, as in example (89). It implies that, if this person has never crossed a river in a plastic bag, he/she has still the possibility to do it.
- A **recent event**, that is, an action connected with the present time, as in example (92). Thus, the use of the adverb *just* is common in *present perfect* since it means “very recently.” According to Leech (1971: 33), the recent past tends to be expressed by the *Past Simple Tense* more frequently than with the *Present Perfect* in AmE, even though it would be unnatural for British speakers.

(92) *A US student, Jordan Junge, who **has just finished** a £17,000 masters degree at the London School of Economics, says she has been waiting for almost five months for her visa to be processed and her documents returned.* <goo.gl/DMP5FA>

- **The result of an action**, that is to say, the consequences of the action are present now, as in example (86), where the result of the action is that many people have achieved their goal of swimming from Cuba to the US.

Furthermore, we have to consider two verbs *be* and *go*. They have a particular usage in *present perfect tense*. These two perfective constructions, *have/has been* and *have/has gone*, differ as regards the result of the action. Example (93) suggests that Peter has been in Greece at least once in his lifetime, that is, he has gone and he has returned; and in example (94), the implication that he is still in England.

(93) *The Queen **has been** to Greece.* < goo.gl/Y22Jsj>

(94) *The Queen **has gone** to Greece.*

So far, we have dealt with the different meanings of the *present perfect* depending on the context, that is, states, indefinite events and habits leading up to the present. Besides, we have developed the different variants of the indefinite past meaning in BrE, that is, a relevant period reaching up to the present, a recent event and the result of an action, as illustrated in

examples (89), (92) and (86), respectively. However, in AmE the *past simple* is used instead of the *present perfect* in order to refer to these variants of the indefinite past meaning.

Furthermore, there are different registers in which the *present perfect* can be used, as is explained below (Biber *et al.* 1999: 465).

- **News.** The event is presented by means of the *present perfect* because it is relevant today. Thus, the reporter presents the event by means of the *present perfect* and uses the past simple to introduce the rest of the news, as in example (95), in which the reporter uses the *present perfect* in order to introduce the news. Then, he/she starts developing all the events that happened in the past time, that is why, he/she uses the past simple.

(95) *The development of conservation zones to protect the seas around the UK **has been** too slow. Last year, the government designated 27 marine conservation zones in the UK, while a further 37 zones could be designated by the end of 2015.* <goo.gl/CfpqI3>

- **Academic prose** tends to use the *present perfect* in order to denote earlier findings, as in example (96), where it introduces the new result of the experiment.

(96) *Subsequent experiments **have shown** that introducing a square or angular plate intensifies the difference, with roundness accentuating sweetness.* <goo.gl/1mHhxx>

- **Conversation.** When people talk, they tend to use the *present perfect* in order to express different meanings, as in example (97), where the speaker uses the present perfect to ask about an indefinite event in a period leading up to the present.

(97) A: **Have** you ever **had** a conflict with a superior or colleague?

B: *I think that everyone at some point **has had** a conflict at work whether it's with a supervisor or co-worker.* <goo.gl/3er6LX>

4.3.3. PAST SIMPLE

The *synthetic past tense* is marked inflectionally, as mentioned above. The *past simple* is used to refer to actions in the past, namely, those that started and finished in the past. Thus, there is a gap between the moment the action finished and the present moment (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 183). According to Leech (1971: 9), the speaker has to consider the definite time in which the event happened by means of the use of an adverbial expression, as in example (98). For this reason, the use of *present perfect* with this kind of adverbials would produce an ungrammatical sentence, as in example (99).

(98) *Pablo Picasso died **in 1973***. <goo.gl/a11B>

(99) **Picasso **has died** in 1973*.

The *past simple* can also be used for other purposes, such as attitudinal past, hypothetical past, deictic shift and reported backshifted. Besides, it can be employed in different registers, just as the present perfect, e.g., fictional narrative and description.

Just as *present simple tense* does not only refer to present time, the *past tense* too can denote different meanings in addition to past time (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 187).

- **Attitudinal past** is used to express the speaker's state, feelings or attitude instead of past time, as in example (100), where the speaker uses the *past simple* in order to express what she wanted to say in a polite way.

(100) *I **wanted** to speak up for my rights*. <goo.gl/1VUqNm>

- **Hypothetical past** tends to appear in certain grammatical structure, such as *if*-clauses and in *if only/I wish* clauses, as in examples (101) and (102), respectively. They indicate the non-occurrence of the action in the present, as in example (102) and future times, as in example (101).

(101) *If you **did not receive** the confirmation e-mail or deleted it before replying, then please send an e-mail with a brief description of the problem*. <goo.gl/rVOvwq>

(102) *She **wishes** doctors listened to her warnings about her daughter*. <goo.gl/lsvluz>

- **Deictic shift** refers to an action which occurs after another past action, that is, “future in the past”, as in example (103), where the action “to look” happened after the action “to enter.”

(103) *When his servant entered, he **looked** at him steadfastly* (Wilde 1891: 19).

- **Reported speech or backshift** is one of the major uses of the past simple. It is used when someone wants to report what somebody has said previously. For instance, an utterance in the present tense will be reported in the past tense. In that change, not only will the verb change, but also adverbials of time and place, modals, pronouns, etc. As Huddleston (2008: 153) claimed, backshift can occur when certain conditions are fulfilled, for example, when the verb of the main clause is in the present tense, as in example (104). Thus, a backshifted preterite may be connected with the present tense.

(104) *“It’s hard to face such strong public criticism and to find ourselves leading our own news bulletins,” she said* (original utterance) → *She said it **was** hard to face such strong public criticism and to find ourselves leading our own news bulletins.* <goo.gl/uz1lGW>

So far, the original utterances were in the present time, even though they can also appear in the past tense. Therefore, when the original utterance is in the past tense, the backshift triggers a change into the past perfect, as in example (105). However, if the original clause is complex, there are several possibilities:

- The two verbs, the main verb and the subordinate one, change (backshifted + backshifted), as in example (106).
- The main verb change and the subordinate one not (backshifted + non-backshifted), as in example (107).
- The subordinate verb change but the main verb not (non-backshifted + backshifted), as in example (108).

(105) *She said “Many of you **told** me yesterday how grateful you are to him.”* (original utterance) → *She said that many of them **had told** her that day how grateful they were to him”* (backshifted). <goo.gl/uz1lGW>

(106) *Al Watts said “Mr. Mom **was** a way to describe a man who **was taking care** of children.”* (original utterance) → *Al Watts said that Mr. Mom **had been** a way to describe a man who **had been taking care** of children”* (backshifted + backshifted). <goo.gl/pnCSb8>

(107) *Al Watts said that Mr. Mom **had been** a way to describe a man who **was taking care** of children”* (backshifted + non-backshifted).

(108) *Al Watts said “Mr. Mom **was** a way to describe a man who **had been taking care** of children”* (non-backshifted + backshifted).

Moreover, the *past tense* can be used in different registers, such as in fictional narrative and description, as in example (109), which is an extract from the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

(109) *Lord Henry **looked** at him. Yes, he **was** certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There **was** something in his face that **made** one trust him at once. All the candour of youth **was** there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One **felt** that he **had kept** himself unspotted from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward **worshipped** him* (Wilde 1891: 19).

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, there have been many changes in the verb phrase over the time. In OE, there were only tenses, *present* and *past*, just as in ME. In OE, the *synthetic preterite tense* expressed actions completed in the past time, actions that continued for a period of time, perfect aspect and past perfect, just as in ME. However, the perfect and continuous tenses were not established until eModE. The perfect structure was *be* + past participle in eModE with verbs of motion, but it changed at the end of ModE when the auxiliary *be* was replaced by *have*, while the progressive structure was *be* + present participle. There was no *synthetic future tense* in OE, ME and eModE, but some future markers underwent a process of grammaticalization and eventually came to express future time, such as *sculan*, *willan*, *be about to* and *be going to*. However, the grammaticalization process has not been completely reached in PDE since the PDE periphrastic future do not express just future time, but modal and lexical meanings, too.

The *preterite* and the *present perfect* are two tenses which refer to past time in PDE. The *past simple tense* (preterite) denotes an action which started and finished in a finished period of time, whereas the *present perfect* is used for an action which goes into the present moment, so that it can be considered as an inclusive time. They are synthetic and periphrastic forms, respectively.

Therefore, these two tenses express different meanings. On the one hand, the *present perfect* conveys states, indefinite events, and habits leading up to the present. Particularly in BrE, there were some variants of the indefinite past meaning, such as relevant periods reaching up to the present, recent events and the result of actions. On the other hand, the *past simple* can be used for other purposes, such as attitudinal past, hypothetical past, deictic shift and reported backshifted. Furthermore, these two tenses are employed in different registers, since they are used for different purposes, as mentioned above. The *preterite* can be used in fictional narrative and description, whereas the *present perfect* can be used in news, academic prose and conversation, among others.

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