

# The emergence of the Narrative Present Perfect in British English: reality or illusion?\*

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There has been so much work in the literature on the tense/aspect system of contemporary English, and particularly on the vexed matter of the *Present Perfect*, henceforth PP, that it has become something of a commonplace to devote part of the introduction of articles on the subject to commenting on just what a huge body of literature it has generated, and as is already apparent, this article has no intention of bucking the trend. Bauer (1970), Engel and Ritz (2000) and Miller (2000) are just three examples of introductions of this kind. Most recent accounts of the semantics/pragmatics of the PP agree in breaking down the meanings or uses of the PP into four separate temporo-aspectual categories which, while at times given different names by different scholars, can be summarised and exemplified as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- *resultative (perfect of result / stative)*

I cannot come on holiday because I have broken my leg

- *continuative (present of persistent situation / universal)*

He has been here since Monday

- *existential (perfect of experience / experiential)*

I have never broken my leg

- *hot news (perfect of recent past)*

Ben Ali has fled the country

This article tentatively proposes to add a fifth category to this list, namely the *narrative perfect* (henceforth narrPP), to be defined below. It should be noted that the term is by no means entirely novel: Lowrey (2009: 231) also talks about a *narrative perfect*, though in a somewhat more general sense than meant here, including the use of the perfect in conjunction with definite past time adverbials,

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\* My thanks go to Marc Fryd for his eagle eyes, which spotted a number of incongruities in the draft versions of this paper. Any that remain are, of course, my own downfall.

<sup>1</sup> The multiplicity of terms for these various uses is an interesting phenomenon in itself, one that would almost justify a historiography of the literature on the Present Perfect. Just to take the first category as an illustration, the term *resultative* perfect seems to go back to Kruisinga (1931: 390), and is used by Michaelis (1994: 113) and McCafferty (2006: 131), whereas Comrie (1976: 56) and Ritz (2010: 3401) prefer the *perfect of result* and McCawley (1993: 445) the *stative* perfect.

more of which below. While, as we shall see, the phenomenon has been noted by others and given a variety of names (*aoristic perfect* Fryd 1998, *footballer's perfect* Walker 2008, *non-standard perfect* Ritz 2010), to my knowledge it has not yet been proposed to recognise it as deserving of a place alongside the other categories mentioned above.

We shall start by defining and illustrating narrPP before moving on to sketch out the reasons why it should arguably be recognised as a fifth temporo-aspectual usage of the English PP and, in the interests of balance, adumbrating some of the weaknesses in the argument which need to be addressed. These reasons will be of two kinds: pragmatic and socio-historic. In so doing, we will touch on long-held assumptions about the grammaticalisation of the auxiliary *have* in the history of English, and on the place that has been accorded to non-standard usages in the analyses of the PP that have preceded what is to be presented here. The word 'sketch' at the start of this paragraph needs emphasis. The claims made here have no pretence other than to raise questions, suggest some possible answers and propose areas for future work.

### 1. *The narrative PP – illustration and initial claims*

There has been a growing sense over the past couple of decades that, to quote Trudgill (1978: 13): “something is happening to the present perfect”. An increasing number of scholars have noted a tendency, still “vague and looked on as a mistake”, if we are to take Gachelin's word (1990: 225), whereby the PP is increasingly used with definite past reference. There would seem to have been, say those scholars who have looked into the matter a little more closely (Fryd 1998, Ritz 2010, for example), a relaxing of the constraints of current relevance on the present perfect, such that it is no longer impossible, for example, to combine definite past time adverbials with the present perfect (a phenomenon henceforth referred to as ptaPP), the kind of constraint that leads, for some speakers, to the unacceptability of *\*I have kissed my wife yesterday*.

The evidence for this is sometimes close to anecdotal. Trudgill, for instance, backs up his above assertion, made in two separate works, with an unsourced example that differs slightly each time (Trudgill 1978: 13; Hughes & Trudgill 1979: 9) to illustrate what they see as:

...the apparently increasing use of the 'present perfect' in conjunction with expressions of definite past time reference. One hears such things as 'and Roberts has played for us last season' (without any kind of break). Most native speakers, it must be admitted, would find this odd. They would claim that the speaker had made a mistake. But sentences like this are heard more and more often.

Another example of this kind of comment *en passant* comes from Milroy (1984: 26) who states that “in SE the perfect construction seems occasionally to be preferred to the simple past, where the latter would be predicted (as in *He's won it last year*)” or Quirk et al (1985: 195) who claim:

One quite often meets (especially in British English) sentences in which the present perfective co-occurs with time adverbials: ‘Have you ever seen *Macbeth* on the stage?’ ‘Yes, I’ve seen it ages ago, when I was a child.’ Examples such as this may be explained as performance errors”.

Others (Fryd 1998, Ritz 2010, already mentioned, Cotte 1987 and Engel and Ritz 2000 are two others) have taken a more in-depth look at this apparent anomaly. The fact that so few authors seem to have examined the phenomenon in much detail would seem to be *prima facie* evidence that this is an emerging phenomenon.

Many of the above authors make an explicit parallel with the prevailing situation in languages such as French or German<sup>2</sup>, where precisely this replacement of a simple past form by a periphrastic perfect seems to be more or less complete. Other languages are brought to bear on the discussion, such as Italian, Italian, Romanian, Dutch, Mandarin and the languages of the Kru and Bantu groups (Bybee et al 1994: 81), but French and German remain the overwhelming favourites. On this view, the propounded increased use of PP in such circumstances is evidence of a wholesale change in the English tense system, bringing it into line with other closely related languages. When on top of this is added the considerable work on the grammaticalisation of the *have*-perfect (Hopper and Traugott: 1994, Brinton: 1994, Carey: 1994) and much more general notions of language drift à la Sapir (1921, ch. 7), cyclicity à la Meillet (1912) and Jespersen (1917: ch. 21) or directionality à la Elsness (1997), it is very tempting to conclude that the weight of the evidence is such that the case has been made. And indeed, it may have been, but it nevertheless needs to be put to the test.

However, what I call the narrPP is a slightly different, though almost certainly related phenomenon, which bears immediate illustration. The following extracts are taken from interviews with, first Graeme Souness, manager of the Newcastle United football team, and second, the goalkeeper of the England football team, Paul Robinson, recounting an incident in a match:

1. Well, I thought that apart from the goal we were the better team today, I mean Shay’s made a fantastic save in the first half, but apart from that, had nothing to do, and we’ve had some really great opportunities, Brad(’s?) saved one, Alan’s put one wide, and Lee’s had a great opportunity at the penalty spot where Alan’s laid it in his path.... [about the goal] Morten’s handballed it in, and the ref’s had a good look at it, and he’s looked at his linesman, and I’ve looked at both of them, so between them, they’ll be disappointed when they see it on TV.
2. I got myself into a reasonable position when the ball was to be crossed, but I was unlucky on two counts: firstly, the ball ended up going in towards the top left-hand corner from out on the touchline and, secondly, when I have palmed it out it’s gone straight to their player and he’s stuck it in. I’ve only managed to get it out straight to him.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bybee et al (1994: 81) add Italian, Romanian, Dutch, Mandarin and the languages of the Kru and Bantu groups to the list.

<sup>3</sup> Respectively: <http://tinyurl.com/cx6ocse>; <http://tinyurl.com/d7wxwby>.

What is of note here is precisely the absence of past time adverbials in conjunction with the *have* auxiliary in each extract. That we are dealing with the narration of past events is recoverable only by context, in this case clearly established by the use of the simple past in the first part of the sentence. I shall therefore define narrPP as the use of the present perfect form of the verb to recount past events, without supporting past time adverbials, in contexts where most accounts of Standard English would predict a simple past form. It must be owned that for present purposes, I am relying on a rather intuitive definition of narration, one that requires further refinement, particularly in terms of event semantics and sequencing, but that is an endeavour that would take us away from the central thesis. In this context, *narration* and *narrative* are to be taken to refer to the relatively orderly recital of a series of discrete events which constitute the particulars of some more overarching occurrence.

The reason that for the moment I explicitly omit those cases, referred to above, of ptaPP is because it is not entirely clear whether the two phenomena are linked. One pathway to the emergence of narrPP, if indeed it has emerged recently, which is precisely what this article seeks to investigate, might be as follows:

#### Stage 1

The present perfect requires ‘current relevance’ and is therefore incompatible with definite past time reference. The term *present relevance* or *current relevance*<sup>4</sup> as a catch-all explanation for the use of PP goes back at least to Twaddell (1960: 6), but was perhaps given its greatest prominence by Comrie (1976: 52 *et passim*). In general terms, the idea states that the PP shows a “concern for NOW” (Declerck et al. 2006: 301), which concern can receive a number of interpretations (result of past action, continuation of past situation, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

#### Stage 2

The PP develops a ‘hot news’ (HN) reading. This term was forged by McCawley (1971) to refer to uses of PP for events, and more precisely aspectually bounded, telic events, which are temporally proximate but nevertheless occurred in past time, such as *William has proposed to Kate*. This HN development is made possible by a more general loosening of the current relevance constraints associated with PP, which ultimately authorises the use of definite past time adverbials with PP. The fact that this development of an HN perfect from other perfect functions is attested in other languages lends weight to this scenario, as Schwenter (1994: 995) makes clear: “Diachronically, hot news uses arise later than other perfect functions, as the perfect construction gradually loses its connection to the present. This shift of focus from the present to the past makes hot news perfects more like perfectives than other perfect functions.”

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that these two terms are synonymous is nicely demonstrated by the fact that Bauer (1970: 190) misquotes Twaddell as having written of *current relevance*, when the term he used was in fact *present relevance*.

<sup>5</sup> McCoard (1978 : ch.2) offers an excellent account of current relevance, as do Declerck *et al* (2006, 301 *et seq*).

### Stage 3

Current relevance ceases to be necessary at all and definite past time adverbials are therefore no longer essential either. By this stage, the PP has developed a narrPP function, as illustrated in the above examples, and is commutable with an SP. This is somewhat more speculative, but we might posit a move from Stage 2 to Stage 3 as occurring in the following way. A narrator recounting past events works, so to speak, with two sets of parameters, the *hic et nunc* of the speaker/hearer dyad and the *ibi et tunc* of the actual string of events. What occasionally happens during an act of narration is that the distance between Now and Then becomes blurred, with the events occurring before the eyes of the speaker and listener. Most often, the result of this is the use of a present tense form for narrational purposes. It might be argued that the loosening of current relevance constraints in Stage 2 gave the PP form the opportunity to take up the narrational baton, alongside the present, and, of course, the SP. Thus, runs the scenario, the narrPP occurs initially in narrative focussing contexts, before, potentially, becoming available for other contexts.

The thinking behind the work presented here, however, is that it is important to entertain a hypothesis, which I shall call the ‘relative stasis hypothesis’, to be opposed to the seemingly self-evident grammaticalisation scenario, or ‘aoristic drift hypothesis’, which we have just discussed, and which I reword briefly as follows:

*aoristic drift hypothesis*: the English *have*-perfect is losing its ‘present’ feature, like French and German before it, by a loosening of the current relevance constraint. It is therefore coming to be used where a simple preterit *is/was* more common.

*present stasis hypothesis*: the distinction between the *have*-perfect and preterit has never been as clear as normative grammatical tradition would have it, and has never been entirely resolved in the history of the language. What we see is not an emergence of a new phenomenon, but the increased visibility of an old one.

Only by rigorously examining the present stasis hypothesis can we safely claim that a change is under way in English. This hypothesis will require work in a number of areas such as pragmatics, syntax, diachrony and sociolinguistics before it can be rejected, or indeed upheld. This latter possibility might initially seem unlikely, so used are we to envisaging language change and so powerful are the tools developed in the field of grammaticalisation, but it is essential to keep an open mind. To anticipate a fuller discussion later, it is a well known fact that American English would seem to be undergoing, if anything, a contrary drift, with SP in contexts where in many other forms of English the PP is predominant. It is also well known that Irish English shows similar phenomena. Any statements to the effect that ‘English is undergoing change X’ need, it seems to me, to be treated with considerably more caution than is all too often the case.

One final word, before addressing the pragmatics and the geographical scope of the issue, concerning the corpus on which the study is based. In previous work (Walker: 1998 and 2011), I have pointed to the apparent prevalence of narrPP in the speech of footballers, be they players, managers or commentators, as a consequence of which many of the examples in what follows will be drawn from a corpus of 170 interviews with footballers and managers, recorded on local BBC radio stations for the most part, such as the following two examples further illustrate.

3. Adam switched off, there's no doubt about that, he's reacted late, he's got wrong side, he's obviously made contact, but that contact was outside the box, and the game changed on that incident.

Mark Robins (manager, Barnsley)

4. It was 1–1 at halftime and then about 15-minutes after the restart we got a second goal. Gary Price has seen Dan Tolley move away from his marker and has played a long ball to him, Dan's then taken a couple of touches and has poked the ball in to make it 2–0. I then made a change and brought the rest of the youngsters on and they've slotted in well. Then a great bit of thinking by Endaf Jones after he's seen the keeper dwell on the ball, he's nicked the ball off him and put it away to make it 3–1. All in all very pleased with the performance as it was a good team performance, and we came out with a lot of plus points.<sup>6</sup>

Nigel Vaughan (manager Shrewsbury Town)

It might be objected by some that such a genre-specific study invalidates, or at best weakens considerably, some of the points made here, inasmuch as they cannot be extrapolated to the language as a whole. In response, I would wish first to claim that focusing on such small groups, or communities of practice, has become something of a commonplace in sociolinguistic research over the last decade, enabling the examination of micro-phenomena sometimes hidden from view by attempts at all-inclusivity, and secondly that the most important paper on the pragmatics of narrPP is equally mono-genre (Ritz: 2010 on Australian police reports), and is probably all the stronger for precisely that reason. Finally, narrPP may be particularly strong in football, but it occurs in other narrative contexts, as in the following extract from the *Fast Show*, a BBC sketch programme.

5. So he's bought himself one of those dirty great roadcruisers, you know the sort I mean, six wheels on it, radar, roof racks, all that. He('s) stocked up with food, and he's bought himself a lovely little fridge, and he('s) stocked it up with beer, and off he's gone. One day into the desert, and what's happened? The fridge has broken down, innit?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/clr5hex> and <http://tinyurl.com/cpw74pn> respectively

<sup>7</sup> The full sketch can be viewed here, with narrPP practically systematic throughout: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obNwuswuIsg> (Accessed 7/7/2011).

It may also be worthy of note, and of further study, that narrPP regularly shows up in folk songs, such as the traditional *Cold, Haily, Windy Night* recorded by Steeleye Span containing the following passage:

oh she rose up and she's let him in  
she's kissed her true love cheek and chin.  
and she's drawn him between the sheets again  
and she's opened and let him in – oh.  
then she has blessed the rainy night  
cold, haily, windy night – oh  
then she has blessed the rainy night  
that she opened and she let him in – oh<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The pragmatics of narrPP

As just mentioned, Ritz (2010) is probably the most important article to date in this regard, in its detailed analysis of texts to attempt to establish whether what she calls the *nonstandard present perfect* (equivalent to narrPP as defined above) that she documents can be explained in terms of pragmatic inference, scene-setting etc. The idea behind this is, essentially, to test whether narrPP is a development of the well-known *hot news perfect*. In many newspaper reports, for example, it can be shown that the present perfect serves an attention-grabbing function, in the headline in many cases, whereas the same information might be developed more fully in the body of the article using a simple past form. Ritz shows that the situation is considerably more complex in her corpus, where narrPP seems to play an attention-grabbing role, but is not incompatible with narrative elaboration and foregrounding, and furthermore seems also to have a mirative function, highlighting unexpected events.

The same is true of the football corpus. Each of the 170 interviews in the corpus contains a passage which could be described as narrating the events of a recent football match, and in 92 of those cases, i.e. 54%, there is at least one instance of the narrPP. In 72 (78%) of these cases, the first verb of the narrative sequence is in the simple past (SP) and the narrPP follows, which is in contradiction to the commonly studied scene-setting use of the hot news perfect in newspaper reports.

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<sup>8</sup> These lyrics taken from <http://tinyurl.com/c6uppxu>. Interestingly, there are other versions of the same song in which the preterit dominates:

Oh then she rose and let him in  
And kissed his ruby lips and chin  
And then they went to bed again  
And soon he gained her favor  
Then she blessed the rainy night  
She rose and let him in O  
Now since you had your will of me  
Soldier will you marry me?

<http://www.burpler.com/unknown-cold-haily-rainy-night-lyrics.html>

This could well be attributed to some kind of personal or emotional involvement in the narration of the events being described. As the narrator begins, he (for it invariably is 'he' in this corpus) uses the SP as would be expected, but as the narration develops, the action in some sense comes alive for him once again, he relives the scene, and the narrPP enters the fray. Example (2) above would lend itself well to this kind of analysis, as would the following.

6. I don't think it was a red card. Mark may have caught their player but he was right next to me and it didn't look a booking. It was on the halfway line and we had players chasing back but the referee has made a decision and there's nothing we can do about it.

Derek Young, manager Aberdeen, Scottish Daily Record, 30 Nov. 2009

This cannot of course be discounted, and much more detailed work needs to be done to see whether there is a general regularity to this tense shifting. If such regularity were to be demonstrated, then, this might be because the narrPP is a kind of development of the historic present, enabling narrators to give freshness and vitality to the scene, and as such, would probably stand in favour of Stage 3 of the aoristic drift hypothesis. However, a contrary analysis seems possible in many cases, one that would lend support to the stasis hypothesis. In some examples, as we have seen, we seem to be dealing with an ordered progression, over the narrative event, from one form to the next, namely from SP to narrPP, but in many others, we are faced with a much more (apparently) unordered switching, placing narrPP and SP in a relationship somewhat akin to free variation. While many might balk at the use of the term *free variation* for these two verb forms, there is a history of the use of the term, as other scholars have also taken this path. Bauer (1970: 194), for example, speaks of the present perfect simple and the present perfect progressive at times being in free variation, with examples such as 'I have been living here for two years now' as opposed to 'I have lived here for two years now' and Dušková (1976: 59, quoted in Engel and Ritz 2010: 127) suggests that "PP and SP can be considered as free variants, the preterite being more characteristic of American English", although her article, it must be owned, is restricted to discussion of resultatives.

If this were true, it might well support the stasis hypothesis mentioned above. This is because a number of scholars have pointed out that commutation between SP and PP forms is commonly attested in the Middle English period. Fischer (1992: 257) for instance, notes that "The perfect is not fully grammaticalised in Middle English: it freely alternates in almost all its functions with the preterit...Just like the non-past, the perfect is found in narrative past time contexts offered in conjunction with the preterit", whereas Denison (1993: 352) observes that "In [the examples he quotes], a present perfect appears to be commuting with a simple past. The evidence is provided by parallelism with a simple past or by occurrence with an adverbial of definite past time".

Looking back at the examples given so far, this notion of what appears to be unmotivated commutation seems to function, and is particularly clear in the following three examples:



7. They've been brilliant, they were absolutely brilliant.  
Paul Lambert (manager Norwich Town)
8. We missed a penalty, we've missed two, you know, good chances  
Dougie Freedman (manager, Crystal Palace)
9. We talk about ringing the box, but the lad's ended up striking a magnificent shot in the top corner, so we're disappointed we haven't ringed the box better, the two boxes, for and against, so we're disappointed we didn't ring the box better.<sup>9</sup>  
Steve Cotterill (manager Portsmouth Town)

If it can be demonstrated that the SP and the PP are indeed in a relationship of free variation, then one conclusion might be that there has not been such a degree of grammaticalisation of the *have*-perfect as is sometimes claimed, and the stasis theory might be upheld.

This clearly needs to be tested in the crucible of historical data, using the various methodologies that have become so fruitful in recent years in the field of historical sociolinguistics, and particularly by focusing on the Early Modern English period, for which we currently lack sufficient studies on potential developments in the aspectual system. However, there are other ways of approaching the issue. As Harris and Campbell (1995: 12) state, "a fruitful and often overlooked source of reliable data in diachronic syntax is found in dialectal differences". There are certain indications in the recent literature on the present perfect which suggest that such a dialectal approach might prove rewarding here and which cause problems for the grammaticalisation hypothesis, not least of which is the contention expressed by Hundt and Smith (2009) that there has been in fact a decrease in the use of the PP in both US and GB Englishes in recent years, a finding which contradicts what Elsness (2009) describes, namely an increasing divergence between US and GB Englishes. The point here is that the changes, if changes there are, are not operating in the same way, or in the same direction, as the hypotheses on the grammaticalisation of the *have*-auxiliary might have it. Similarly, while a small corpus of football interviews does not, manifestly, lend itself to diachronic analysis, it does enable preliminary, and potentially enlightening reflections on the dialectal spread of the narrPP within the British Isles.

After all, dialectal difference is something of an elephant in the room which grammaticalisation needs to grapple with on a more sustained basis, if that is a metaphor which is not too hard to sustain. This is something that is pointed out by Lowrey (2009), precisely with regard to the grammaticalisation of the *have*-perfect, but his conclusion, to the effect that American usage of the *have*-perfect demonstrates that such grammaticalisation has peaked, seems first of all to be in internal contradiction with the main thrust of the article and secondly is not backed up by the evidence proposed here. Grammaticalisation theory in general intersects well with diachronic work, as by definition it has to, but that variationist/dialectal work seems strangely absent, or if that is too strong, perhaps not given its full due. In

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<sup>9</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/bst77mo>; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/fa\\_cup/9341842.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/fa_cup/9341842.stm);  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/eng\\_div\\_1/9322946.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/eng_div_1/9322946.stm) respectively, all re-accessed 7/7/11

other words, in the main work (Hopper, Traugott, Bybee, etc.), there is much interesting discussion on how such and such a gram in English, say, has moved from being used for purpose X at time Y to purpose Z at time A. But left there, much is missing, because this fails to theorise how such changes may occur at different speeds in different dialects, or may occur in some dialects and not others. The concept of *layering* (Hopper and Traugott: 1994, 126), which allows for older layers of grammaticalisation not to be discarded, but to coexist for a time with newer layers, and for various forms of pragmatic differences to exist between them, would seem to be appropriate here, were it not for the doubts, below, on the recency of narrPP, and for the fact that it does not account for how some dialects may initiate change in opposite directions.

Here, then, it will be useful to look at what is a staple of the grammaticalisation literature, the perfectivisation of *have*-perfects, and I shall attempt to do so by injecting some variation into it. Therefore, I shall be examining these data with two ends in sight: first to determine whether the stasis hypothesis stands up, and second, as a challenge to grammaticalisation, one that I hope it is equipped to deal with, so powerful and important a theory is it.

### 3. Dialectal Variation

Despite the huge amounts of money with which modern football is awash, it remains a quintessentially working class sport. It is extraordinarily rare to hear an RP accent in an interview with a footballer. In addition to that, football, unlike other major sports such as rugby or cricket, is played professionally in every region of the country, from Plymouth Argyle in the south-west to Ross County in the north of Scotland. This makes it an ideal testing ground both for genre-related work and for coarse-grained dialectal analyses.

The aforementioned corpus of interviews was utilised as follows: those parts of the interviews that were clearly serving a narrative function, most often to relate incidents from the match, were isolated. Almost all of the interviews, lasting between 3 and 5 minutes each, contained other sequences, such as the manager reflecting on forthcoming matches or potential transfer targets – these passages were discarded for present purposes. The number of SP and PP forms were counted, and the results collated as follows:

nb. using no narrative PP	78	46,00%
nb. using some narrPP	92	54,00%
nb. using exclusively PP	0	0,00%

The following maps show the locations of the first 40 in each of the above. The number was chosen for purely practical reasons, as it was found that beyond that figure, the number of plotted dots made the map close to uninterpretable.

The dots plotted correspond to the birthplace of the managers and players in the corpus. There are, of course, major methodological risks inherent in proceeding this way. It may well be that an individual is born in a locality far removed from that

where he grew up. For example, David O’Leary, the former manager of Aston Villa, was originally in the corpus. He has a pronounced Dublin accent and was for many years a mainstay of the Republic of Ireland’s team, and yet was born in Stoke Newington, in north London, and would have located there for this study, had I not been aware of his background. As far as possible, such cases were eliminated from the corpus, but doubts must remain. Furthermore, football players and managers very often travel quite extensively in the course of their careers and work with people from a very wide variety of backgrounds. Place of birth, then, can only be taken as a ‘rough and ready’ guide to their dialect, and would be entirely inappropriate were we dealing here with matters of pronunciation, for instance. Inasmuch as the purpose here, though, is illustrative rather than conclusive, and in light of the robustness of the results, to be discussed below, I believe that it is an adequate technique for present purposes.



Some narrative PP used



No narrative PP used

It is abundantly clear that there is no real geographical grouping, and that the spread of the form is in pan-British. The narrPP is used by speakers from Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and across England from north to south. The only areas which appear not to manifest narrPP are the South-West and East Anglia, but this is due to a sampling effect introduced by the random choice of examples. The same kind of patterning holds true of those speakers from the corpus who manifested no use of the narrPP.

What does all this tell us? On the face of it, there might be two explanations for these results:

- (a) The narrative perfect has somehow emerged as a component of the footballing register

This may, on the face of it, seem to be a rather implausible explanation, partly I suspect because we are so used to seeing register as regard register as “almost exclusively a matter of lexis” (Trudgill 1999: 121), and partly because, even if we accept to open up our conception of register to include other linguistic categories, the tense-aspect system of a language is something that we might feel is so fundamental it should be resistant to the vagaries of register. However, there is intriguing evidence that other sporting registers manifest uses of tense and/or aspectual forms that are specific, such as the fact that Australian horse-racing commentators regularly use a

simple past, as in *Red Ruby passed the two-furlong pole*, at the moment that the action is occurring, something that is not found among British commentators, hinting that the idea might be amenable to further analysis.<sup>10</sup>

However, if it is indeed the case that narrPP is restricted to the language of football, this then has no bearing on the conflicting hypotheses that we are seeking to address. We need therefore to examine another possible explanation, one that does have something to say about our conflicting hypotheses and about the English language more generally.

(b) The narrative perfect has not recently emerged at all.

What the geographical spread, the pan-Britishness of the narrPP, may in fact be telling us ties in with the diachronic remarks made earlier. That is, rather than seeing the very recent emergence of a new use of the PP, what we are actually witnessing is a much older state of affairs which is only now coming to light. This is strongly suggested by the fact that it is found in non-standard Englishes across the country, with no discernible geographic pattern, which is consistent with the hypothesis that the functional distribution between the SP and the PP has never been entirely resolved in the history of non-standard English. It may be that in Standard English, due to prescriptivist pressure, the distinction has been artificially maintained, or imposed, to a degree not true of other varieties. That this is only coming to light now, runs the hypothesis, is due to a vastly greater access of working class Englishes to public consumption, so to speak, notably through the medium of football. This initial finding deserves further analysis from other non-standard sources, of course, but it is highly suggestive of the stasis hypothesis, as is the evidence from folk songs mentioned earlier.

Further indications that we are not dealing with another step on the grammaticalisation cline, but with an illustration of uncertainty as to the direction of grammaticalisation, comes from observing the dialectal situation beyond the United Kingdom. It has already been mentioned that a similar use of narrPP is common in Australian English, at least in some registers, which counters the “emerged in football” hypothesis and, given the demographics of early Australian settlement, might be argued to be a continuation of the situation prevalent in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century non-standard British Englishes, rather than as an endogenous development. This is further bolstered by the observation that narrPP is also found in New Zealand English (Bauer 1970).

#### 4. Conclusion

It is important to recognise that this article has in no manner sought to dismiss the hypothesis that emergent narrPP is the fruit of the continued aoriticisation of the *have*-perfect. It has merely sought to test the hypothesis, by throwing up a number of potential challenges. That *have*-perfects tend to drift towards an aoristic use has been amply illustrated by the histories of German, French, Romanian, Dutch and other languages. That this is a widespread tendency is further illustrated by the fact

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<sup>10</sup> My thanks go to horse racing commentator Patrick Ferriday (p.c.) for this example.

that other varieties of English, with other means of forming perfects, have undergone similar processes. For example, the Irish “after perfects” would seem for many speakers to be following, or to have followed, this path, as testified by the following example: “The chairman of the East’s Residents’ Association and the mother of Tommy O’Rourke who has that pub in the village are after both kicking the bucket yesterday.” (McCafferty: 2006, 133) and Salkie gives evidence that the after-perfect has aoriticised in Newfoundland and Ottawa Valley “to relatively distant events” (Salkie: 1990, 214). Nevertheless, the fact remains that, if nothing else, the phenomena noted herein demonstrate that the history of narrPP in British English is perhaps more complex than it may seem at first sight, and is deserving of further study, particularly with regard to the diachrony of the functional distribution of SP and PP.

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