THE PERFECTIVE ASPECT IN ENGLISH AND PORTUGUESE: A CONSTRASTIVE STUDY ON SEMANTIC BASIS

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ABSTRACT: An exam of the occurrences of the PRESENT PERFECT in English was made in such a way as to establish the prevailing semantic features of this verbal form. It was verified up to what an extent the meaning of the PERFECTIVE thus characterized is expressed in the corresponding Portuguese sentences in the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO. It was found that in Portuguese the verbal inflexion itself characterizes in a much smaller degree the PER-FECTIVE ASPECT.

UNITERMS: Present perfect; Perfective; Contrastive analysis; Verbal aspect; "Pretérito perfeito".

1. INTRODUCTION AND PROPOSITION

1.1. It is evident that when studying the PRESENT PERFECT there are some "uses" to be distinguished.

Jespersen presents three main uses: a) for past occurrences which continued up to the present moment; b) for past occurrences having results or consequences on the present moment; c) when the time indicated is not yet completed ('this year' for istance) (5; lst 1933).

Allen points six uses: a) to express the completion of an action

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by NOW; b) to indicate something which happened in a period of time that is not yet over; c) to indicate a point in past till NOW (e.g. with *since)*; d) to express length of time till NOW (e.g. with *for*); e) to emphasize the present interest in a past action (e.g. with *already, just, yet* or *ever)*; f) to indicate indefinite time in the past (1; 1st 1947).

According to Roberts the PRESENT PERFECT a) "serves to link up the past with the present"; b) "indicates that the action has just been completed"; c) indicates that the effects of the action "are still being felt" (11, p. 155).

Corder mentions the following uses: a) "for an action which began in the past and which has continued up to the time of speaking"; b) "for an action which took place in the past, the results of which we can feel or observe in the present" (3;1st 1960; p. 81).

Eckersley and Eckersley state the following four uses: a) "for an action just concluded when the resulting state is still present"; b) for activities completed in the immediate past (*just* is often used); c) "for duration of an action or absence of an action begun in the past and continuing to the present (and possibly to the future)" d) for actions with indefinite time (4; 1st 1960; p. 174-5).

Stone mentions three main uses saying that the PRESENT PERFECT "shows something that: a) 'has happened' at indefinite past time"; b) "began in the past

and 'has continued' up to the present"; c) "has just happened" (12; 1st 1967, p. 7).

Leech points four uses for the PRESENT PERFECT (the first for 'state verbs' and the others for 'event verbs') indicating; a) a state which extends up to the present; b) an indefinite happening in the past; c) a habit in a period leading up the present; d) a resultative past (6; 1st 1971 & 8; 1st, 1969).

Quirk *et alii* link the choice of the PRESENT PERFECT to the expression of: a) a period of time stretching backwards into some earlier time (it is past with "current relevance"); b) indefinite reference (10; 1st 1972, p. 91-2).

Palmer says that it is used: a) to indicate a period of time "that specifically began before and continued up to (possibly overlapping) the present moment" (p.36); b) to account for very recent activity; o) to refer to past experiences (usually with a fall-rise intonation) (9; 1st 1974; p. 77).

In spite of the existence of several uses, as those mentioned above, it is possible to determine the most regular features of the PRESENT PERFECT. In the authors cited we may find reference to a general meaning linked to the PRESENT PERFECT. First of all, the authors in general connect the PRESENT PERFECT with the present time (1,3,4,5,6,8,9,11,12). Some of them point to the indefinite character of the past which is expressed by

the PRESENT PERFECT (1,4,6,8, 10,12) and some of them refer to the idea of "current relevance" as a basic point (9, 10). Linked to these points, some of them add the idea of some element of the sentence (specially the subject argument) being still alive or in action at the moment of speech (5, 9, 12).

1.2. In this work we have tried, starting from a classification on a semantic basis, to determine the most constant features in the occurrences of the PRESENT PERFECT in such a way as to get a common denominator which, in general terms, may characterize this verb form.

On the other hand, considering the fact that the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO has been traditionally accepted as the verb form which in general translates the PRESENT PERFECT, we have tried to verify if the totality of the possible constant feature, which can be obtained by examining the features of the English predications in the PERFECTIVE, bears some correspondence to the examination of the Portuguese predications in the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO. *

Our hypothesis, which we have tried to verify by examining a number of sentences, is that in Portuguese the verb inflection of the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO in itself is able to account for the PERFECTIVE aspect in a much smaller degree. This would be an element to conclude provisionally that, although the English and the Portuguese languages lack special forms for the indication of aspect — contrary to other languages as, for instance, the Greek — and this indication is always subordinated to a time indication, the so-called verb tenses in English bear more aspectual features than the verb tenses in Portuguese.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

Through the examination of different predications in English we have tried to detect the presence of distinctive features necessary to the expression of the PERFECTIVE.

Using a broad sample, we have studied the sentences which exemplified all the types of predications embodied by a general classification which we devised.

As a first approach we have selected the sentences in which the verb inflection itself (i. e. without the specifications that other components may bring, such as adverbials) was able to account for the 'meaning' of the PRESENT PERFECT.

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* We are not saying, however, that the sentences in Portuguese, which we provided, *are* exact *translations* of the English sentences, which would only destroy our hypothesis. Sentence number 5 in Portuguese, for example, is far from being a translation of the corresponding English sentence as will be discussed later on.

Our classification begins with a bipartition of the predicate into + *generic* and — *generic* *. This distinction is useful in the study of the PERFECTIVE governing the meaning of past time expressed by the PRESENT PERFECT.

The subsequent specification classifies the verbs according to the binary taxonomy ± *state*. Among the — *state* verbs we have considered three groups respectively characterized by the three binary taxonomies: ± *action*, ± *process*, ± *action-process*.

We have taken into account the classification into "one-place predication" and "two-place predication" (7, p. 134) which enables us to observe the existence of distinctive features in the different elements (argument(s) and predicate) in the expression of the PERFECTIVE.

3. RESULTS

3.1. In Table 1 there is an illustration of the several occurrences of the PRESENT PERFECT in accordance with the adopted classification of the predication. The features occurring in the argument(s) and in the predicate that are linked to the inflexion of the PRESENT PERFECT have been point out. We have left out the semantic features not distinctive in a study of the PERFECTIVE.

The occurrences of the PERFECTIVE in + *generic* predicates have been restricted to + *action* verbs because we have verified that the verbs with the feature + *state* and those with the feature + *process* do not inflect in the PERFECTIVE when + *generic* ** On the other hand, considering that the verbs of relative state *** can only be ge-

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* We understand *generic* as a verb semantic unit wich indicates a timeless and general affirmation (2, p. 168.171). Thus, for example, *John has worked* can not only signify that once in his life John worked (+ *generic*) but can also refer to a single occurrence (— *generic*).

** Sentences like *The door has been open* (+ *state*), *The door has opened* (+ *process*) and *John has killed* (+ *action* and + *process*) would never be + generic because they would always refer to a particular fact. In verbs belonging to these groups in the PRESENT PERFECT, the feature — *generic* is, therefore, automatic. On the other hand, in + *generic* verbs in the PRESENT PERFECT, the feature + *action* is an automatic one.

*** There are states which constitute fixed and absolute concepts such as the state of being open, but there are others which are relative, such as the state of being small: what is small for a bird is not small for an elephant (2, p. 119-120).

neric * the feature + *relative* can not occur in the PERFECTIVE predications with state verbs for, as we have verified, these only inflect in the PERFECTIVE *if-generic* **.

3.2.
The specification of the distinctive semantic features present in the elements of the examined predications are in Table 2 where we can see the specific differences between the several classes of predications.

3.3.
In Table 3 there are the Portuguese sentences corresponding to those in Table 1. The verbs are inflected in the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO as it is traditionally done in a translation of the PRESENT PERFECT.

3.4.
In Table 4 we find the representation of the distinctive semantic features present in the elements of the several predications represented in Table 3.

4. Discussion

4.1.
The examination of the features specified in Table 2 indicates that:

a) all the predicates have the feature + *completion;*

b) all the predications show the feature ± *relevance on the completed fact,* which may occur:

— in the predicate when it is a one-place predication with + *action* verbs;

— in the initial argument (subject) when it is a one place predication with + *state* verbs or + *process* verbs, i. e., with — *action* verbs ***;

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* The relative states are necessarily generic because they are always timeless (2, 1st 1970, p. 170). Therefore the sentence *A freeway is wide* (relative state) is necessarily + *generic* and the sentence *A door is open* (nonrelative state) is — *generic,* for the state of *wide* is not understood as transitory as that of *open* is. Confirming the generic meaning of the first sentence and the nongeneric of the second, we observe that, in the first, the noun does not refer to a particular freeway and that, in the second, the noun does refer to a particular door (2, p. 170). In Portuguese, this difference can be seen in the representation of *is* for *é* in the first sentence, and for *está*, in the second.

** A sentence like *The door has been wide* is "an odd thing to say" (2, p. 174), and only by adding up an adverb, which would alter the verb specification itself (such as for a *long time*), the oddness would vanish.

*** In this case, to be more precise, the relevance is on the present state as a consequence of the completed fact (sentences 4 and 5).

TABLE 1 — Relevant Features of the PRESENT PERFECT Predications in English

Predicate Features	Predication Classification	Sentences	Semantic Structures
+ Generic			
+ action	one-place	1. John has worked.	(John : WORK) / + still alive & active — + completion / + indeifnite past / + relevance on the completed fact.
+ action	two-place	2. John has sung ballads.	(John : SING. balladas) / + still alive & active — + completion / + indefin. past / + as relevance of the presente state as a consequence of the completed fact.
+ action	one-place	3. John has worked.	(John : WORK) / + still alive & active — + completion / + relevance on the completed fact. / + indefinite past having very recently occurred.
— Generic			
+ process	one-place	4. The door has opened.	(⊖ door') / + relevance of the pres. state as a conseq. of the completed fact. — BECOME (⊖' : OPEN) / + completion / + indefinite past having very recently occurred.
+ state	one-place	5. The door has been open.	(⊖ door' / + relev. of the pres. state as a conseq. of the completed fact. — OPEN) / + competion / + indefinite past having very recently occurred.
+ action	two-place	6. John has sung ballads.	(John : SING. ballads) / + still alive & active — + completion / + indef. past having very recently occurred
+ action + process	two-place	7. John has killed Peter.	(John : DO. (Peter : BECOME (⊖'' : DEAD)) / + still alive & — + relevance of the change of state as a consequence of the completed fact. / + completion indefinite past having very recently occurred.

TABLE 2 — Specification of the distinctive semantic of the predications presented in TABLE 1.

Predicate Features			In the Initial Argument			In the Predicate		Indef. Past having very recently occurred	In the Final Argument
Predication Classification	Sentence Number		+ Still alive & active	Relevance on the completed fact	Completion	Relevance on the completed fact	Indefinite past		Relevance the completed fact
+ action one-place	1	+ Generic	+		+	+	+		
+ action two-place	2		+		+	+	+		+
+ action one-place	3		+		+	+		+	
+ process one-place	4	− Generic		+	+			+	
+ state one-place	5			+	+			+	
+ action two-place	6		+		+			+	+
+ action two-place + process	7		+		+			+	+

TABLE 3 — Relevant features of the PRETERITO PERFEITO Predications in Portuguese taking into account the same binary taxonomies pointed out for the English sentences examined in Tables 1 and 2.

Predicate Features	Predication Classification	Sentences	Semantic Structures
+ action (+ Generic)	one-place	1. João Trabalhou.	(João : TRABALHAR) + completion
+ action	two-place	2. João cantou baladas.	(João : CANTAR : baladas) + completion
+ action	one-place	3. João trabalhou.	(João : TRABALHAR) + completion
+ process	one-place	4. A porta abriu.	(⊖ porta' : TORNAR-SE (⊖' : ABERTA) + completion
+ state	one-place	5. A porta esteve aberta.	(⊖ porta : ABERTA) + completion
+ action (- Generic)	two-place	6. João cantou baladas.	(João : CANTAR : baladas) + completion
+ action + process	two-place	7. João matou Pedro.	FAZER : (Pedro : TORNAR-SE (⊖ : MORTO) + completion

TABLE 4 — Specification of the semantic features of the predications presented in TABLE 3 taking into account the same binary taxonomies pointed out for the English sentences examined in Tables 1 and 2.

Predicate Features — Predication Classification	Sentence Number	In the Initial Argument			In the Predicate			In the Final Argument
		+ Still alive & active	+ Relevance on the completed fact	Completion	Relevance on the completed fact	Indefinite past	Indef. Past having very recently occurred	Relevance on the completed fact
+ Generic								
+ action one-place	1	±		+	±	±		
+ action two-place	2	±		+	±	±		±
+ action one-place	3	±		+	±		±	
+ process one-place	4	±	±	+			±	
− Generic								
+ state one-place	5	±	±	+			±	
+ action two-place	6	±		+			±	±
+ action two-place + process	7	±		+			±	±

— in the final argument when it is a two-place predication *;

c) all the predications present the feature + *indefinite past,* so being that in the predicates with the feature — *generic* this indefinite past is very close to the present;

d) to every predicate with the feature + *action* corresponds an agentive with the feature + *still alive* and *active* **.

4.2. The above considerations lead us to establish the following general marks of PERFECTIVE:

+ *completion*
+ *relevance on the completed fact*
+ *indefinite past.*

It may also be mentioned that with a restricted occurrence to certain types of predicates the following features also characterize the PERFECTIVE:

+ *subjet still alive and active*
(with + *acton* verbs)
+ *indefinite past very close to the present*
(with — *generic* verbs)

4.3. Observing the Portuguese sentences in Table 3 and the features represented in Table 4 we took as a point of reference the same binary taxonomies pointed out for the English sentences and we verified that:

a) all the predicates have the feature + *completion;*

b) all the predications may or may not have the feature + *relevance on the completed fact,* which signifies that the event itself may be in relevance;

c) all the predications may or may not have the feature + *indefinite past,* and, in the case of — *generic* predicates, the past may not have recently occurred;

d) the subject argument corresponding + *action* verbs may or may not have the feature + *still alive and active.*

Thus, examining the Portuguese sentence 6, for example, we may observe that:

a) *João* may or may not be still alive and active in the moment of speech;

b) *cantou* can both refer to a recent and to a far away past, to an indefinite and

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* In this case, to be more precise, we have: relevance of the present state as a consequence of the completed fact, when the verb expresses action (sentences 2 and 6); relevance of the change of state as a consequence of the completed fact, when the verb expresses action-process (sentence 7).

** It is interesting to observe that a sentence like * *Queen Victoria has visited Brighton,* which is not acceptable because the subject argument is dead, would be possible in the passive construction (*Brighton has been visited by Queen Victoria*) because the subject is still an existing place. We should also observe that the use of the PRESENT PERFECT is only possible for dead people when the result of the action still affects the present day, as in: *Shakespeare has written the most famous English plays.*

a definite past, being even possible to add to the sentence a precise indication such as *em 10 de dezembro de 1950* (= *on the 10th December of 1950)*;

c) the relevancy can be on the completed fact (that is, if João has just left the stage and somebody refers to the fact of João having done what he should) as well as in the action of singing itself (PUNCTUAL ASPECT).

As for sentence 5 there are some special considerations that should be made. In this sentence it is difficult to recognize the distinctive features of the PERFECTIVE ASPECT as they are expressed by the PRESENT PERFECT. On the contrary, the most evident meaning in *A porta esteve aberta* (or even in *A porta foi (uma porta) aberta)*, without any adverbial specification (such as *sempre, durante esse tempo todo)*, is that, at the time of reference, the door does not present this state or quality (CESSATIVE ASPECT). In fact, sentence 5 can be a good starting point to exemplify the difficulty of expressing in Portuguese, through the verbal inflection itsef, the aspect which the PRESENT PERFECT expresses. If we translate *The door has been open* by *A porta está aberta*, so as to account for one of the distinctive features of the PRESENT PERFECT ("relevance of the presente state") we

will not be expressing, however, as in *has been open* that the present state is a consequence of a past fact. Such is so that the Portuguese sentence *A porta está aberta* corresponds more accurately to *The door is open* than to *The door has been open*.

4.4. In any of the Portuguese sentences only the context or the situation (when a specification given by another element such as an adverbial adjunct does not occur) can assign the meaning of PERFECTIVE or of any other aspect. It is of interest to observe that any of these predications, isolated as they are, can not only correspond to the PRESENT PERFECT predications but also to the PAST TENSE predications (in English).

5. CONCLUSION

This study presents evidence that from all the features characterizing the PERFECTIVE, abstracted from the sentences with the PRESENT PERFECT (in English), only the feature + *completion* is also found in the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO (in Portuguese), which thus indicates that the PERFECTIVE is much less characterized in Portuguese. From this conclusion we can suggest that predications with the PRETÉRITO PERFEITO are more ambiguous when not explicitated by means other than the verb inflection itself.

RESUMO: A partir do exame de ocorrências do "PRESENT PERFECT" tentou-se chegar ao conjunto de traços semânticos característicos dessa forma verbal inglesa. Verificou-se em que extensão o sentido do PERFECTIVO assim caracterizado é expresso nas formulações correspondentes portuguesas em PRETÉRITO PERFEITO. Concluiu-se que, em português, a simples flexão verbal caracteriza em grau muito menor o ASPECTO PERFECTIVO.

UNITERMOS: "Present perfect"; Perfectivo; Análise contrastiva; Aspecto verbal; Pretérito perfeito.

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