

THE LICENSING OF THE ENGLISH PRESENT PERFECT TENSE BY TURKISH ADULTS

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Abstract

Turkish has no form that expresses the present perfect; the past suffix –DI is used for this function. This study aims at investigating how Turkish adult learners of English as a foreign language license the English present perfect tense in their interlanguage. We hypothesized that our participants would use the simple past tense instead of the present perfect tense especially when there is no overt time adverbial and that among the perfect types, they would use the U-perfect more correctly when compared to the other types of perfect. The findings seem to support both hypotheses, leading us to conclude that this may be the result of negative transfer from their L1.

Key words: Types of perfect, negative transfer, second language acquisition, Turkish.

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to investigate the notion of the present perfect tense in English and how it is licensed by adult Turkish learners of English. We argue that the context and/or the presence of adverbs are the determining factors to decide whether to use the present perfect tense or the simple past tense. The problem stems from the difference between Turkish and English in that Turkish, unlike English, does not have a present perfect that is structurally distinct from the simple past tense.

In Turkish, unlike English, we do not have a distinct form that expresses the present perfect; we use the definite past suffix –DI to suggest this function:

- (1) Hasan balig-i ye-di
 Hasan fish-Acc. Eat-Past
 “Hasan ate the fish”
 “Hasan has eaten the fish.”

(Kornfilt, 1997, p. 349)

As indicated in the example above, it is “systematically ambiguous between a simple past reading and the present perfect reading (Kornfilt, 1997, p. 349). In English, semantically, when a temporal adverb is absent, there seems to be very little difference between the present perfect and the simple past tense (Bussman, 1996); however, when an adverb is added, there is a difference. For example, the sentences below differ in the sense that only (2b) conveys a sense of current relevance (for further discussion, see Klein, 1992; Depraetere, 1998; Ferretti, McRae, & Kutas, 2007; Anderson, 2007; Katz, 2003):

- (2) a. George lost his glasses yesterday.
 b. George has lost his glasses.

Both (2a) and (2b) indicate that the actions happened in the past and are completed; in other words, they are perfective. In (2a), the verb “lost” occurred in the past in an exact time so it is a simple past tense statement; but in (2b), the action occurred in a near past and the situation affects George’s present situation. Certain time adverbs like “yesterday”, “two days ago” or “last week” can appear in sentences as (2a) but not in (2b), and there are also some adverbs (e.g. *since*) which are compatible with the present perfect but not with the simple past. In the present perfect, an event predicate is introduced as the presupposition; it is possible for this event predicate to hold at a time after the time of speech (Bertinetto & Delfitto, 2000; Bybee, 1985).

While the simple past expresses a temporal precedence between the Speech time and the Reference time (R__S), the perfect expresses a temporal precedence between the Event time and the Reference time (E__R) (Horstein, 1990). Since an event predicate with a past-time adverbial can only hold in the past, such modification will necessarily violate this presupposition, resulting in the infelicity of (2):

- (2) *John has met me yesterday.

“By using the present perfect the speaker brings what happened in the past to the realm of the present” (Bardovi-Harliq, 2000, p, 168). The main difference between these two tenses is that the present perfect is [+ current relevance], but the simple past is not because specific time adverbials are incompatible with the semantics of the present perfect. All in all, these grammatical markers (namely tense, aspect, and temporal adverbs) play a central role in conveying temporal information and are present in almost every language (for more details, see Comrie, 1985; Magliano & Schleich, 2000; Ferretti, Gagne, and McRae, 2003; Andersen, 1993).

2. Types of Perfect

Comrie (1976) and Iatridou, et al. (2000) among others talk about four types of Perfect (see also Klein, 1992 & 1994; Depreatere, 1998, Bardovi-Harliq, 2000; Katz, 2003):

- 1) Universal Perfect (U-Perfect)
- 2) The Experiential Perfect
- 3) The Perfect of Result
- 4) The Perfect of Recent Past (“hot news perfect”)

The reason why there are different types of perfect is “not due to an inherent ambiguity of the perfect, but due to contextual information” (Klein, 1992, p. 539).

Universal Perfect (U-perfect) asserts that “the event holds throughout an interval, delimited by the reference time and a certain time prior to it” (Bhatt and Pancheva, 2005, p. 9). This type conveys the meaning that the predicate holds throughout some interval stretching from a certain point in the past up to the present (Iatridou, et al., 2000); in other words, U-Perfects are always the modified ones:

- (3) (a) We have been friends since 2005.
2005-NOW (=utterance time)
- (b) 2005'den beri arkadaş-ız
2005-Abl.since friend-1.pl.
“We are friends since 2005”

On the U-perfect reading, we understand that the eventuality of being friends extends from 2005 up to now. Comrie names this type as the “The Perfect of Persistent Situation” because it “persists into the present” (p.6). Some languages do not have this type of perfect. It is a characteristic of English in that many other languages such as Turkish use the present tense in the same meaning (3b). The expression of the U-Perfect in Turkish is achieved through the zero marking on the adjectival predicate (or more-generally the non-verbal predicate) or adding the imperfective -Iyor, -mAk-tA, or -mİş suffixes (as illustrated in 4) to the verb in Turkish, which is observed in Comrie (1976) that unlike English, the use of the present tense yields the U-perfect reading in many languages:

- (4)a: Atilla o gün-den beri ümit-siz-miş. Atilla that
day-Abl since hope-less-Perf. Aspect
“Atilla has been hopeless since that day.”
- b: 2005'den beri Moda'da yaş-ıyor. 2005Abl. since
Moda-Loc live-ing

“S/he has been living in Moda since 2005.” In (4a), the meaning created by the use of the suffix -mİş indicates that the speaker is not the witness (see Aksu-Koç, 1988; Kornfilt, 1997). In (4b), similarly, the imperfective suffix -Iyor denotes U-perfect. We believe that when the activity is dynamic and atelic, it lends itself to the progressive inflection of the verb as is the case of U-perfect in Turkish as in 4b. The suffix -yor (-ing) denotes the continuity of the situation started in the past and continues to the present.

The other three types (experiential perfect, perfect of result and perfect of recent past) are grouped as Existential (E-Perfect) by Iatridou, et al. (2000). They state that “it conveys the meaning that the predicate holds throughout some interval stretching from a certain point in the past up to the present”. They also argue that “the U-Perfect can be formed only if the ‘underlying eventuality’ is a stative verb or adjective or Progressive”, that is the underlying eventuality should have the feature *unboundedness* (p. 4). Now we will present each type separately here. The Experiential Perfect asserts that the subject has a certain experience and that the event holds *prior to* the reference time (now). Unlike the U-perfect, the experiential perfect can be formed from an underlying eventuality of any Aktionsart-- “the inherent lexical semantics of the verb as a source of aspectual distinctions” (Erguvanli-Taylan, 2001, p.98).

- (5) (a) Have you ever eaten Sushi?
 (b) Hiç Sushi ye-di-n mi?
 ever Sushi eat-past-2sg Q

In the E-Perfect reading, we understand that the action occurred at least once in the past till TU (time of the utterance).

The third type is the Perfect of Result which asserts that the result state of the event holds *at* the reference time. This type of resultant perfect is possible if the eventuality is still true (Iatridou, et.al., 2000).

(7) I have written the report.

(8) Anahtar-lar-ım-ı düşür-dü-m

key-Plu-1sg-Acc drop-DI past-1sg.

“I dropped/ have dropped my keys.”

In (7), the present state is the result of an action in the past (the report is ready). In (8), the meaning may be ambiguous for it may be read as perfective (when we add a sentence indicating that I got them back) or as the perfect of result (when it means that the keys are missing or on the floor).

The last type discussed is the Perfect of Recent Past (or “hot news perfect” as Katz (2003) calls) which is used to report an eventuality that just happened. It asserts that the event holds prior to, and sufficiently close to the reference time (which is now) (Bhatt and Pancheva, 2005):

(9) He has just married.

(10) Oğlu-m üniversite-den henüz/yeni mezun ol-du.
 Son-Poss university-Abl. Just/new graduate be-DI past
 'my son has just graduated from the university'

(11) Ali yer-I sil- di
 Ali floor-Acc sweep-DI past

'Ali swept the floor/ Ali has swept the floor.'

The relevant pragmatic context for hot news perfect is that the sender/speaker believes that the receiver/hearer knows that the particular action may occur, but s/he does not know that it has occurred and exploits this presupposition to achieve the “hot news” effect. In Turkish, this is achieved by using the suffix-DI and the adverbs such as “yeni” (new) or “henüz” (just). “The grammatical morpheme –DI appears to be unspecified as to whether it is a marker of the perfective or perfect aspect; it is the pragmatic context or the presence of certain adverbials that will specify the particular viewpoint” (Erguvanlı-Taylan, 2001, p. 102).

As we have tried to show, in Turkish--a language lacking grammatical morphemes expressing only aspectual categories, there are no structures that consistently have perfective meaning, and this property is emphasized mostly by the use of adverbials, especially for the present perfect and is usually expressed by the definite past morpheme (Arslan, 2006; Kornfilt, 1997). So the -DI suffix denotes both the simple past and the present perfect (Sezer, 2001, p. 10). Therefore, Turkish learners of English need to depend on the context in order to decide which tense to choose. The present perfect construction is licensed in the same way that the past simple tense construction is licensed, and perfect aspect meaning is contributed by adverbials. We believe that this feature of Turkish may lead to negative transfer errors in the interlanguage of Turkish L2 learners of English. For this very reason, we aimed at investigating the semantic notion of perfect (specifically the English present perfect) and its perception by adult Turkish learners of English. In the construction of the present perfect tense in English, we were specifically interested in assessing the impact of the presence of adverbials. The absence of an adverbial signaling the Perfect meaning will result in the simple past interpretation.

3. The Study

In this descriptive study, we tested the following hypotheses:

H1: The students will significantly use the correct form of the verbs in the Fill-in-the-blanks Task (FT). There will be no difficulty in tense choice.

H2: It is the presence of the adverbials that the students will rely on while deciding which tense to use in their translations (the TT task).

H3: It is the reference time that the students will rely on while deciding which tense to use in their translations (the TT task).

H4: Among the four types of perfect, the U-Perfect will be the most correctly produced type.

3.1 The Participants

The study included 85 adult Turkish speakers of English. They were chosen out of a population of 120 undergraduate students at the departments of American Culture & Literature and English Translation & Interpretation at Haliç University, Istanbul, Turkey. In order to form a more homogeneous group with regard to their English language proficiency, we decided to administer *The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP)* to all of them. Then, basing on their performance in the test, we selected 85 students who scored between 80 and 90 (the highest grade of the group) (above IELTS Band 5,5; B2-2 Common European Framework Level) as our sample. Their mean age was 20. Gender is not taken as a variable in this study, so there is not any record of it.

3.2 The Instrument and the Procedure

Believing that it is essential to validate the data of any study by utilizing multiple tasks, we included a fill-in-the-blank task (FT), a translation task (TT), and think aloud protocol (TAP). In FT, there is a short dialogue with 20 blanks; twelve of them required the present perfect structures and eight of them had the adverbs of the simple past constructions. The data obtained from this task will enable us to find out how well the participants grasped the difference between the present perfect and the past simple tenses. An extract from this test is given below:

(12) Jane: "I(16- see) Mark last night."

Susan: "Oh! Really? I.....(17- not /see) him for months. How is he?"

Jane: "He.....(18- take) a trip to Asia last week. He(19-take) many trips to Asia since he..... (20-start) his own import-export business. He says he is exhausted."

In TT, there are 15 Turkish sentences which the participants were asked to translate into English. They were free to use bilingual dictionaries during the course of translation. The structures of the items are categorized under the four subcategories of perfect; the difficulty level of the items is accepted as similar since all of them are constructed in simple or compound sentences; none of them contains a complex sentence type:

--- The perfect of Persistent Situation (Universal Perfect \ U-Perfect): (3 items) "2005'den bu yana bu üniversitede çalışıyorum." (I have been working at this university since 2005)

--- Experiential Perfect: (3 items) "Hayatında hiç hayalet gördün mü?" (Have you ever seen a ghost in your life?)

--- Perfect of Result: (3 items) "Gözlüğümü kaybettim." (I have lost \ I lost my glasses)

--- Perfect of Recent Past (Hot news) (3 items): "Raporu daha teslim etmedim." (I have not handed in the report yet.)

There are also three items which necessitate the use of the simple past tense due to the presence of temporal adverbials (as in 13) and lack of current relevance (in 14):

(13) Dün Ali'yi gördüm. (I saw Ali yesterday)

(14) O evin kapısı demirdi. (The door of that house was iron)

The aim of utilizing this translation task is to find out whether the participants directly translate the verb tense of the Turkish structures into English or notice the sense of "current relevance" of the events and translate accordingly. As for the TAP, we interviewed the students and asked them why they preferred that particular structure in their translations. We noted down their comments during the interview. We did not tape the interview believing that it would cause some anxiety during the talk. After all the students had been interviewed, we grouped the reasons given to calculate the frequency and the percentages of them. The interviews were done in the researcher's office, and for each participant 5 minutes was allotted.

3.3 Results and Discussion

Table 1 illustrates the interval data obtained from the FT. The participants completed this task in the classroom setting in 15 minutes. After we had assessed the task by giving each correct answer five points (total 100 points), we entered each participant's grade into SPSS and calculated the mean, the standard deviation of the grades, and the one-sample t-test to find out whether the mean for the participants differs from 100. The results yielded that there was not a big gap within the group ($\bar{x} = 86.52$; sd.11.28; t: 70,68; p.000) since the majority of the student's grades were 85 or above (f= 57); this indicates that they know where to use the present perfect and the simple past. This finding, supporting our first hypothesis, help us claim that any deviation which might spring in TT may not be due to their lack of grammatical knowledge but due to the interference resulting from the features of Turkish. In the second task (TT), there are 15 Turkish sentences, and the participants were asked to translate them into English.

Since there is no present perfect construction in Turkish, the participants need to decide which one to use according to context and adverbs. We analyzed the translations under four subcategories of perfect, each category with three sentences (total=12 items), and also we added three sentences which were structured in the simple past tense. While entering the data into SPSS, we coded the correct construct as 1, incorrect construct as 2, and the missing ones as 0. Then, as illustrated in Table 2, we obtained the frequencies as well as the percentages of the constructs and in order to find out whether the differences between the obtained frequencies is statistically significant, we ran the chi-square test.

As depicted in Table 2, the participants most frequently preferred the present perfect tense with the Universal Perfect category, supporting our fourth hypothesis. The presence of *since* (-den beri) seems to signal the present perfect tense as the participants used the present perfect in their translations despite the zero marking on the adjectival predicate, the imperfective -Iyor, -mAk-tA, or -mİş suffixes. The difference between the frequencies of correct and incorrect constructs is statistically significant (χ^2 : 49, 70; df:1; $p < .000$). Only a few participants used the simple past or the past perfect in their translations:

Item 3: Atilla o günden beri ümitsizmiş. (Atilla has been hopeless since then)

Atilla was hopeless since that day (f= 8)

Atilla had been hopeless since that day (f=3)

As for the other types of perfect, neither the adverbs nor the relevant pragmatic context seems to be signaling the present perfect tense since the participants significantly produced sentences in the simple past tense (Experiential: $\chi^2 = 4,24$; df:1; $p < .039$; Perfect of result: $\chi^2 = 21,75$; df:1; $p < .000$; Perfect of Recent Past: $\chi^2 = 9,89$; df:1; $p < .002$). Basing on these findings, we reject our second and third hypotheses.

Below are the items in the task; in parentheses are the translations the participants produced:

Exp. Perf.:

A: “Bu hayatımda duyduğum en kötü yalan. (This is the worst lie that I heard)

B: “Yalan söylemiyorum. Vallahi” (I am not lying. I swear.)

Perf. of Result:

A: “Kalbini mi kırdım?” (Did I break your heart?)

B: “Boşver. Alışkırım.” (Never mind. I am used to.)

Perf. of Recent Past (Hot news):

“Raporu daha teslim etmedim. Patron kızabilir.

(I didn't give the report. The boss may be angry.)

There were also three items structured in the simple past tense; two with temporal adverbials and one with lack of current relevance. All the participants correctly used the simple past tense in their translations. The overall results obtained from TT indicate that the participants used the past simple tense more than the present perfect construction. The presence of the -dI suffix seems to be determining factor for the tense choice, not the adverbs or the current relevance. To validate the quantitative data, we believed that some qualitative findings were also necessary; so we applied the think-aloud protocol (TAP). We interviewed all the participants and discussed their translations with them. We asked them why they specifically chose the simple past tense but not the present perfect tense; while they were answering in English, we wrote down their answers. After all the interviews were over, we grouped the reasons:

1. “Because there is the -dI suffix. There is nothing present so I didn't choose the present perfect tense.” (82 %)
2. “Because it is not now. The present perfect tense is wrong. It happened in the past. I never thought of any other tense.” (10 %)
3. “Because it sounded correct in this tense and I don't know why” (8%)

Some indicated that they noticed the adverbs such as “daha” (yet) and “hiç” (ever) and hesitated whether they should have used the past perfect tense (had V3) or the simple past tense. When the researcher asked whether they had ever thought of the present perfect tense, their answers were negative because they said that the events already happened in the past.

4. Conclusion

In Turkish, the present perfect construction is licensed in the same way that the past simple tense construction is licensed. This feature of Turkish grammar might explain why the participants used the present perfect construction less, and this deviation can be labeled as negative transfer.

Since there is not an individual correspondence of the present perfect construction in Turkish grammar, the construction might not have a clear reflection in the interlanguage of Turkish speakers of English, and this can make it less preferable in their usage. Although the data were not large enough to make a generalization, we may claim that the possible reason for our participants' not preferring the present perfect tense constructions may be that they cannot find a particular correspondence for that particular use while producing the language. For further research, we suggest an experimental study which provides some consciousness raising activities on the differences between these two tenses in the classroom setting to minimize the negative transfer from Turkish in their interlanguage.

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Table 1. The results obtained from the fill-in-the-blank test

Valid	f	%	Valid %	Cum. %
60,00	2	2,4	2,4	2,4
65,00	7	8,2	8,2	10,6
70,00	2	2,4	2,4	12,9
75,00	7	8,2	8,2	21,2
80,00	10	11,8	11,8	32,9
85,00	10	11,8	11,8	44,7
90,00	15	17,6	17,6	62,4
95,00	17	20,0	20,0	82,4
100,00	15	17,6	17,6	100,0
Total	85	100,0	100,0	

Table 2. Distribution of Obtained Constructs in TT: Perfect Types

Categories	present perfect constructs	simple past constructs
Universal perfect	Item1: 75 (88.2 %) Item 2: 74 (87,1%) Item 3: 74 (87,1 %)	10 (11.8%) 11 (12,9 %) 11 (12,9 %)
Experiential perfect	Item1: 32 (37,6 %) Item 2: 33 (38, 8%) Item 3: 35 (41, 2 %)	53 (62, 4 52 (61,2 %) 50 (58, 8 %)
Perfect of result	Item1: 25 (29,4%) Item 2: 17 (20%) Item 3: 22 (25,9%)	60 (70,6%) 68 (80%) 63 (74,1%)
Perfect of recent past	Item1: 30 (35,3%) Item 2: 26 (30,6 %) Item 3: 29 (34,1 %)	55 (64,7%) 59 (69,4%) 56 (65,9%)
TOTAL	15 items (n=85)	