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THE TOPIC “PAST SIMPLE VS PRESENT PERFECT” IN THE GESTALT’S MIRROR (FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING ENGLISH TENSE FORMS)

The article deals with the problem of inconsistency between the traditional explanations of the choice of tense form in the pair “Past Simple vs Present Perfect” prevailing in Anglistics and the real functioning of this tense pair in live speech. Thus, the traditional justification for the choice of tense in this pair is based on the use of time markers. For the Past Simple: yesterday, last week, the last time, when, in the morning, at night, at 5 o'clock, in 1979, three days ago, on Tuesday, in winter, today, this week/month. For the Present Perfect: already, just, always, ever, never, recently, yet, since, as, as soon as, today, this week/month. However, many examples of real-life speech refute this traditional explanation, which raises natural questions from advanced students. The authors provide a large number of examples from live speech that refute the traditional explanation. Leaving such questions unanswered would mean the teacher's linguistic and pedagogical bankruptcy. In the authors' opinion, the explanation of the choice of tense form by means of tense markers is a demonstration of only the tip of the iceberg. The real reasons for the choice lie deep in the (sub)consciousness of the speaker. As a new explanation, the authors propose a Gestalt theoretical approach, namely, the identification of a figure in the Gestalt of the discourse content, similar to the identification of a figure in E. Rubin's classic 'face-vase' drawing. If the figure is time, the speaker chooses the Past Simple form; if the figure is action, the speaker chooses the Present Perfect. On the part of the speaker, this choice is often subjective, without regard to tense markers. According to the authors, the pulsation of the tense pair “Past Simple vs Present Perfect” fits well into the paradigm of Gestalt theory. The authors' conclusion: 1. The strategy of tense markers to explain the nature of “Past Simple vs Present Perfect” is appropriate only at the beginning of learning English grammar to give only a general idea of these tense forms. 2. Later on, students with a high level of proficiency should be offered a figure-background Gestalt interpretation of this tense opposition. The authors suggest that there may be other explanations.

Key words: tense category, Past Simple, Present Perfect, psycholinguistics, gestalt theory, background-figure.

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ТЕМА «*PAST SIMPLE VS PRESENT PERFECT*» У ДЗЕРКАЛІ ГЕШТАЛЬТУ (З ДОСВІДУ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ЧАСОВИХ ФОРМ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ)

У статті розглядається проблема невідповідності пануючих в англіцистиці традиційних пояснень вибору часової форми в парі “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” реальному функціонуванню цієї часової пари в живому мовленні. Так, традиційне обґрунтування вибору часової форми в цій парі ґрунтується на вживанні часових маркерів. Для *Past Simple*: *yesterday, last week, the last time, when, in the morning, at night, at 5 o'clock, in 1979, three days ago, on Tuesday, in winter, today, this week/month*. Для *Present Perfect*: *already, just, always, ever, never, recently, yet, since, as, as soon as, today, this week/month*. Однак безліч прикладів реального живого мовлення спростовують таке традиційне пояснення, що викликає закономірні питання з боку студентів рівня *advanced*. Автори наводять велику кількість прикладів з живого мовлення, які спростовують таке традиційне пояснення. Залишити такі питання без відповіді означало б лінгвістичне і педагогічне банкрутство викладача. На думку авторів, пояснення вибору часової форми за допомогою часових маркерів є демонстрацією лише верхівки айсберга. Справжні причини вибору лежать глибоко у (під)свідомості мовця. У якості нового пояснення автори пропонують гештальт-теоретичний підхід, а саме виділення фігури у гештальті змісту дискурсу на кшталт виділення фігури у класичному малюнку Е. Рубіна «лице-ваза». Якщо для мовця фігурою є час, то він обирає форму *Past Simple*, якщо фігурою є дія, то мовець обирає *Present Perfect*. З боку мовця такий вибір часто є суб'єктивним, без оглядки на часові маркети. На думку авторів, пульсація часової пари “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” добре вкладається в парадигму гештальт-теорії. Висновок авторів: 1. Стратегія часових маркерів для пояснення природи “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” доречна лише на початку вивчення граматики англійської мови, щоб дати лише загальне уявлення про ці часові форми. 2. У подальшому студентам з високим рівнем підготовки доцільно пропонувати фігурно-фонову гештальт-інтерпретацію цієї часової опозиції. Автори припускають, що можуть бути й інші пояснення.

Ключові слова: категорія часу, *Past Simple*, *Present Perfect*, психолінгвістика, гештальт-теорія, фон-фігура.

Research analysis. The grammatical topic of “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” is a common one in all English textbooks and manuals. This topic can even be called trivial. The traditional justification for choosing the tense in this pair is based on the following traditional explanations: *The Past Simple* is used when: 1) a question with the word “when” asks about the time of a certain action, 2) the sentence refers to an action that took place at a time known to the speaker, 3) actions and states that began in the Past and continue

in the Present, 4) the sentence uses the time markers *yesterday, last week, the last time, when, in the morning, at night, at 5 o'clock, in 1979, three days ago, on Tuesday, in winter, today, this week/month*. *The Present Perfect* is used when: 1) the action took place at an indefinite time, 2) the action took place during a period that has not ended, 3) actions and states that began in the Past and continue in the Present, 4) when the time of past actions is not stated, 5) indefinite time is expressed by the time markers *already, just,*

always, ever, never, recently, yet, since, as, as soon as, today, this week/month. (Kherr, Jones, Straightforward. Intermediate, 2016: 17, 20, 24; Kherr, Jones, Straightforward Upper-Intermediate, 2016: 39, 44). In addition, these explanations are accompanied by statements such as “*exact past tense*” (Past Simple), “*imprecise present tense*” (Present Perfect), which are questionable because they belong to fuzzy logic. In addition, the explanations of points 3) and 4) for the Present Perfect are completely ambiguous, and the markers *today, this week/month* refer to both tenses. But if we summarize all these explanations, it becomes clear that they boil down to the use of the appropriate tense markers.

Problem statement. The traditional explanation of the principles of tense choice often does not correspond to examples of live speech, which raises natural questions from advanced students. The strategy of linking the topic “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” to tense markers resembles the authors of such explanations playing a game of giveaways with themselves. The very name of the pair of tense forms suggests to the students that they have to make a choice between two options, what significantly narrows the number of possible choices. And when the authors also offer exercises with the wording “*Choose the correct tense*” and provide time markers, everything is easy, transparent, and clear. This traditional approach creates the necessary apperception, artificially constructs a desirable situation that directly pushes a student to choose the right option without realizing its underlying cause.

But in reality, in live speech outside of artificially constructed contexts, everything is much more complicated. Pupils and students often do not understand the essence of the opposition “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” when these time markers are not used in sentences at all, and sometimes in the same contexts they use both the Present Perfect and the Past Simple forms. There are many examples of this. For example, we come across “*I bought a car*” and “*I have bought a car*” without the markers. Or even with the same time marker “*I bought a car last month*” and “*I have bought a car last month*”. Observation of live speech shows that the strategy of the traditional marker approach to explain the difference between *the Past Simple* and *the Present Perfect* does not work. When reading the original texts, this massively raises questions from advanced learners: “*Why is this? Why doesn’t the system of time markers work?*” Of course, a teacher can get away with a general comment, saying that this is the author’s vision, or that it has historically happened. But such an explanation cannot be considered scientific. It is a matter of hon-

our for a teacher to provide a scientific explanation of the nature of the opposition “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*”. And vice versa, avoiding a scientific explanation is a manifestation of a teacher’s linguistic and pedagogical bankruptcy.

Here are examples from written texts of various genres, oral podcasts from YouTube video hosting, and the “Reverso Context” dictionary, which captures live multi-genre written speech.

I. From the story of Mark Twain. «How I Edited an Agricultural Paper»:

1) *As I left the office, toward sundown, a group of men and boys at the foot of the stairs dispersed with one impulse.*

2) *I said to myself, I **never, never believed** it before, notwithstanding my friends kept me under watch so strict...*

3) *There, you **wrote that**. Read it to me – quick! Relieve me. I suffer.*

4) *I **did not take** temporary editorship of an agricultural paper without misgivings.*

5) *The regular editor of the paper was going off for a holiday, and I accepted the terms **he offered**, and took his place.*

6) *Then this old person **got up and tore** his paper all into small shred etc. (Twain). (According to the traditional recommendations for the examples 3, 4, 5, 6 it would be more appropriate to use the *Present Perfect* form).*

II. From Biographer Podcast. The YouTube movie “Audrey Hepburn: Beyond the Silver Screen | Full Biography (Roman Holiday, Breakfast at Tiffany’s”:

7) *Joseph...became more involved in fascist activities and **never visited** his daughter abroad. (2.38 min)*

8) ***Since** that time Audrey **was** afraid to blame her mother for anything. (2.43 min).*

9) *The childhood of Audrey **suddenly ended** under the roar of tanks in the quiet streets of Arnhem. (4.14 min)*

10) *...**once** risking her own life (she) **even searched** for a downed English pilot in the forest. (5.14–5.24 min)*

11) *...a wonderful ballerina and dance teacher **never promised** that she would become a great ballerina. (7.34 min)*

12) *... she **never become** a professional ballerina. (8.11 min)*

13) *James **was already** in his thirties when he met Audrey. (10.52 min)*

14) *In general, I **sailed** to America with two offers **already** – from the Fulton Theatre on Broadway and from Hollywood! (14.45 min)*

15) *Katharine Hepburn **was already** famous in Hollywood. (18.14 min)*

16) *The star **already had** a clearly visible belly...*
(48.02 min)

17) The couple **never got married**, but lived together. (1.10.09 min)

18) *The mother greeted her daughter coolly, but she **never knew** how to express her feelings.*
(48.24 min) etc. (Biographer Podcast).

III. From “Reverso Context”:

19) Brian **already did** this hard work for you.

20) Our real enemy **already did** what they came to do.

21) Actually, we **already did** that for you.

22) *It comes very soon and some people **already started** preparing Christmas gifts.*

23) *We seek information which justifies decisions you **already made**.*

24) *However, she **never made** it official.*

25) *Their support for the charity was **just lip service**; they **never made** any donations.*

26). *This value acts as a key, **since they made** a hash acts as the lock on the safe.*

27) *That contradicts something you **just said** etc.*
(Reverso Context).

If logic is the science of thought's forms, then grammar is a set of the most abstract models of these thought's forms. That is why grammatical analysis is about penetrating the mind of a pupil (student) and making the appropriate neural-and-synaptic connections in the hemispheres of his or her brain. At first glance, the topic seems trivial, but if you look into the depths of our minds, you will see that the choice of the tense form is not based on any time markers, but on deep subconscious reflexes that have their own specificity. And bringing these reflexes to the level of consciousness is precisely **the purpose** of this article.

One of the possible approaches to achieving this goal seems to be the use of the Gestalt psychological method, namely, the figure-background relations between the elements of the Gestalt. This is **the novelty** of the article.

The play of figure-background within the Gestalt was first adequately illustrated by Edgar Rubin (1886–1951), a psychologist of the Copenhagen School of Psychology, the forerunner of Gestalt's psychology, using the example of the “face-vase” drawing, which has become a classic in modern psychology.



In the perception of Rubin's gestalt, at time t' the figure is a vase, and at time t'' the figure is a face. (Rubin, 1915: 56).

Gestalt is a perceptual entity that is caught by our psyche as a whole, not as the sum of its parts. A *figure* is the main element of the Gestalt to which the listener's or speaker's attention is directed at a particular moment. The *background* is a complex of Gestalt's elements that at time t' serve as an additional environment for the *figure*. In perceptual terms, the background is always secondary and distant from the figure. It is shifted to the perceptual shadow. The peculiarity of figure-background relations in Gestalt is that a person can never perceive both elements of Gestalt – figure and background – at the same time. When perceiving a Gestalt, the figure and the background are in a relationship of substitution. The figure-background relationship in Gestalt is not frozen; it is always dynamic, depending which element of the Gestalt the recipient's attention is directed to. (Bezpalenko, 2009: 151–160).

To help the advanced students clearly understand the nature of figure-background relations in Gestalt, it is advisable to start with the following question: “*You enter the Red Building of the University every day. Who among you can tell me how many steps lead to its main door from Volodymyrska Street?*” Students usually answer: “*We don't know, because we've never paid attention to it!*” Here you should explain to the students that this is because the element “*number of steps*” has never been a figure in the Red Building's Gestalt for you. At the moment of entry (t'), “*the building door*” is your figure, and everything else is the background. And if, for example, you were given the task of putting tiles on these steps, or restoring them, then at the moment (t'') the element “*number of steps*” would become a figure for you, and “*the building door*” would be the background. The figure and the background within the Gestalt are in a relationship of mutual substitution. It is appropriate to consider the pair “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” as a holistic psychological Gestalt, including two pulsating components, one of which can become a figure and the other a background. At the moment (t') when the speaker sees “*the time*” of the action as a figure, he/she chooses *the Past Simple*, and when “*the action*” itself is chosen as a figure, the speaker chooses *the Present Perfect*. In this case, the accompanying time markers does not play any role. They are just the tip of the iceberg. The real reasons for the choice are hidden in the depths of our (sub)consciousness.

Conclusions. Based on the above, it is advisable to offer the following recommendations:

1. The strategy of tense markers to explain the nature of the “*Past Simple vs Present Perfect*” is appropriate only at the beginning of learning English grammar to give only a general idea of these tense forms.

2. In the future, to advanced students, we should propose a figure-background gestalt interpretation of this tense opposition. Namely: 1) if the speaker decides that TIME is a figure for him/her, he/she uses *the Past Simple*, while the action itself is regarded by the speaker as a background; 2) if the speaker decides that ACTION is a figure for him/her, he/she uses *the Present Perfect*, while time is regarded by the speaker as a background. It is important that during communication there should be a coincidence of understanding of figure-background relations between both the listener (translator) and the speaker.

In the sentence "*A writer wrote a book...*" (*not writes, not will write*) a speaker chooses a time as

a figure even if he or she doesn't use the temporal markers (*three days ago, last year, in August* etc). The time when an action is performed comes from the context. In the sentence "*A writer has written a book*" a speaker chooses an action as a figure, not time, because the temporal markers *already, just, yet, since, as* are nothing from point of the view of time accuracy. So, the temporal predication here is as a background like other actions: *A writer hasn't compiled, hasn't bought, hasn't pained, hasn't presented, hasn't borrowed a book.*

We recognize that there may be another interpretation of this temporal opposition.

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