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Jim Walker

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JIM WALKER

## THE FOOTBALLER'S PERFECT - ARE FOOTBALLERS LEADING THE WAY?

It is often believed that the only verb form available for recounting events in past time is the English Preterit form. Every single available academic grammar of the English language supports this view, relegating the Present Perfect to a whole series of other possible uses, such as experiential past, past events with present repercussions, and so on. However, it is an indubitable fact that in some forms of English, the Present Perfect is used as a narrative tense, and it is equally indubitable that this usage is associated especially with football, as this paper will attempt to justify on the basis of a corpus of sports interviews. Secondly, it will show that narrative Present Perfect does exist outside football, and will reflect on whether it is simply a non-standard form that has gained a certain 'visibility' in the light of the recent explosion in the amount of televised coverage, or whether footballers might be taking the English language down a road towards a narrativisation of the Present Perfect, a path that many other languages have followed before English.

### 1. Introduction

As somebody who shares their time between teaching English as a foreign language and conducting research into, and teaching, linguistics, I am used to a situation whereby I spend half a day teaching grammatical rules which I then go on to spend the other half of the day debunking. The subject of this particular paper is a case in point. I shall begin with an example of the phenomenon I wish to discuss. The following extract is taken from the post-match discussion in the Sky Sports studio, subsequent to the incident on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2007 in which AC Milan goalkeeper Dida was confronted by Glasgow Celtic fan Robert McHendry, who had made his way on to the pitch. The two speakers are the Sky Sports anchorman and Charlie Nicholas, a former professional who now works as a studio expert. I have underlined the verb forms of interest.

**Charlie Nicholas:** I don't know how Celtic won it, Milan dominated for long periods, but it's no fluke [...] it's great result, but I don't know, he's hardly touched the goalkeeper, and I've watched it, I watched it unfold, and I could not believe what I was seeing, at first, at first I didn't think the supporter had touched him, he's gave him a little tickle, Dida chases him and then realises he can't take it and he goes down, and he's stayed there, he's off with the ice pack and the stretcher, and he's completely bluffed it, but Celtic will get absolutely hammered because of this one fool.

**Interviewer:** Dida decided to see the whole thing through, from the fact that the fan ran to him, and then Dida decides to make much more of it [looking at the film] there it is, the fan came from nowhere...

**CN:** You can see, he hardly touches him, he's reacted because he's angry...

Most teachers of English explain the difference between the English Preterit and the English Present Perfect using the tried and tested rule of thumb that the Preterit in English is the form used to narrate events in the past that no longer have any connection with the present, whereas the Present Perfect is a somewhat more complex form with a variety of different uses, all of which have as a common feature of the fact that there is some link to the present, and that therefore the name

Present Perfect is not entirely anomalous (a tried and tested view that I will be returning to). And yet a cursory glance at the above example shows that this is by no means the case. Nicholas alternates between the preterit, the Present Perfect and the simple present, in a manner which appears to be unmotivated. There can be no doubt that the Present Perfect is being used here to narrate events where we might in Standard English have expected a preterit. Only the interviewer appears to use the Preterit in a more canonical fashion, with one switch to a present simple.

The second example presented below serves to reinforce the impression that footballers, or ex-footballers, use the Present Perfect in what seems, *prima facie*, to be an unusual way. This example is given partly because, anecdotally, it served as the spark to ignite this particular research project, and secondly as a means of demonstrating the conventions I will continue to use throughout this paper, whereby I underline those uses of the PP which I deem interesting or problematic. Those that are conventional, so to speak, are left unmarked. Note once again the switches between the Present Perfect and the preterit.

I think Gary was a bit disappointed first of all but I have apologised and explained to him that I have tried to pull out. I have tried to explain to all the other Everton players that I have tried to pull out at the last minute. I think it just looks bad because I have gone in with two feet. I am never going to try to deliberately hurt a fellow professional. Although I did go in with my studs showing I have tried to pull out at the last minute - I can honestly say that. We will have to see if there is action from the FA. If I had gone through with the tackle maybe I could have hurt him even worse but I have pulled out and he has only got a little mark so I am glad for him that I haven't hurt him and he has been able to carry on."

Steven Gerrard, Liverpool midfielder, English, Liverpool, 26 years, recounting a "horror" tackle on Everton player during derby, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2002<sup>1</sup>

## 2. A Football Phenomenon?

My initial working hypothesis, one that enabled me to work on the syntax of English while sitting in front of the television, was that this was, if I might use a rather trivial expression, a 'footballer's thing'. It certainly seemed to be occurring with considerable regularity, according to my then casual observations, in the mouths of players and managers, as in the following example:

We're disappointed, because Portsmouth have only created one chance in the match, and they've taken it...We didn't play as well as what we have been...We had decent possession around the halfway line, we gave the ball away cheaply, then the next minute, we've overcompensated and pushed men forward, and it's left Curtis Davis 1 v. 1 – he's unfortunate with his challenge...and that's cost us a point.

Bryan Robson, manager West Bromwich Albion, English, Co. Durham, after defeat to Portsmouth, Dec. 2005<sup>2</sup>

These initially casual observations were given more concrete expression by the constitution of a corpus of post-match interviews. All of the interviews involving

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<sup>1</sup> The information following the quotations includes information, such as the age and place of birth of the speaker, that will not be exploited in this paper. The intention is to address the issue of the sociolinguistics of the narrative Present Perfect, most notably its regional distribution. I will make only passing reference to this issue later in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted, of course, that Bryan Robson had an illustrious career as a player before turning to management.

British-born<sup>3</sup> players and managers, broadcast on the BBC programme *Match of the Day*, were recorded over the period from January to April 2006. Almost 40% of all such interviews contained an example of the Present Perfect being used to narrate events in the match, a finding which indicates beyond doubt that we are dealing here not with some isolated grammatical oddity, but with a much more widespread and systematic phenomenon, therefore deserving of attention. Something akin, in fact, to what might loosely be referred to as an example of syntactic register. This notion was further bolstered by following two examples. The first is the caption to a photograph which appeared on the sports pages of the British newspaper, *The Guardian*.

**FA Cup fifth round:** Michael Duberry dives to scoop the ball out of the back of the net. No goal! No penalty! The ref's had an absolute shocker here, you know.

(Guardian photo caption linking to [http://football.guardian.co.uk/Match\\_Report/0,1527,897062,00.html](http://football.guardian.co.uk/Match_Report/0,1527,897062,00.html) match report, accessed on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

It seems clear that the use of the Present Perfect in the final sentence here is an attempt, reinforced by the use of the lexical items *ref* and *shocker*, to lend the caption a certain "footballing feel". If I might be permitted a neologism, this is a footballised caption.

The second was an article that appeared in the same *Guardian*, written by David McKie, a historian and the newspaper's deputy editor at the time. The article, entitled *Present far from Perfect*, is essentially a complaint about this particular phenomenon, in which, among so many other eminently citable passages, we might pick out the following: "Does this practice, so common in football commentary nowadays, have any grammatical justification? [...] And yet the usage in football still seems awkward and odd. It doesn't happen with cricket." (McKie 2002)<sup>4</sup>

So at this stage in my research, it appeared that the idea of a "footballer's Present Perfect" was fully justified, so much so that it served as the motivation for the title of Walker (in press). But this hypothesis had to be rejected once the corpus was opened up to cover other sports, as the following two examples, successively from rugby and snooker, demonstrate.

Today it's gone against us but we played the rugby. It's a game we had won and then there's an element of luck and we've lost it. There was that bounce of the ball from O'Gara's little chip at the end. Credit to them - they had to throw everything at it. They've tried something and it's paid off - the luck of the Irish, as it were. It's difficult to say we've thrown that game away because it's the bounce of the ball. We've played most of the rugby and unfortunately we've come away with nothing again."

Jamie Noon (English centre, English, Yorkshire, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2006, 27 years, after defeat to Irish)

I came out afterwards, and I had three difficult shots, all 3 of which I've missed, and Steve then's gone break break break and it looked like it was going to be 8-7, and then he fell down and makes 57 points and I've managed to clear the table and I'm absolutely delighted.

Steve Davis, snooker player, Romford, commenting on being in final of UK Championships in 2004

But before continuing the investigation into how widespread this form is, it is important at this juncture to take a more purely linguistic detour and to reflect on

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<sup>3</sup> This particular restriction was applied, naturally, to eliminate any non-native speaker errors from the corpus.

<sup>4</sup> The implicit sociolinguistic comment here, in the comparison between football and cricket, deserves a degree of attention that this particular paper does not allow for.

the syntax of this form, to try and counter the possible objection that these narrative Present Perfect forms are in fact not particularly unusual or interesting.

### 3. The Narrative Present Perfect - What's All The Fuss About?

This narrative use of the Present Perfect, illustrated above, seems to have received very little coverage. The breadth and scope of the literature on the Present Perfect in English is nothing short of impressive, which makes its relative silence on the matter of the narrative Present Perfect all the more deafening. I posit three reasons for this absence: first, that my fellow academics do not spend enough time watching football matches; second, more seriously, that we are dealing here with a very recent development, one that has not had time to percolate into the grammatical descriptions of English and third, the interpretation least favourable to my enterprise here, that the Present Perfect as used by footballers is in fact of no major linguistic interest, inasmuch as it is merely an extension of existing uses. I will begin this section by attempting to demonstrate that discussion of the phenomenon is indeed lacking in the literature, before going on to indicate why I believe this usage is of great importance. In so doing, I will add a fourth explanation to the three outlined above.

In none of the reference grammars which I was able to consult is there any mention of the Present Perfect being used to narrate past events<sup>5</sup>. There are occasional references to the use of the Present Perfect in conjunction with past time adverbials, such as Quirk et al. (1985: 195), where we see the example "Yes, I've seen it [Macbeth] ages ago, when I was a child", followed by the somewhat throwaway remark to the effect that "Examples such as these may be explained as performance errors", but it is important to stress here I shall want to claim that this is an entirely different phenomenon. The use of the Present Perfect with past time adverbials has been given a certain amount of coverage both in grammar works, as we have just seen, and in the linguistic literature, to which we shall turn, but in none of the examples that I have presented is there an explicit time adverbial - past time reference is recoverable from context only, and the context is one of narrative, which is not the case in the example from Quirk and in all of the others I have seen in the literature.

Turning now to the linguistic body of research on the Present Perfect, we see a similar absence. This is not the place to go back over the extensive work that has been done on the Present Perfect in contemporary English, but suffice it to say that be it in the works by Elsness, McCoard, Cotte or McCawley, whom I cite below, along with a host of others, there is not a breath of this. There are one or two very fleeting remarks, almost in passing. According to Denison (1998: 279), Leisi mentions that "in some dialects, it is possible to hear the Present Perfect used for past-time narrative", although it is not entirely clear in this passage whether the foregoing citation is to be understood as being in conjunction with past time adverbials. Trudgill (1984: 42) mentions *en passant* the use of Present Perfect for recounting events. There is also the article by Engel and Ritz on Australian English (Engel & Ritz 2000), but very little on contemporary British English. Furthermore, Mair (2006: 84-85) provides an extensive list of syntactic changes in Modern

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<sup>5</sup> The list of these grammars is provided in the reference section at the end of this paper.

English that are deserving of our attention, and no mention is made of a potential change in the balance between the Preterit and the Present Perfect.

But as intimated above, this is perhaps simply due to the fact that I am reading too much into too few data. Let me attempt to counter such an objection. Most of the literature on the Present Perfect adopts a somewhat typological approach. Sometimes these typologies are semantically based, in other cases they have a more syntactic bent, but in essence they can be boiled down to the following exposition. In contemporary British English, most authors would concur, there are four types of Present Perfect, which may be illustrated as follows<sup>6</sup>:

- a. Perfect of Result  
I've washed my hair  
I've written to them, but they haven't replied.
- b. Existential/experiential perfect  
Have you ever broken a bone?  
I've seen Pulp Fiction I don't know how many times.
- c. Perfect of Persistent Situation (Extended Now)  
Harold has been here since last week.
- d. The 'Hot News' perfect  
Saddam Hussein has been executed.

The narrative Present Perfect causes a problem, because it clearly does not enter into any of the first three categories. There is however a strong temptation to attribute the examples I have quoted in the paper so far to the fourth category above, *viz.* the hot news perfect. The nature of the corpus, a series, let us remember, of post-match interviews, is very likely to lead us to believe that what we have here is nothing more than a conventional and much studied use of the Present Perfect. I believe this to be a mistaken interpretation, for at least two reasons.

First of all, it is my intuition that it is perfectly possible to invent an example such as the following, in which event is in the distant past are narrated (here, the final of the UEFA Champions League in 2005):

Early in the second half, Steven Gerrard's scored a magnificent header and it's given Liverpool the self belief they didn't have in the first half. A few minutes later, Šmicer's scored a cracker and then Gerrard's been fouled for Alonso's penalty.

This intuition would appear to be shared by McKie in the article already mentioned, in which he provides another invented example, purporting to recount events one week old:

"We've missed absolute sitters ... Mark Badman has kicked it straight at the goalie from five yards. Our luck was summed up in the last minute when Steve Brown has put in an absolute pearler of a cross to Charlie Griffin and, from four yards, he has managed not to put it in the net." (McKie, 2002)

More relevantly, it would appear that the examples quoted thus far in this paper are intrinsically different from the "hot news" perfect in one important respect: that is, they can be used to recount an entire sequence of successive events, in a way that is entirely analogous with the characteristic use of the Preterit in Standard

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<sup>6</sup> Authors will often differ as to the names they give to these categories, and on many of the finer details, but this presentation is sufficiently detailed for our present needs.

English. As far as I am aware, a "hot news" perfect is often used to introduce the subject of a narrative, but when that narrative begins, as in the example with Saddam Hussein quoted above, we would normally expect the Preterit to take over. This is not what occurs in the footballing examples, where the Present Perfect seems to be used from beginning to end of a conversation turn. It is chiefly for this reason that I would contend that the narrative Present Perfect does not fit in to the standard descriptions in the literature, and is therefore extremely problematic.

The foregoing discussion would seem therefore to lead to the conclusion, sketched out at the beginning of this section as the second of three reasons why the narrative Present Perfect does not feature in the literature, that we are dealing here with an emergent use of the periphrastic perfect in modern English, for narrative purposes. It must be conceded that this is indeed an extremely tempting conclusion, one that is given support by many who have written on the diachrony of past tense forms. Many of the authors who have noted the somewhat uncanonical uses of the Present Perfect with past time adverbials have advanced the theory that English is following the path trod by other languages before it, and most notably the Romance languages, wherein perfect forms have taken on simple past meanings (for example Comrie 1976: 61, Cotte 1987, who both attribute it to a relaxation of the restriction of current relevance). McKie (2002), writing from a non-linguistic perspective, sees the narrative Present Perfect as something new, as does Rastall (1999: 79) who, *contra* Comrie and Cotte, contends that this "unexpected Present Perfect is due to *focus of attention on current relevance* which has led to a recent new usage". These ideas are given ample support by authors who state that such a diachronic change involving the perfect is an entirely uncontroversial cross-linguistic phenomenon. Lindstedt (2000, 366), for example, has this to say: "The perfect is a gram type<sup>7</sup> that is frequent [...] but unstable, as it often tends to be lost. More often than not, it does not disappear as a form, but becomes something else - a general past tense, for instance." As is well documented, this is precisely what has happened in German and French, among a host of other languages.

Applying this analysis to the narrative Present Perfect is therefore hugely tempting, but nevertheless faces a number of problems, not least of which is the fact that American English functions in a manner which is wholly different, a fact which has been amply recorded (not least by Schottman 1997). This last consideration makes sweeping statements about "the direction English is going" more difficult to sustain, in particular in light of the fact that there may be another explanation. As Mair (under)states (2006: 111), there is a lack of clarity as to the diachrony of the Preterit versus Present Perfect distinction in English, and reading Olga Fischer, who says "The perfect is not fully grammaticalised in Middle English: it freely alternates in almost all its functions with the preterit." (Fischer 1992: 256), it is very hard not to be struck by the ease with which this remark could be applied to the examples given above. This is not to suggest that modern British footballers speak Middle English, rather that a picture whereby the Present Perfect is *becoming* a narrative form in contemporary English is potentially a misleading one.

#### **4. Not an emerging form, but a re-emerging one?**

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<sup>7</sup> For the term 'gram type', see, among others, the preface and the first article by Dahl in the same volume.

The suggestion I wish to sketch out in this concluding section can briefly be stated as follows. It is possible that what we are dealing with here, in the murky, troubled waters of the history of non-standard Englishes, is not in fact a new development at all, simply an increased visibility for a form which has never fact disappeared. Let it be stressed immediately that in the current state of research, it is impossible to confirm or reject this hypothesis, but it is an avenue that I believe we should pursue.

Earlier in this paper, I explained how my thinking developed from considering the narrative Present Perfect as being part of footballing register to regarding it as part of a wider sporting register. In the light of examples such as the following, it is clear that this particular position has to be abandoned. In one series of sketches, English comedienne Catherine Tate plays the role of Sam, a young woman who recounts events of the most stunning banality to her husband Paul, as if they were exceptional exploits, whereupon Paul collapses into hysterical laughter.

An absolutely mental day-to-day, you'll never believe it. Lunchtime, right, Elaine said to me "what do you fancy?" And I said I was thinking about a jacket potato and she said "I've half a mind to go to Prêt à Manger" and I said "why don't I walk down with you 'cos it's on the same way." In the end we've ended up sharing a jacket potato, cottage cheese and a salad so it's all worked out quite well. We've gone back to work, we've got in the lift, next thing I know, the lift's stopped, the doors have opened, she's walked out, I've followed her out, I've taken one look around me - I'm only on the fifth floor ain't I? I'm only on the fifth floor in human resources instead of the third floor in personnel [...] we have gone into uncontrollable hysterics. She said "what you doin' up here", I said "you know what I've done, doncha? I've only gone and followed you". She said to me "you're a lunatic!".

The accent in which this soliloquy is delivered can best be described as working class southeast English. So what conclusions can we draw? First, that the narrative Present Perfect is not a part of the sporting register, but is a form prevalent in non-standard British English<sup>8</sup> generally. It does seem to have a particular association with football, that much is clear, but is not restricted to this field of activity. The fact that we are clearly dealing with a sociolect raises the possibility that the narrative Present Perfect, far from being a novelty emerging in the English language, is a form of a certain venerability which has simply remained out of sight for many years. In the teaching and study of English grammar, and even in research into the history of English, the focus has almost always been exclusively on the development and description of standard English, with the result that huge amounts of data simply never feature in the prevailing accounts.

Only in recent years, with the extensive media coverage accorded to sports people in general and footballers in particular, has this form developed a certain degree of visibility and has become widely known, if not accepted, across all strata of society. In other words, my contention is that footballers are indeed leading the way: not by being innovators of a new grammatical form, but rather by being the vectors by which a particular use of the Present Perfect, which has never been grammaticalised in non-standard Englishes in the way that it has in Standard English, has gained wider public recognition. Whether or not this is true, and some arduous work on the diachrony of non-standard Englishes awaits this author, we can only conclude by thanking our much linguistically maligned professional footballers

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<sup>8</sup> The work on geographical distribution remains to be done, but this would appear to be a pan-British phenomenon. The corpus contains Scottish, Welsh and English speakers, from all four corners of the British Isles



for showing us once again how endlessly fascinating and complex the English verbal system can be. Footballers are often accused of verbal inadequacy, but if we listen closely they have a great deal to teach us!

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69007 Lyon  
France  
e-mail: Jim.Walker@univ-lyon2.fr