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# The strange phenomenon of the footballer's perfect<sup>1</sup>

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This paper must begin with two confessions on the part of its author, right from the very outset. The first is purely anecdotal, in that the research which it recounts was born, in part, of a passion - that of watching football - which all too often is seen as having very little to do with the lofty call of academia. If no other end is achieved herein than a demonstration that football can lead to serious linguistic reflection, in other words that intellectual business can indeed be combined with pleasure, then that in itself is perhaps sufficient. The second is a more serious confession, in that it relates to the way this paper, and the research process on which it is based, has been devised. This project was initially undertaken as an investigation into what might be seen as an unusual and little discussed grammatical feature, almost an oddity, one that has been termed the *footballer's perfect* for reasons that will become evident in a moment. The initial intention was simply to describe the phenomenon, to establish the factors which might lead to its emergence and to attempt to establish a sociolinguistic framework within which it might be more fruitfully studied. However, it soon became apparent that the feature described here poses problems for various approaches to the question of the present perfect that appear in the literature, and it is these more deeply-rooted theoretical problems, which in effect took over from the initial descriptive intention, which are submitted herein. In other words, this paper seeks less to present the findings of research than to indicate what problems these initial findings might pose. The confession that needs to be made, then, is that the problems sketched out here come as the direct result of a certain theoretical bias that will become apparent over the coming pages. I have made clear in the past (Walker, 2002) my contention that utterer-based, pragmatics-oriented

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<sup>1</sup> Je souhaiterais remercier les deux relecteurs de cet article, à qui je dois d'avoir évité quelques coquilles et certains maladroites.

grammars are ill-equipped for handling certain variationist phenomena in language, and I shall be using the footballer's perfect as more grist to my mill.

So let us turn to definitions and descriptions and begin by examining the *footballer's perfect*. To begin with, a negative definition, to indicate what it is not.

#### A. The Present Perfect with Past Time Adverbials vs. the Footballer's Perfect

There is little need to comment on the well-known fact that the Present Perfect (henceforth PP) is not, despite what prescriptive grammatical tradition would have us believe, and therefore despite what we consistently tell our students, entirely incompatible with definite past time reference. This has been pointed out by a great many authors (for example, Cotte 1987: 91-93, Rastall 1999 and Larroque 1999, who tries to explain the phenomenon in utterer-centred terms, an analysis I shall attempt to counter in the paper). This use of the present perfect may be illustrated by the following examples, which stem from my own research:

1. The epidemic of highly pathogenic avian influenza caused by H5N1, which began in mid-December 2003 in the Republic of Korea and is now being seen in other Asian countries, is therefore of particular public health concern. H5N1 variants demonstrated a capacity to directly infect humans in 1997, and **have done so again in Viet Nam in January 2004**.

WHO Avian Influenza fact sheet [http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004\\_01\\_15/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)

2. Don't know whether this is new to you guys but it was news to me--a copy of Saussure's original manuscript of his work was found in his summer house in 1996 and **has been published in French in 2002**, reviewed by Roy Harris in England in 2002 and will be published by Oxford University Press this summer.

message to the LINGANTH list: <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0604B&I=LINGANTH&P=R2&I=3>

However, it would appear that there has been considerably less coverage of the phenomenon I want to present here<sup>2</sup>, and which I shall tentatively call the *Footballer's Perfect*, or alternatively the narrative perfect. In passing, while we are on the incidental but rarely negligible

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<sup>2</sup> Rastall (1999, 81) claims not to have seen it mentioned in any of the grammars he has consulted.

subject of the name of the phenomenon, I might also suggest calling this the colloquial perfect<sup>3</sup> or, following Visser (1973, § 2008b), the ‘epic perfect’.

It will be helpful to introduce an example of the footballer’s perfect here, before moving on to a fuller discussion.

3. 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.

Graeme Souness (manager Newcastle Utd, Scottish, Edinburgh, 53 years, 21/2/06, after league match against Blackburn)<sup>4</sup>

This extract was recorded in a post-match interview with the erstwhile football manager, Graeme Souness, on BBC's *Match of the Day*. We see here that the present perfect is being used systematically by the speaker to narrate events in a football match, where we might more readily expect to see the preterit used. The important thing to note here is that there is no time adverbial: the past time reference is recoverable by external context only. The ‘footballer’s perfect’, then, will be used here to refer to this specific use of PP for narrative purposes, without the adjunction of any form of explicit adverbial.

To my knowledge, there are only a small handful of fleeting references in the literature to this phenomenon. Rastall (1999) says that he has detected an increased use of the PP by sports commentators when commenting on video playback of events during matches, although it will be my contention that it is by no means restricted to this particular context, and Leisi (1964, cited par Denison 1998, 192) also notes that, in some dialects, PP can be used narratively, though no

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, of course, we think of work by Wendy Schottman (SCHOTTMAN, 1997) and her use of the term *colloquial present*, but as Schottman herself underlines, this term goes back at least to Vanneck in 1958 (SCHOTTMAN, 1997, 14)

<sup>4</sup> The reason for the biographical details under the example are for the planned sociolinguistic exploitation of the corpus, which has not yet been undertaken.

further indications are forthcoming.<sup>5</sup> Only Engel and Ritz (2000) discuss this phenomenon in any detail, pinpointing it as something occurring with increasing frequency in contemporary Australian English.

In order to investigate the Footballer's Perfect, I constituted what amounts for the moment to a rather informal corpus of transcriptions of post-match interviews, either from BBC's Match of the Day, as in example (3) or from the BBC website. Apart from these sources the corpus also contains examples heard and noted on the fly on news bulletins or discussion programmes, and from match reports in the British press and other web-based sources. The corpus currently runs to a little over 50 examples, and therefore needs considerably more work in order to become fully exploitable, but there is already enough evidence in my view for a number of interesting questions to be asked. It is clear, for example, that this use of the present perfect is extraordinarily frequent in these post-match interview situations, appearing in a little over 50% of the interviews when the interviewee begins recounting a goal or, more often than not, when complaining about a dubious refereeing decision, as we see in examples 4 & 5.

4. The players thought it was a foul on Maik Taylor (for Fulham's second goal) but the referee hasn't given it.

Steve Bruce (manager Birmingham City, English, Northumberland, 46 years, Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> 2003, after draw with Fulham)

5. The linesman's given the decision but what astounds me is that he [Riley] has sent Taricco off before he spoke to the linesman. Very unjust. If it had been 1-0 at half-time I'd have taken that and we might have got something out of it.

(Glenn Hoddle, manager, Tottenham Hotspurs, English, west London, 47 years, after league defeat to Manchester Utd.)

What is also clear from a cursory examination of the corpus is that this use of PP seems to be in some sense a feature of what one might venture to call a footballing register, inasmuch as the examples in 4 and 5 were actually taken from a written source, the reports of the matches in question appearing in the Guardian on the day following the match. It is common practice when

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Trudgill (1978, 13) also touches on the use of PP, in passing, using an example from what might be construed as a footballing context: "He's played for us last year". This is mentioned here as a curiosity, however, because it contains of course the adverbial 'last year'.

quoting verbatim to provide some indication, such as a parenthesised *sic*, that the quotation contains some form of linguistic oddity, but there is no such indication here. As yet, it is not entirely clear what conclusions, if any, can be drawn from the written provenance of such examples, other than the fact they seem to be creeping into footballing articles unnoticed.

A number of questions are raised by this feature, which I will briefly sketch out and address in turn.

### B. The Footballer's Perfect - Questions

Firstly, does this PP "replace" a preterit, in these match narratives, or can they co-exist? In either case, what can we conclude from this, in terms of the constraints, or lack thereof, on the use of the present perfect? As we see from examples 4 and 5, and again in 6 and 7 below, there seems to be no constraint on a PP and a preterit appearing together in two successive conjoined clauses, with the same temporal context. The corpus contains many other examples like those given. Might we conclude from this that the PP and the preterit have precisely the same value here, that they are essentially interchangeable? The initial evidence seems to indicate that indeed they are, and if this tentative conclusion is reinforced by further data, this cannot fail to throw up problems for grammatical theories based on core meanings.

6 We should've gone in 3-0 up at half time, at least. Wonderful football for the first goal, a sizzling shot by Alan, one of his best. But Alan then missed a big chance and their keeper has clattered Kieron outside the area. He should have got a red card. I feel strongly about it.

Bobby Robson (manager Newcastle United, English, County Durham, 73 years, Jan. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004, after league match with Leeds)

7 We're disappointed, because Portsmouth have only created one chance in the match, and they've took 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)

Secondly, is there something in the fact that all of these examples are taken from post-match interviews? Taking a typological perspective for a moment, can we not just see these as a form of 'hot news perfect'? Taking a more utterer-centred approach, can we not see the emergence of a present here as a means for the speaker to indicate that he is in some sense reliving the moment? In short, is this PP not a kind of an extension of the historical present? Example 8 might be pointing us in that direction, in that it seems that the transition from the preterit to a historical present might be a contributing factor for the subsequent use of a present perfect:

8. No such measures needed 5 minutes later when Thompson floated a corner to the far edge of the box and with one measured swipe Bellamy planted the ball in the far corner of the net. Pandemonium in the stands. Two minutes later one of the refereeing decisions of the year; Bellamy gets on the end of our best passing move of the game, hares into the box and in [sic] taken out, American Football style. A clear penalty. Except the referee hasn't reacted. Better yet neither has the linesman. Now it is possible that the ref had his view blocked by a player, but the linesman had a clear unobstructed view.

<http://www.nrvcelticfanzine.com/match%20reports/season%202004-05/aberdeen%20h%20apr.htm> (match report in Celtic fanzine, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006)

However, it would be a mistake to see this footballer's PP as merely an extended historical present or as a *hot news PP*, for two reasons. The first is that, as we have seen, it enjoys an apparently easy co-existence with the preterit, more so perhaps than does the simple present with the preterit (though it must be readily acknowledged that this latter statement is based on intuition rather than quantitative analysis, and is therefore in need of further research). The second is that the footballer's PP can easily be extended back in time. Although no such example exists in the corpus, because of the nature of this latter, a narration of the events of the Champion's League Final of 2005, or Maradona's hand-of-God goal in the 1986 World Cup, using the PP, would not be grammatically ill-formed.

To complicate matters, we encounter an even greater complexity of verb form mixing in examples 9 and 10:

9. "I was sitting just there, and I can't believe the ref hasn't seen him. He handballed it, clear as day, he's put his hand up to it, but the ref didn't see it. At the end of the day, he's affected the outcome."

Mark Hughes, manager Blackburn Rovers, Welsh, Wrexham, 43 years, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2005, after league defeat to Liverpool)

10. 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

In short, the evidence seems to force the conclusion that the contributing factor to the emergence of these forms is less the situation, i.e. the post-match interview, than the status of the speakers as sportspeople.<sup>6</sup>

The third question which arises pertains to the sociolinguistic status of the narrative PP. The working hypothesis was that this usage was more or less restricted to football, hence the name given to the form in the title and the early sections of this paper. The reason for this was that, although the author follows a number of sports assiduously, he was under the distinct impression that this form was heard only from footballers. The corpus extends to cricketers and rugby players, for example, and in the (admittedly rather small) corpus, there is no narrative PP. This particular hypothesis needs considerable refinement, however. That the form is associated with footballers is undoubted, as example 11 makes clear:

11. **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, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

Unlike examples 4 and 5 above, this is no verbatim quotation, but the caption to a photograph. It is very hard to imagine the narrative PP being used for any other kind of photograph, since "the ref's had a shocker" is something of a stock phrase that immediately

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<sup>6</sup> Although all the examples given here are from sportsMEN, this is entirely an artefact of the corpus. There seems no a priori reason to believe that narrative PP is a particularly masculine phenomenon, though this will naturally be one of the questions to be addressed in forthcoming sociolinguistic work.



connotes football. Similarly, an article in *The Guardian* by columnist David McKie (McKie, 2002), commenting on and to a certain extent complaining about the prevalence of the feature, refers only to football, saying: "And yet the usage [of the present perfect] in football still seems awkward and odd. It doesn't happen with cricket." However, analysis shows that it is not purely the linguistic territory of footballers, as example 10 above was spoken by a snooker player.<sup>7</sup> It appears therefore that we need to be looking at the sociological status of these speakers, rather than at their profession. This is not an entirely surprising conclusion, but one that does not concur with the initial hypothesis.

The fourth question that needs to be addressed is the diachronic status of this form, and more particularly whether there are parallels to be drawn between this narrative perfect and the reputedly increasing use of PP with time adverbials. Many of the authors who have noted these somewhat uncanonical uses of the present perfect 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). 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>8</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."

Applying this analysis to the narrative PP is therefore hugely tempting, particularly in the light of the use of PP with time adverbials, 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

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<sup>7</sup> It has recently been brought to my attention that British comedienne Catherine Tate plays a recurrent character, in her BBC television series "The Catherine Tate Show", as one member of a happily married yet slightly simple couple (Paul and Sam), who find everyday situations surprisingly hilarious. Her character uses the narrative PP almost systematically, and therefore needs exploring further.

<sup>8</sup> For the term 'gram type', see, among others, the preface and the first article by Dahl in the same volume.

sweeping statements about "the direction English is going" more difficult to sustain. Considerably more work needs to go into the history of the narrative PP before we can talk of such grammatical drift with any degree of certainty. There seems to be little discussion of this matter in the literature, but Visser (1973, §2008) quotes examples of narrative PP from Middle English, so the form may have a much richer history than we imagine. I am tempted to believe that talk of grammatical drift is based to a certain degree on this lack of diachronic information, and on an undue focussing on Standard English, a point to be expanded upon in a moment.

### C. From the Footballer's Perfect to Variation and Utterer-Centred Grammars - discussion

To conclude this paper, let us reflect more globally on the problems that have been raised here.

First of all, any approach to grammar that sets out to be explicative rather than purely descriptive - and utterer-centred grammars are certainly to be counted among these - must be able to account for apparently marginal variationist phenomena, within the bounds of its own theoretical constructs. The footballer's perfect is a prime example of such a case. A phenomenon such as this has to be confronted, and this cannot be done by handing the problem over to sociolinguists and asking them to sort it out - they have been doing so, reasonably successfully, for decades, without needing to work within an utterer-centred framework. Some schools of utterer-centred linguistics are rather suspicious of looking to the extralinguistic world for explanations of linguistic phenomena, and are equally suspicious, it would appear, of troublesome variationist phenomena. However, if sociolinguistics has taught us anything over the last forty years, it is that the extralinguistic cannot be excluded from grammar, and that variation cannot be dismissed as marginal. By flirting with the rejection of the extralinguistic, utterer-centred grammars are in danger of rejecting almost everything that has ever been put forward to attempt to explain variation.

Secondly, what does a grammatical theory that posits the existence of core semantic meanings of operators to explain structural grammatical phenomena do in a case like this? Here we have an operator HAVE interchanging almost willy-nilly with -ED. What happens to the central meaning we have posited? How do we explain its behaviour when it is as unexpected as this? A number of options are open, it seems. In what follows, the author may well stand accused of having created straw men, but it must be noted that there at least four of them:

1. We pass it off as natural drift, and we say that English is moving that way. However, this raises a number of problems. One was brought up earlier, i.e. that English seems to be moving both ways at once, and another is the related issue of the considerable problem we create for ourselves by saying that "English is moving", i.e. that we continue to entertain the illusion that "English" is a coherent whole. Most importantly, however, we also have a problem with our overarching theory, in that we have implicitly confessed that we cannot explain this change within the bounds thereof. We have sought an explanation that is not in itself utterer-related, and have demonstrated the need for a diachrony of operations, something which needs to be more cogently theorised than it would appear to be at the present time.

This objection may not be an insurmountable obstacle for grammatical theories that are based on notions of utterer choice and semantic invariants. It is, however, a very serious challenge, which to a very great extent up until now has been largely ignored or underestimated, instead of being met head-on.

2. We might want to make the claim that our definition of the operator in question, in our case HAVE, is sufficiently abstract to enable it to account for two apparently contradictory cases, or alternatively we might seek to tweak the definition somewhat, to adapt it to this new data. While this would be a completely sound approach, epistemologically speaking, it is hard to avoid

the feeling that if this were to be the course to be followed, we should be watering the theory down beyond all recognition.

3. We might wish to posit the existence of two separate systems - one in which HAVE has one core meaning, another in which it has a slightly different, or even a contrastive value. This would be, it seems, more intuitively pleasing, but would fly in the face of much recent sociolinguistic research, which often stresses how language users function along continua of possibilities, rather than falling neatly into one category or another. It would be hard to explain, on this view, why a speaker might use one version and then another, within the same speech turn.

4. This is the option that I am currently minded to propose. Each available grammatical form is available "out there", so to speak, in language, and each has meaning - but that meaning is more social than it is purely linguistic, and as such cannot be grounded in a hypothetical operation, and even less in a posited semantic core. The idea that grammatical forms have meaning that extends beyond their purely linguistic form is no revolution to anybody versed in the sociolinguistic literature, but is something that has been insufficiently handled by utterer-centred grammarians. I would contend, therefore, that it is somewhat misguided to go looking deep down into HAVE +EN to explain the uses of the footballer's perfect highlighted here. The form "HAVE +EN" bears extralinguistic meaning, and it is this that is being brought to bear in the examples. To go back to the notion of redundancy: the HAVE +EN form will appear (although this needs to be confirmed by more corpus evidence) in cases where the past narrative reference is established contextually, not necessarily by linguistic context, but wider-ranging situational context, notably the post-match interview. With that in mind, HAVE +EN is "free" to refer to the past, and to express its "social meaning" - i.e. the explanation for its appearance and

use is partly contextual, and therefore analysable in terms of utterer choice, but overwhelmingly social, and therefore, it seems to me, singularly less amenable to such analysis.

While it is becoming increasingly clear to me that it would be entirely wrong to claim that variation in English is ignored by utterer-centred linguists, I still feel that it is by no means given the place it truly deserves. Furthermore, and this is the crux, it is still not entirely clear to me how a theory, based as it is on the concept of deep-rooted semantic invariables, is conceptually equipped to handle features such as those set forth here, which lie on an ill-defined border between the inter- and extralinguistic. It is for this reason that I would repeat a call I have made before, but here more forcefully, that those working within a broadly enunciative framework make a more concerted effort to regard variation as central to the problem of language, and therefore central to their concerns. In other words, to prove me wrong.

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