

Book Review

Xinyue Yao. 2024. *The present perfect and the preterite in Late Modern and Contemporary English. A corpus-based study of grammatical change* (Studies in Corpus Linguistics 114). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. xvii + 235. ISBN: 9789027214430.

Reviewed by **Berit Johannsen**, Institute for English Language and Literature, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany, E-mail: berit.johannsen@fu-berlin.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/flin-2025-2023>

The aim of Yao's book is to explore "the mechanisms and motivations for the diachrony of the [present perfect-preterite] opposition in English from the late 18th to the late 20th century" (p. 2). Yao formulates three main research questions, which include further subquestions: 1. "How did the co-occurring tendencies [of the present perfect and the preterite, e.g. temporal specification, situation type, transitivity] shift over time, and what broader functional changes do they suggest?", 2. "How is [register and regional] variation reflected in the diachrony of the PP and the PT?", 3. "What are the probable motivating factors – linguistic, cognitive, and/or social – for the observed changes? More generally speaking, how does the diachrony of the PP and the PT relate to established sources of language change such as grammaticalization and contact?". The author subscribes to a usage-based approach and situates the study within grammaticalization and variationist sociolinguistic research, the latter of which is restricted to register and regional variation in the present study. Furthermore, Yao combines corpus analysis of a specific language, English, with a comparative overview of European languages. The data for the corpus analyses come from ARCHER, ICE-GB (spoken), the Santa Barbara Corpus, and the COHA. While the BNC, COCA and the Brown family of corpora are listed as data sources in the introduction, they are only used as sources of a handful of illustrative examples throughout the book, but not for any corpus analyses.

The main part of the book starts with a chapter (Chapter 2) on the theoretical background, in which the notions of tense, aspect and situation type are introduced. Additionally, Yao presents how she draws a line between semantic and pragmatic information conveyed in the use of the present perfect and the preterite. Finally, the author proposes a framework for the functions of the present perfect based on a Reichenbachian system of tenses (Klein 1992, 1994; Reichenbach 1966) and previous accounts of current relevance as the overarching function of the present perfect. Yao argues that the present perfect differs from the preterite in that current relevance is linguistically encoded in the former, hence part of its semantics, but can only be pragmatically inferred with the latter. Although the argumentation is generally convincing, the incompatibilities of formal semantic and usage-based accounts and

the difficulties of applying the theoretical concepts to usage data, especially historical data, could have been addressed in more detail. Yao only mentions these issues in passing at some points (p. 26, p. 40). In my view, this chapter would have benefited from more usage-based cognitive linguistic accounts.

Chapter 3 sketches the development of the English present perfect (and its opposition to the preterite) from Old English to Present-Day English, based on existing accounts and studies. It provides a good overview on previous accounts and empirical studies of the history of the English present perfect. A minor point of criticism concerns the situation type of other periphrastic *have*-constructions in Old and Present-Day English as described by de Acosta (2013): Yao claims that the adnominal, affectee and target-state (“attained state” in de Acosta’s terminology) constructions all have stative interpretations (p. 55), which is not in line with de Acosta’s description and Johannsen’s (2022) analysis of PDE *have*-NP-past participle constructions in the Spoken BNC2014. For the adnominal construction, de Acosta (2013: 37) does not specify the situation type, but only states that the construction contains lexical *have*. Johannsen’s (2022: 65) corpus analysis only finds instances of this construction (“optional depictive” construction in her terminology) with dynamic/non-stative uses of *have* in the sense of ‘eat’. For the attained state (target-state) construction de Acosta states that “[t]he action described by the attained state type begins punctually and continues as a state” (2013: 37). Based on this, Johannsen distinguishes a non-stative *have*-resultative construction (more precisely, this construction expresses achievements) and a stative *have*-depictive construction (2021: 62–64). De Acosta does not specify the situation type(s) expressed by the affectee construction, but the corpus examples in Johannsen (2022: 54) clearly show its non-stative situation type, as it is, for example, used in the progressive (*do you know Liverpool are having work done on their stadium* [Spoken BNC2014: ST6R]). This minor detail is, however, not a problem, as Yao leaves the origin of the perfect open, stressing that “the perfect function – that is, expressing a past situation with current relevance – is manifestly available in Old English” (p. 56). The focus lies on the changing opposition between the present perfect and the preterite and, most importantly, Yao identifies corpus-methodological issues in previous studies, as “the quantitative evidence gathered so far is at best suggestive of the reported declines [and] topical shifts may easily lead to variation in tense choice, even across different sections of the same text” (p. 64), which is hidden by the whole-corpus approach of earlier studies, which emphasizes variation between corpora and subcorpora and ignores variation within them. She convincingly concludes that “more rigorous inferential statistics are required to tease apart patterns of random variation from strong indicators of genuine language change” (p. 64).

Before the author presents her own corpus analysis, she reviews the typological literature on perfects and related categories in Chapter 4, ending in a cross-linguistic

survey on the present-day functions of *have*-periphrasis and preterite in European languages. While the chapter contains some relevant background on cross-linguistic tendencies in developments of tense-aspect systems, I think that the contents of this chapter could have been more smoothly included in other chapters. For example, proposed universal grammaticalization paths could have been discussed in Chapter 3 and the cross-linguistic survey, which is not needed for the corpus analyses presented in Chapters 5–7, could have been included in Chapter 8, where parts of it are needed for the cross-linguistic comparison between English and Spanish.

Chapters 5–7 contain the core of the book and constitute a major contribution to the study of the history of the English present perfect and preterite. Chapter 5 presents a frequency analysis of the present perfect and preterite in corpus data from ARCHER, ICE-GB (spoken) and the Santa Barbara Corpus. Yao determines the rate of present perfect (vs. preterite) for individual texts, grouped by fifty-year subperiods of Late Modern and Present-Day English, registers (drama, letters, news, science, conversation), and variety (American vs. British English), and explores the variability of present perfect rate within and between groups of texts. The most important findings are that there is considerable variability on both levels and that register differences are particularly relevant in explaining that variability. The median rate is highest in letters across subperiods and varieties, followed by drama, science and news. The texts in the science category are the most heterogenous, followed by letters, drama, and news. Yao then discusses each register in more detail, convincingly providing explanations for differences in present perfect rate while analyzing some example extracts from individual texts. The rest of the chapter concerns the identification of the most prominent diachronic trends by comparing the present perfect rates in the ARCHER data of the first period (1750–1799) to the last period (1950–1999). In general, all registers, except for BrE letters, show a declining trend in present perfect rate, but the difference is only significant for AmE drama and letters. Yao concludes that the rise of the preterite at the expense of the present perfect is not restricted to speech-based registers but also appears in interactive written registers, arguing that drama and letters differ from science and news mostly in the degree of interactiveness and the availability of shared time and space.

In Chapter 6, the author presents a multivariate analysis of the ARCHER data in the form of four mixed effects logistic regression models for the periods 1750–1799 and 1950–1999 and the varieties British and American English respectively, considering the predictor variables register, temporal specification, telicity, transitivity, negation, subject type, clause type and preceding verb form, as well as the interactions between register and telicity, register and transitivity, and register and clause type. The models also include individual texts as a random effect. In a nutshell, the results of these analyses are the following: in both varieties, temporal specification, negation, and the simple present as preceding verb form became significant

predictors for the choice of the present perfect over the preterite from the first to the second period, while first- and second-person pronouns became insignificant over time. In AmE drama texts, the association between the present perfect and transitive clauses becomes insignificant, while it is already insignificant in the first period in BrE. Yao interprets these findings as evidence for the present perfect's continued grammaticalization. While it is convincing that the increased association of negation with present perfect indicates the strengthening of the non-resultative, continuative use, which can be seen as grammaticalization with regard to the function along the resultative > anterior > perfective/past path, I do not think that the weakened association with transitivity should also be linked to grammaticalization. Yao interprets this as the present perfect moving "further away from its transitive roots and spread[ing] into the former territory of the *be*-periphrasis" (p. 126) and categorizes this development as grammaticalization. But what about German? In German, *be*-perfects are still used, but both *be*- and *have*-perfects are further along the grammaticalization path with regard to their function, as mentioned by Yao in Chapter 4. Should the changes in the choice of auxiliary be regarded as part of grammaticalization at all? Such questions on the scope and nature of grammaticalization are not specific to Yao's book, but a general problem of grammaticalization research (see e.g. Joseph 2014; von Mengden and Simon 2014). In general, the book would have benefited from a clear definition of grammaticalization and/or a critical evaluation of the concept of grammaticalization.

Chapter 7 takes a closer look at two additional variables – the progressive and temporal adverbials – through a random forest analysis of the 1750–1799 and 1950–1999 ARCHER data. The results mostly confirm the results of the regression analysis of Chapter 6, with only some divergences concerning register. There is change concerning the progressive over time: while it is not significant in the first period, it predicts a higher probability of the present perfect in AmE in the second period. Yao also presents interesting findings for the temporal adverbials.

Finally, Chapter 8 considers language-internal and -external explanations for the developments described in the previous chapters. In the first part of the chapter, Yao tests the formal-leveling hypothesis, which claims that reduced formal difference between present perfect and preterite in AmE leads to rise of preterite, in data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). In the second part, the author considers external explanations of dialect and language contact by comparing the development in English to the development in Spanish, based on existing literature, and argues that there are parallels between colonial varieties of the two languages. The argumentation is not entirely convincing, however, as the existence of dialect and language contact in the history of both colonial varieties does not entail that these have caused these linguistic developments. More evidence from

other colonial varieties and language and dialect contact situations would have been needed to strengthen the argument.

In sum, Yao's book provides a thorough and methodologically fine-grained analysis of frequency developments of the present perfect and preterite in British and American English in the past 250 years. While the cross-linguistic comparisons are not always convincing, the strength of the book lies in the corpus analysis of the development in English.

References

- Acosta, Diego de. 2013. The Old English *have*-perfect and its congeners. *Journal of English Linguistics* 41(1). 33–64.
- Johannsen, Berit. 2022. *She has a stadium named after her* – Meaning variation in spoken interaction. *Constructions and Frames* 14(1). 42–78.
- Joseph, Brian D. 2014. What counts as (an instance of) grammaticalization? *Folia Linguistica* 48(2). 361–384.
- Klein, Wolfgang. 1992. The present perfect puzzle. *Language* 68(3). 525–552.
- Klein, Wolfgang. 1994. *Time in language*. London: Routledge.
- Mengden, Ferdinand von & Horst J. Simon. 2014. What is it then, this grammaticalization? *Folia Linguistica* 48(2). 347–360.
- Reichenbach, Hans. 1966. *Elements of symbolic logic*. New York: Free Press.