The present perfect in British and American English: Has there been any change, recently?

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1 Introduction

For past-time reference, Present-Day English (PDE) has a choice between the present perfect (*I have seen her*) and the simple past tense (*I saw her*). With temporal adverbials like *yesterday* or *last week*, the simple past (SP) is usually required. Adverbials like *since, just* and *yet* tend to be used with a present perfect (PP). The distinction between SP and PP is a fairly recent development in English. Since the distinction was not clear-cut in British English (BrE) when the first settlers arrived in America, its scarcity in American English (AmE) has been interpreted as an aspect of colonial lag. Data from late Modern English indicate that this is not really the case. The long-range, corpus-based study by Elsness (1997) shows that the PP increases over time but starts decreasing again from the second half of the eighteenth century. This development is led by AmE, but the decrease starts from a higher level than in BrE.

Previous corpus-based studies of PDE – whenever they included regional variation – have consistently shown that the PP is more commonly used in BrE than in AmE. The American *Did you eat?* for British *Have you eaten?* can even be considered one of the shibboleths of transatlantic grammatical differences (cf. Strevens 1972: 48; Biber *et al*. 1999: 463).[1] According to Foster (1968: 210), BrE was not following AmE in replacing the PP with the SP in the 1960s:

> On another negative note, it is interesting to see that British is so far firmly opposed to the American habit of bringing a simple past tense into play when a very recent action is indicated. ... It should perhaps be added that such syntax is known to Englishmen via the famous 'Kilroy was here', let alone such Hollywood film phrases as 'I just ate' and the ever-recurring 'So you finally got here'. But they show no tendency to copy it.

Evidence from the Brown family of corpora might show that this is no longer the case. Elsness (2009: 242), based on the untagged version of the Brown quartet and a study of 20 frequently used verbs, provides preliminary evidence that the decrease of the PP continues into the second half of the twentieth century. He points at a regional difference, namely that the decline is slowing down in AmE and that BrE is approaching the level of AmE. In other words, the two national varieties appear to be converging in their use of the PP. We will use evidence from the tagged corpora to show whether this is, indeed, the case.

The tone of Foster's comment is somewhat disparaging. Powell (1990: 484) is even more outspoken in his condemnation of what is perceived as an ongoing change in BrE:

> Written – and spoken – English is rapidly becoming the tongue of those who do *not* know Latin. We are for instance losing – as transatlantic English has already lost – the expressive resource of the difference in English (uniquely among European languages) between the aorist […] and the perfect […]. The result is English impoverished because it is English ungrammatical.

If anything, AmE is more conservative than BrE in using the SP with adverbials that indicate recent relevance; the use of the PP with these adverbials is a more recent development in the grammaticalisation process. Nevertheless, usage guides tend to attack the combination of the SP with *yet* in AmE as ungrammatical (cf. Greenbaum and Whitcut 1988: 783; *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* 1989: 969; Burchfield 1996: 861).

One strand of evidence, then, indicates a declining use of the PP in English. But at the same time, we find comments pointing in the opposite direction: reports of the PP being combined with temporal adverbials that clearly indicate past time reference:

> One interesting example of grammatical variation which may represent the beginning of a change in the language is the apparently increasing use of the present perfect construction in conjunction with expressions of definite past time reference. We may hear utterances such as *And Roberts has played for us last season* (implying that he did so without any kind of break). Most native speakers, it must be admitted, would find this odd. They would claim that the speaker had made a mistake. But sentences like this are heard more and more often. (Hughes *et al*. 2005: 12f.).

Hughes *et al*. (*ibid*.) claim that these constructions "are heard more and more often", so they might be a feature mainly of spoken English. Two twentieth-century examples from written American texts are quoted by Vanneck (1958: 240) who interprets them as rare cases of hypercorrection. We find anecdotal evidence of the expanded use of the PP in BrE in various sources (cf. Trudgill 1984: 42; Meyer 1995: 226; Elness 1997: 26; Engel 1998: 131f. and Rastall 1999: 80f.).[2] Frequency data, however, is practically never given. Engel (1998) and Engel and Ritz (2000) give a qualitative analysis of PPs in past-tense contexts, stressing their particular pragmatic function as framing elements (at the beginning or end of a newspaper article). Miller (2004: 235) attributes these PPs in press language to the advent of computer-based publishing and less rigorous copy-editing. Engel (1998: 141) concludes that the PP is obviously far from grammaticalising into a tense marker in English.

In the following, we will look at both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the development of the PP. The macroscopic, quantitative approach will consider the overall frequency of the PP, frequency variation according to text type, and relative frequencies of the PP and the SP. In the microscopic, qualitative analyses we will focus on the co-occurrence of the PP and SP with temporal adverbials. We will use data from both written and spoken corpora of BrE and AmE (for the corpora included in the study, see Appendix 1).

2 The PP – overall development

2.1 The frequency of the PP in standard BrE and AmE

To retrieve occurrences of the PP in the Brown family corpora, we used the CQP query software (Christ 1994) on versions of the corpora that had been tagged in advance for part of speech (POS; see Mair *et al*. 2002). The two basic elements of the CQP query are the POS specification for the auxiliary HAVE (in the present tense) and the past participle. Between these two elements a variety of optional material is permitted, including:

- adverbs (e.g. *quite*, *recently*), negatives (*not*, *n't*) or multiword adverbials (e.g. *of course*, *in general*);
- noun phrases: pronouns or simple NPs consisting of optional premodifiers (such as determiners, adjectives) and nouns. These typically occur in the inverted word order of interrogative utterances (*Has he arrived? Have the children eaten yet?*)[3]

Figure 1 gives the overall development of the PP in the Brown family of corpora expressed as frequencies per million words (pmw):[4]

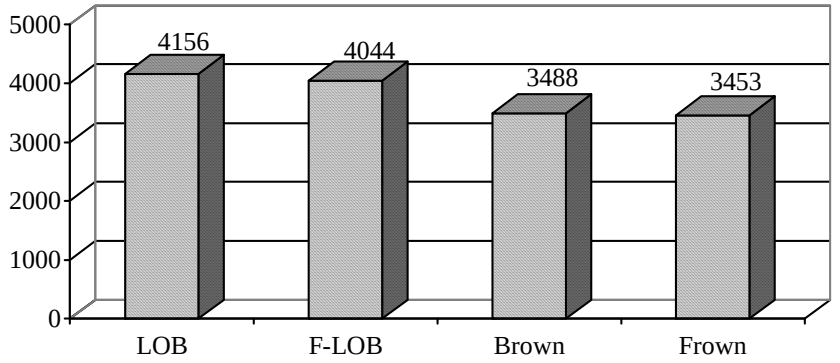

Figure 1: Development of PP in the Brown-family (frequency pmw)

Log likelihood tests performed on these data show that the overall diachronic development within both varieties is not significant. However, the general trend to be observed is that of a slight decrease of PPs in both varieties of English, which is led by AmE. PPs in AmE started out at a lower level in the 1960s, and despite the more dramatic decrease in BrE, written AmE in the 1990s still uses significantly fewer PPs than BrE. So we are dealing with relatively stable regional variation, overall. The evidence based on the tagged version of the corpora thus does not support Elsness' (2009) findings, i.e. a narrowing of the gap between BrE and AmE differences in the use of this grammatical construction.

We now turn to developments in different genres. The results from Table 1 in Appendix 2 are graphically summarized in Figure 2:

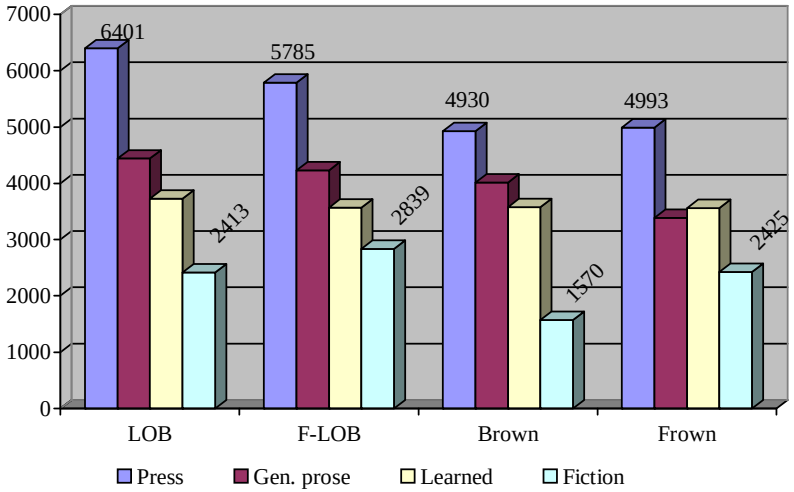

Figure 2: Development of PP across genres (frequency pmw)

The tendency towards an overall decrease of PPs is also evident in journalistic prose in Britain where, this time, it is statistically significant. Newspaper language in the US, on the other hand, shows a slight increase of PPs, but this development is below the level of statistical significance. But why would the PP increase at all in AmE? Elsness (2009: 234f.) comments on technical change as a possible explanation:

> […] with modern telecommunications news reporting has changed drastically since the eighteenth century; in that century news reports usually centred on events which were quite distant in time, while today even news reported in print tends to be located in the much more recent past.

McCawley (1971) coined the term 'hot news' perfect for this pragmatically motivated use of the perfect. Miller (2004: 235) attributes the PPs in press language to the advent of computer-based publishing and less rigorous copy-editing. Engel (1998) gives a qualitative analysis of PPs in past-tense contexts, stressing their particular pragmatic function as framing elements (at the beginning or end of a newspaper article). She describes this function as 'scene-setting before a narrative'. But in our data, resultative PPs in the opening sentences of

news reports have not increased: we found 13 in section A of the Brown corpus and only eight in Frown. In Engel's data, the PP seems to have been used more frequently overall. Even if not all of these are resultative PPs, and some may have been motivated by a co-occurring temporal adverbial such as *recently* or *so far*, the difference between her data and our results is still striking.

Apart from newspaper language, there is a significant decrease in American general prose. Fictional writing is also an interesting category to look at: we see an increase of PPs in this genre, which is more dramatic in AmE than in BrE.[5] The result of this increase is that fiction writing is coming closer to general prose in its use of PPs, and the overall differences between text categories are decreasing in both national varieties. This is again a result that differs markedly from Elsness' study (2009) that was based on a sub-set of verbs from the untagged versions of the corpora: he reports that the present perfect is consistently used much less frequently in fictional writing than in other text categories in his diachronic study. The development in his data is thus towards a greater divergence of fictional narrative rather than a convergence. Note, however, that he investigated fictional narrative separately from fictional dialogue, a distinction not systematically made in the Brown quartet.

It has to be taken into account that the data in Figure 1/Table 1 have not been post-edited manually. In the retrieval of PPs, combinations of a modal with *have* + participle were excluded for the obvious reason that they do not have past tense counterparts. Sometimes, the distance between the modal and auxiliary *have* is rather long, so occasional instances of modal constructions slipped through; these were not manually excluded from the overall counts. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate such patterns:

(1) What difference would being hatched in an incubator have made to his life? (FLOB G13)

(2) … he presented a package of reforms to Parliament which would, if passed, have nullified the movement's additions to the electorate. (FLOB J59)

Other instances that are not PP constructions but were not frequent enough to be manually extracted from the original concordances are illustrated in examples (3) to (5).

(3) I had much rather have continued a spectator than become an actor. (FLOB G36)

(4) Vernon was consummately fond of oysters, Manning's had been famous for them since the Civil War. (Brown E11)

(5) Contemporary furniture that is neither Danish nor straight-line modern but has sculptured pattern, many design facets, warmth, dignity and an effect of utter comfort and livability. (Brown A29)

The manual analysis of the Brown and Frown corpora showed that, overall, the number of non-perfect constructions returned by the query was exceedingly small. So for a comparison of all four corpora, the original concordances were considered to provide reliable results.

2.2 The PP and the SP

With a decline of PPs in twentieth-century English we might expect a concomitant increase of the SP. But a look at the results in Figure 3[6] reveals that SPs have also decreased over time. As a result, when it comes to relative frequencies of the PP and the SP in BrE and AmE, we are – again – dealing with stable regional variation rather than ongoing diachronic change:

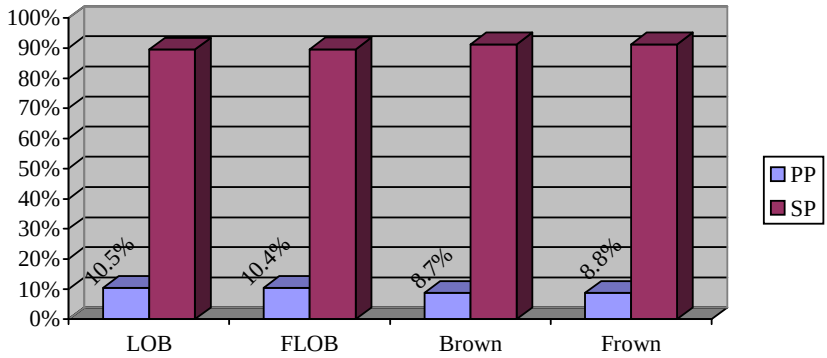

Figure 3: Development of PP vs. SP in the Brown-family (relative frequency)

It will be interesting to see whether the qualitative analysis of our data will lend additional support to the idea that variation in the use of the PP in PDE is regional rather than diachronic.

3 Co-occurrence with temporal adverbials

Schlüter's (2006: 143f.) review of previous, corpus-based studies shows that temporal adverbials are used in fewer than 50 per cent of all PPs, with results ranging between 45 per cent for AmE and 29 per cent for BrE. The results in Figure 4 are based on the manual analysis of every fifth example from the original concordances.

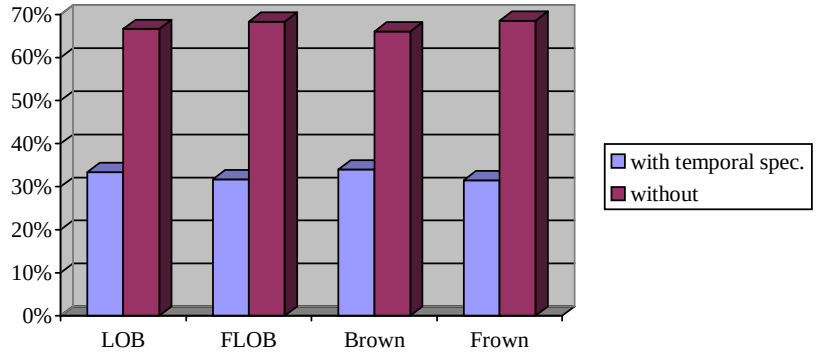

Figure 4: Co-occurrence of PPs and temporal specification (relative frequencies)

Our results confirm previous findings: the large majority of PPs are used without temporal specification in the immediate context. There are practically no regional differences in this result and it is a diachronically stable one. The fact that most PPs are used without a triggering adverbial allows us to account for fluctuation in the use of the construction. If – as Engel (1998: 132) points out – the "concept of present relevance is often a subjective interpretation of pertinence on the part of the speaker/writer […]", then ongoing change and/or regional variation boil down to different or shifting preferences in these subjective interpretations.

This does not mean, however, that there is no mileage in investigating cases where the PP and SP tenses are used with temporal adverbials. We will look at two such co-occurrence phenomena, namely adverbs indicating current relevance (section 3.1) and past tense adverbs (section 3.2).

3.1 Adverbs indicating current relevance

Even with adverbs of current relevance, we find variation in the use of the PP and SP, as examples (6) and (7) illustrate:

(6) "You look like you just heard a real gasser, Mr Partlow". (Brown P27)

(7) "He's just heard from the pathologist who says Mrs Meeker apparently died from suffocation." (Brown L15)

For the qualitative analysis of this aspect of variation, we searched for all instances of the temporal adverbials *already, (n)ever, recently* and *yet* to verify how frequently they would occur with either the PP or the SP in our corpora. We only included unambiguous cases of temporal reference of these adverbials in our counts. Another condition was that the SP had to be interchangeable with the PP (so we excluded instances in which, for example, *yet* was used in the SP in contexts of reported speech – which would really be an example of the present tense use with *yet*). The results are summarized in Figure 5:[7]

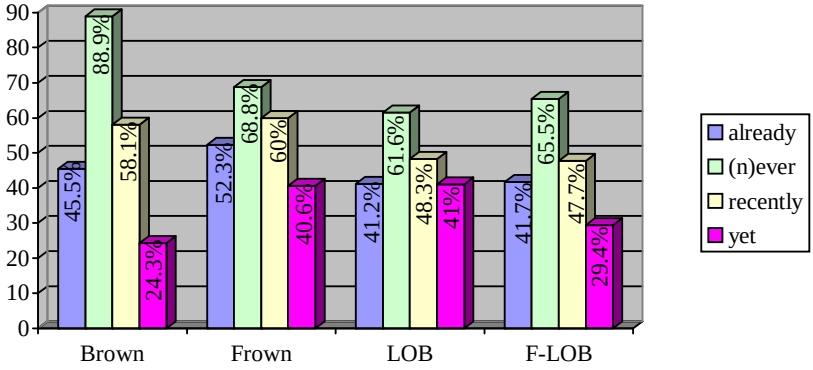

Figure 5: Relative frequency of SP with temporal adverbials

The qualitative analysis indicates that the SP is generally used more frequently in our American than in our British data. Moreover, the co-occurrence patterns of adverbials with the SP appear to be relatively stable in LOB and F-LOB (with the exception of *yet*, where the proportion decreases). In Brown and Frown, on the other hand, the proportion of SP only decreases with *(n)ever*, whereas with *yet* we see a substantial increase between the years 1961 and 1992. It is interesting to note that, due to ongoing change over the past thirty years in AmE, the previously huge gap between the co-occurrence patterns of *already* and *yet* seems to be closing in written usage. This is not quite the case in spoken English.

Evidence for spoken usage comes from the spontaneous conversations of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Longman Corpus of Spoken American English (LCSAE). The results in Figure 6 are based on sets of 500 random occurrences of the adverbials; these were manually thinned to those results with variable usage of PP and SP.[8]

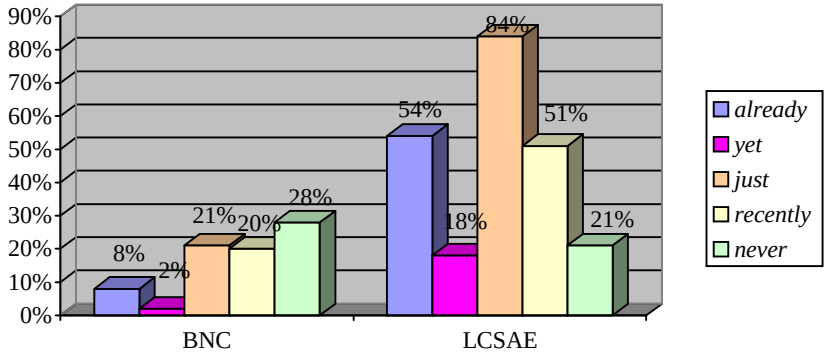

Figure 6: Relative frequency of SP with temporal adverbials in spoken BrE and AmE (figures for already *and* yet *are based on Tottie 2002: 51)*

Surprisingly, spoken AmE frequently uses the past tense with *already*, but the preferred aspect with *yet* is the PP: "This intra-variety difference is highly significant (p. = 0.001, chi-square 54.76, 1 d.f.). It is thus not entirely felicitous to treat the two adverbs *already* and *yet* as having the same effect on the choice of tense in American English" (Tottie 2002: 51). The results from the spoken data also run counter to the common perception that *yet* combines freely with the past tense in informal AmE: in usage handbooks such as the ones by Burchfield (³1996), Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988) or *Webster's* (1989), comments are made about the dubious grammaticality of *yet* with the SP; no such comments are made in the context of *already*, despite the fact that it is actually used more frequently with the SP in AmE. The result that the SP with *yet* increases in written American usage against both spoken evidence and the usage guide wisdom is thus all the more surprising.

Our corpus data also show that the SP is used with temporal adverbials of current relevance in spoken BrE as well. The following examples are taken from

Sampson (2002: 28f.), who points out that they are all, incidentally, produced by speakers from the South (West) of England:

(8) We'd always get one, we never lost one yet. (BNC, H5H)

(9) Since when did they ever? (BNC, KC4)

(10) She said to me ehm, didn't count those, didn't give a re … refund on those cigarettes yet, I said no. (BNC, KDY)

(11) Did she decide what she's doing with her money yet? (BNC, KE3)

(12) I never lost mine yet. (BNC, KP4)

(13) Did you put up my red light up yet? (BNC, KP5)

3.2 PPs with past tense adverbials

As pointed out in the introduction, the PP is increasingly used with adverbials that clearly refer to an event in the past. Occasional instances are also found in our corpora of written English, but they are so rare that a more detailed frequency breakdown would be inappropriate:

(14) … the contrastingly random, uncoordinated resignations last week of chairman Lord Sainsbury as well as Jeffrey Tate as principal conductor *have added* fuel to the fire of those who claim that the Royal Opera's artistic direction is unsure and its structure diffuse. (FLOB A26)

Moreover, this is not really a prototypical example of a combined PP and past tense adverbial usage: the resignation happened in the past but has current relevance. As Rastall (1999: 81) points out:

> The point about such examples is that they show up a potential for a conflict in the conditions of use of the present perfect in English. The criterion of 'current relevance' to the moment of speaking is quite evident in all of the cases adduced, but in each case the speaker also wishes to convey the point in time when the event occurred. […] the current relevance or newsworthiness of the information may override the latter consideration [i.e. past time zone for the point in time when the event occurred].

Co-occurrences of the PP and adverbials that require the SP according to the usage guides are more commonly found in spoken English, as the following examples with *yesterday* from the LCSAE and BNC illustrate:

(15) Well it's worked yesterday (LCSAE)

(16) I haven't smoked yesterday. (LCSAE)

(17) … so we've talked about some of those instances yesterday. (LCSAE)

(18) … I mean, I've, I've had a <pause> long chat with Anne, we've had a long, erm meeting with Anne <name> yesterday about it, and she's gonna start pushing <pause> (BNC, KBD 6028)…

(19) We've been out in it yesterday. (BNC, KBE 3003)

(20) Mind you all the questions he's asked me yesterday I answered. <pause> (BNC KCM 137)

(21) Anyway <pause> three people have phoned yesterday, we had two phone calls yesterday, in the morning <pause> … (BNC, KCC 480)

(22) See the A four five's, er three's been closed yesterday. (BNC, KCW 1441)

(23) Well we've had their director on the phone, phone yesterday <pause> and more or less demanded his twenty thousand back. (BNC, KB9 3305)

Rastall's comment helps to explain some of these examples: in (18), for instance, the results of the chat are of current relevance; others might be accounted for out of a larger context which we did not investigate. Some occurrences, however, are more likely to be due to online language production: (24) could be interpreted as a blend with an unclear sentence boundary; (25) exemplifies the use of a PP instead of a grammatically more 'correct' past perfect; in (26), the adverb could be interpreted as an afterthought.

(24) I've been trying to call her yesterday and today uh I'm at a hotel (LCSAE)

(25) It's like I haven't heard it advertised at all until yesterday. (LCSAE)

(26) But I don't he's gotten a whole lot done. Yesterday (LCSAE)

The following example from the spoken section of the BNC is an interesting case of self-correction from a SP to a PP, i.e. in a direction that should normally be considered 'ungrammatical':

(27) I mean, Ann finished lectures, Ann's finished lectures yesterday, she's a secondary teacher and she doesn't have a lecture again until after Christmas. (BNC, KPV 6109)

The current relevance here may be that there will be no further lecture "until after Christmas".

4 Conclusion

To sum up, the PP is decreasing somewhat in our parallel corpora, but the overall trend is not significant within the varieties; we seem thus to be dealing with relatively stable regional variation rather than ongoing change. The results obtained on the tagged Brown quartet of corpora thus provide a very different picture from the one obtained by Elsness (2009), who used the untagged versions of the same corpora and limited his analysis to a set of frequent verbs. Typologically, a decrease of the PP in (written) standard English would go decidedly against the general trend in other Indo-European languages, which show an increasing use of the PP at the expense of the SP. But the comparison of the PP with the SP in our family of corpora has shown that the proportion of the two constructions is stable over time.

When we look at individual genres, we see that there is, however, a significant decrease of PPs in British newspaper writing and American general prose – but there is an increase in fiction writing: the overall effect of this is a decreasing variability across genres in the use of the PP.

Where there is variation between the two constructions with adverbials that signal current relevance, the SP is used more often in AmE, as the text books generally indicate. However, within written AmE, the gap between *always* and *yet* seems to be closing as co-occurrences of the SP decrease with *always* and increase with *yet*.

PPs with past tense adverbials are still rare and usually 'locally' triggered. As our conclusion on this point, we could use Kjellmer's comment (2003: 18) on the use of perfect constructions without auxiliary *have*:

> So some of what we are at first likely to regard as simple solecisms in modern English may still be solecisms, but in that case solecisms with both a respectable ancestry and some distinguished neighbours and relatives. Whether they will reassert themselves as legitimate in the language, unlikely as it seems, remains to be seen.

Miller (2004: 235) rightly points out that PPs with specific past time adverbs have a long history in English (going back to Middle English), but that – as long as we lack diachronic data – it is impossible to assert whether modern specimens of the constructions are simply a continuation of this usage or whether they have re-emerged. He claims that pragmatic requirements might serve as a good explanation for them having remained a latent option in English:

> When speakers refer to an event in the past they are under pragmatic pressure to enable listeners to locate the event accurately in past time. This is achieved by producing an appropriate adverb referring to a specific past time. There is no reason to suppose that this pragmatic pressure has ever ceased to apply and no reason to suppose that the construction is returning to English after a period of absence.

So, ultimately, what we are dealing with is another case of – relatively – stable layering in the tense and aspect system of English.

Notes

1. Note, however, that the pattern is also found in Scottish English (Trudgill and Hannah 2002: 95), Irish English (Engel and Ritz 2000: 126) and (White) South African English (Lass 1987: 352).
2. It is not limited to BrE and AmE, as comments in Bauer (1994 on NZE), Engel and Ritz (2000: 130, on AusE) or Trudgill and Hannah (2002: 134, on Indian English) show.
3. The search query was as follows:
   [pos = "VAH0|VAHZ"] [pos ="R.*|MD|XX" & pos !="RL"]{0,4} [pos = "AT.*|APPGE"]? [pos = "JJ.*|N.*"]? [pos ="PPH1|PP.*S.*|PPY|NP.*|D.*|NN.*"]{0,2} [pos = "R.*|MD|XX"]{0,4} [pos = "V.*N"]; where […] is a single word token, 'pos' = part of speech, "VAH0|VAHZ" (in the first position) are the tags for auxiliary HAVE in the present tense, "V.*N" (at the end) represents any past participle form, and the tags in-between represent optional adverbial and noun phrase sequences. In PPs, finite auxiliary *have* is sometimes omitted, but this is definitely a feature of informal spoken language use (see Kjellmer 2003: 18).
4. A table with raw frequencies is provided in Appendix 2.
5. Elsness (2009) shows that the present perfect is consistently used much less frequently in fictional writing than in other text categories in his long-term diachronic study. The development in his data is towards a greater divergence of fictional narrative rather than a convergence. Note, however, that

he investigated fictional narrative separately from fictional dialogue, a distinction not systematically made in the Brown quartet.

6. The raw frequencies for this figure can be found in Table 2 in Appendix 2.
7. For absolute frequencies, see Table 4 in Appendix 2.
8. For a native speaker of BrE, many of the AmE sentences would be considered ungrammatical. The analysis therefore used a more neutral World-Englishes view.
9. The right-hand column gives a measure of how significant the difference between the two corpora is, *, ** and *** showing progressively higher levels of significance. We tested for significance with the log-likelihood test which has the following critical values for significance: $p < 0.05$ – critical value = 3.84 (marked as *); $p < 0.01$ – critical value = 6.63 (marked as **); $p < 0.001$ – critical value = 10.83 (marked as ***).

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Appendix 1

Corpora used in this study

Brown LOB Frown F-LOB The Brown family Press, General Prose, Learned, Fiction	the Brown (University) Corpus the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus the Freiburg-Brown Corpus the Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus the four corpora above, regarded as a group Four subcorpora into which the corpora of the Brown family are divided.
BNC the BNC demographic subcorpus (BNCdemog)	British National Corpus a part of the BNC, consisting of largely spontaneous spoken English discourse by 153 individuals and their interlocutors, sampled from the population of the UK on demographic principles
LCSAE	the Longman Corpus of Spoken American English

Appendix 2

Table 1: Frequencies of the PP in BrE and AmE[9]

	LOB		F-LOB		
Subcorpus	raw freq.	pmw	raw freq.	pmw	change as % of LOB
Press	1138	6401	1031	5785	*-9.6%
Gen. prose	1840	4438	1741	4230	-4.7%
Learned	599	3727	571	3566	-4.3%
Fiction	619	2413	730	2839	**17.6%
Total	4196	4156	4073	4044	-2.7%
	Brown		Frown		
Subcorpus	raw freq.	pmw	raw freq.	pmw	change as % of Brown
Press	882	4930	894	4993	1.3%
Gen. prose	1678	4016	1407	3385	***-15.7%
Learned	575	3573	574	3557	-0.5%

Fiction	403	1570	624	2425	***54.4%
Total	3538	3488	3499	3453	-1.0%

Table 2: Relative frequencies of the PP and SP in BrE and AmE

	LOB	FLOB	Brown	Frown
PP	4.196 (10.5%)	4.073 (10.4%)	3.538 (8.7%)	3.499 (8.8%)
SP	35.821 (89.5%)	35.276 (89.6%)	37.223 (91.3%)	36.250 (91.2%)
Total	40.017	39.349	40.761	39.749

Table 3: Co-occurrence of PPs and temporal specification

	LOB	FLOB	Brown	Frown
with temporal spec.	275 (33.4%)	248 (31.7%)	240 (34%)	211 (31.5%)
without	548 (66.6%)	535 (68.3%)	466 (66%)	459 (68.5%)
Total	823	783	706	670

Table 4: Relative frequency of PP : SP in the Brown family of corpora

	Brown	Frown	LOB	F-LOB
already	69 : 60	63 : 69	97 : 68	70 : 50
(n)ever	130 : 321	131 : 289	146 : 234	126 : 239
recently	31 : 43	32 : 48	45 : 42	46 : 42
yet	28 : 9	19 : 13	36 : 25	36 : 15