

Tense matters

Tenses crop up in two ways in this issue, both inspired by readers' letters. The first referred to the use of the present perfect on both sides of the Atlantic, and DAVID CRYSTAL looks at that. The second is the puzzling 'plupluperfect', and VALERIE LAMBERT, BILL BROUGHTON and FRANK PALMER look at that.

The best tense we ever had

DAVID CRYSTAL

'He is the best caricaturist we ever had in America,' said someone being interviewed in a British magazine recently, and that provoked an alert *ET* reader in Guadeloupe, Tim Williams, to underline it and send it in, along with an interesting question: Is it standard usage in American English?

This grammatical difference between UK and US English has often been noticed. I've just looked it up in half a dozen grammars, and each one refers to it. The simple past tense is 'often preferred' to the present perfective in American English says the grandaddy of them all, *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. There's a 'strong tendency' for this to happen, says another. This is something Americans 'frequently' do, says a third. Let's have some examples:

UK	US
I've just seen John.	I just saw John.
You've already told me.	You already told me.
We've had a great time.	We had a great time.
Has the parcel arrived yet?	Did the parcel arrive yet?
I haven't seen anyone.	I didn't see anyone.
He's been telling me . . .	He was telling me . . .

Of course, it isn't simply a matter of the US usage replacing the British usage. The perfective form is found in the USA also, and, these days, the simple past is coming to be used in Britain. In the latter case, it certainly isn't yet standard formal usage. It would be most unlikely for British authors to have begun this paragraph with 'I just looked it up . . .'. But it's increasingly to be heard in colloquial speech and informal writing, as a stylistic variant. No difference of meaning seems to be involved, and I've yet to hear a real case (as opposed to the imaginary ones which turn up in textbooks) where the use of the past tense form was misleading.

What I'm less sure about is whether the same situation obtains in the USA. The trouble with the above descriptive statements is that they don't explain what is going on. Why is there this 'preference', 'tendency', and 'frequency'? I have come across three explanations.

(i) The past tense form is slowly displacing the perfective – simply incorporating the meaning and range of use of the latter. In this view, the distinction between recent and distant time reference

is coming to be expressed more by adverbs (e.g. *I just saw John* vs *I saw John last month*) or left for the context to resolve (e.g. *We had a great time*, said as a group of people arrive home, where only the recent past meaning could be meant). Hmm, possibly . . . but I would have thought the usage is too recent a development for it yet to affect the longstanding system for expressing past time in English.

(ii) The above past tense usage is an additional use, for colloquial speech – as in the UK, but much more established. The perfective is carrying on as it always has/did, but is becoming increasingly restricted to a formal style. It would be interesting to have some evidence on this point. To quote one of Tim Williams' examples, 'If you were submitting a PhD thesis at Yale or Princeton, would you want to use these past tense constructions – and would they be acceptable?' I doubt it, but I really don't know. I've just looked

in a few American usage manuals (such as the *Washington Square Handbook of Good English*), and there's no mention of it as a problem. The new Reader's Digest manual, *The right word at the right time*, does however refer to it as 'nonstandard' American usage (in the article on American English).

(iii) The past tense usage is restricted to certain social groups or settings, and is popularized by its frequent appearance in US film and television dialogue. Amongst other groups, there is no change in the traditional use of the perfective vs the past tense. Our correspondent writes, 'If the correct use of the present perfect implies social kudos and WASPishness, then it is possible that it is not on the way out at all'. An interesting idea, but not an easy one to make precise.

I could go on hunting, but life's too short, as is this column. Far better to tap some *ET* intuitions about the matter. Today, I prefer (ii). Maybe next month, after you've thought about it for a while, and let us know your conclusions, I'll be persuaded differently.

The nonstandard third conditional

VALERIE LAMBERT

I was interested to read Ian Watson's letter in the October issue of *English Today* on the proliferation of the 'plupluperfect', as he calls it, or the 'nonstandard third conditional', as I prefer to call it.

As an EFL teacher, I first became aware of the form in my days as a novice teacher when I went to write 'If I'd have known . . .' on the blackboard as an example of the third (or unreal) conditional in English, and realised that I had slipped in one auxiliary too many. I feel sure that I am not the only 'transgressor' in the EFL world who has had this experience.

My fascination with this 'intrusive' auxiliary prompted me to investigate it further when I was studying for my MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading, where I conducted a sociolinguistic survey on the use of the form to see whether it correlated with factors such as age, style and social class.

The results of the survey (which are in the process of being written up in a paper)

The plupluperfect?

Please comment – however briefly – on the proliferation of the use of the plupluperfect tense (I cannot think what else to call it). An example is: 'If he had have gone . . .', almost invariably contracted to 'If he had've gone . . .'. The latest transgressor among people who should know better is Mr Jim Prior [the Conservative politician] who, on BBC's Radio Four *Any Questions?* (3 May) said, 'If I had've been there . . .' I have even heard the use in Radio and Television drama and in the narrative of news bulletins, where it would by no means have been in the script, since the form is never written, only spoken.

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We are working on it. Ed.