**REVIEW ARTICLE**

# English Present Perfect and German Perfekt
## —Previous Analysis from T&A Theories

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**Abstract**
Although both English and German belong to the Germanic family, and both languages have the present perfect tense, the use of the present perfect tense in English and Perfekt in German is not exactly the same. The Perfekt (present perfect tense) in German is more flexible, while English must be expressed in other tenses in some situations. These differences and the reasons behind them have aroused the attention of many researchers. Most of them choose to solve problems by analyzing Tense and Aspect (T&A) relations. The most classic theory is the ERS Theory proposed by Reichenbach (1947) and the latest Topic Time Theory proposed by Klein (1994). This article will briefly elaborate on the differences in the use of the present perfect in English and Perfekt in German, introduce some T&A theories, summarize limitations of the previous theories pointed out by the other researchers, and advocate that more refinements are needed.

**Keywords:** Present perfect, Perfekt, T&A relations, ERS theory

**Introduction**

The present perfect is widely accepted as indicating a "past event of current relevance" (Comrie, 1976). Usually, this grammatical category is composed of an auxiliary and a participle, i.e. *have done* in English. Other types of structures are also possible, such as adding a suffix or modifying verb root (i.e. Latin), adding a prefix (i.e. suaheli), and so on (Klein, 1998; Comrie, 1976). It is well acknowledged that different languages use different morphosyntactic forms for the same category in most cases, and even one category within one language can represent different meanings and forms. Whilst English and German both belong to the Germanic language family, their uses of perfect are not identical either. The most obvious difference is that, the only perfect auxiliary in English is *have*, while there are two auxiliaries in German, namely *sein* and *haben*. Depending on the verb type of the participle, there are situations where the use of *sein* is obligatory[1]. Nevertheless, for both language, the auxiliary part takes over the responsibility of tense, while the participle part represents the type of aspect (Comrie, 1976; Comrie, 1985; Löbner, 2015).

However, among the different meanings of one category, there is often a central meaning that is more typical than others (Comrie, 1976). Noted that central meaning does not equal the basic

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[1] Sein is ususlly used as auxiliary of Perfekt when: ①the participle verb denotes a change of position, i.e. *gehen*(go), *kommen*(come), etc. ②the participle verb denotes a change of state, i.e. *einschlafen*(fall asleep) ③some specific verbs such as *bleiben, fahren, bleiben* and *sein* itself

meaning, as basic meaning should be able to be extracted from every meaning of the structure (Klein, 1998), like the "literal meaning" mentioned by Reis (1980). Considering the facts above, the following questions are naturally raised: Why do linguists employ the same name for category in different languages (Anderson, 1982)? Whether there is a uniform meaning for the same category in different languages (Klein, 1998; Klein, 1999; Musan, 2001)? The present article will focus on the features and functions of English present perfect and German Perfekt, sameness and differences between the use of them and the underlying reasons behind those phenomenon.

**Present perfect in English**

The use of English present perfect is comparatively strict, as it is well distinguished from the use of simple past. The distributional differences between the English present perfect and simple past tense are studied by many researchers (Chomsky, 1970; McCoard, 1978; McCawley, 1981; Klein, 1992; Katz, 2003; Bowler, 2017). There are some rules when using present perfect.

(1) The subject of the sentence must be alive at the point of speech (Chomsky, 1970).

  a.  *I have visited that museum.*

  b.  ***Shakespeare** has visited that museum.*

  c.  *Shakespeare visited that museum.*

Now that Shakespeare is no longer alive, the event is totally past and not currently relevant. As a result, it is more appropriate to use simple past tense like sentence c.

(2) The introduced event should be salient at the point of Speech (McCoard, 1978).

  a.  *\*Newton has proposed the law of universal gravitation.*

  b.  *Newton proposed the law of universal gravitation.*

This rule can be combined with rule (2). Without specific context, sentence b is the more common choice.

(3) The introduced event should be repeatable (Katz, 2003).

  a.  *\*Have you been to **today's exhibition**?*

  b.  *Did you go to today's exhibition?*

The event has been limited by the modifier "today's". So the only two possible results are ①the respondent did go to the exhibition and ②the respondent did not go to the exhibition. Today's exhibition will not hold at the other day again. As a consequence, this is a traditional "whether or not" or "yes or no" question. A simple past tense like sentence c is accepted.

(4) The result in the sentence must be true at the point of Speech (Iatridou et al., 2001; Bowler, 2017).

  a.  *He has read that book.*

  b.  *?He has lost his keys.*

  c.  *He lost his keys.*

In sentence a, finishing reading a book is a permanent truth. Therefore, it is always acceptable to use present perfect in describing this kind of events. However, sentence b is only acceptable, if the man found his keys now. Whether or not has the man found his keys by now, a simple past like sentence c is appropriate.

(5) Unable to embed a temporal adverbial into the sentence (Klein, 1992)

  a.  *I have met him.*

  b.  *\*I have met him **yesterday**.*

Obviously, sentence b is grammatically wrong. When using present perfect in English, it is difficult to give an exact time of the described past event.

(6) Felicitous to be used when raising a question about the general situation in the past. Inappropriate to be used when raising a question about a specific point in the past (Bowler, 2017).

  a.  Peter, have you met Mr. Smith?

  b.  Peter, did you meet Mr. Smith (today)?

When question a is raised, it asks any time in the past (most of the time, recently), that the respondent

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may have met Mr. Smith. While question b is often asking about a specific time, which depends on the context. Rule (6) can be combined with rule (5), considering that when asking about a specific point of past time, it has an underlying temporal adverbial that is not explicitly expressed in the sentence. No temporal adjunction is allowed in present perfect sentence. Consequently, simple past should be employed in this kind of question.

The rules mentioned above can well elaborate the differences between the use between English simple past and present perfect. It is salient that there is a relatively strict distinction between the use of the two grammatical categories. Except for the rules above, present perfect has its own major uses, which is organized by Anderson (1982):

1) "experiential": Have you (ever) been to German?

2) "current relevance of anterior": He has studied the whole book. (so he can help)

3) "new situation" ("hot news"): The volcano has just erupted!

4) "result-state": He has gone. (or) He is gone. (is not here) However, "gone" in the second sentence can be viewed as adjectives, the sentence is consequently not a total present perfect.

The fifth use in Anderson (1982) is "continuous", with such an example: "I have been standing here for three hours. (still here)" Nevertheless, this is a sentence of present perfect progressive rather than present perfect. The sixth use is "anterior", with two examples: "John though Mary had left./Mary will have left by then.", which should be considered as pluperfect that should not be discussed here (Klein, 1998).

**Perfekt in German**

"Present perfect" in German will be expressed as Perfekt in the following texts. Although English and German are typologically similar and not geographically distant, they differ in the use of "perfect". One salient difference is that the distinction between Perfekt and Präteritum (simple past) in German is relatively weak. Some may advocate that the different use of Perfekt or Präteritum is a matter of register, style, dialect, and personal preference (Bußmann, 1990; Klein, 2000). The replacement of Präteritum by Perfekt has already begun since Early Old High German (Behaghel, 1924). In modern German, people are less and less aware of the distinction between Perfekt and Präteritum, in some areas, especially in Southern German, Perfekt has already taken over the role of Präteritum that uses the auxiliary *haben* (Löbner, 2015). This phenomenon seems irregular but has its own tradition from Latin, because "perfect" in Latin, where the name came from, is emplyed to refer to the single previously completed actions, which serves the function that is more simple past and Präteritum alike. Research also shows that, the use of German Perfekt is more like the use of English simple past. (Bowler, 2017) However, it is preferred to use simple past tense in narrative articles (Fleischman, 1990). There is also studies that has proved that some verbs enjoys the Prät. expression priority, in German "Ausdruckspräferenz" [2] (Wang, 1996). Overall, the semantic and pragmatic meaning will have an influence in competition between simple past and Perfect in all languages (Klis, 2020).

Another problematic issue is to distinguish Perfekt from resultative sentences. To do so, it is imperative to introduce two basic concepts first, namely "event" and "state" . Events are individual entities at specific point or period of time, temporal and there must be changes after the events. States are continuous and involve no changes. The are negative counterparts for states (Galton, 1984). Resultatives denote a state that resulted from the event that the verb expresses (Löbner, 2015). They are similar with their so called corresponding "eventive" (Litvinov & Nedjalkov, 1988) Perfekt sentences, but with different functions. There are five major German Resultative types, namely the Active Resultative, the Reflexive Resultative, the Middle Resultative (also called "Medium

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[2] Latzel, S. (1977). *Die deutschen Tempora Perfekt und Präteritum* . Max Hueber.

Resutative") and the Passive Resultative (Litvinov & Nedjalkov, 1988). The most confusing one is the Active Resultative and its corresponding Perfekt, as they basically share the same form. Both *sein*-sentences and *haben*-sentences are possible for the Active Resultative, A$_s$ and A$_h$ for short.

Example for A$_s$:

a.   Sie ist verreist. (Resultative)        Sie ist verreist. (Perfekt)

lit. She is gone away.          She has gone away.

Example for A$_h$:

b.   Sie hat die Datei geöffnet.        Sie hat die Datei geöffnet.

lit. She has the file open(ed).         She has opened the file.

The distinction between the Active Resultative and Perfekt can be mainly devided into three points:

1. Resultatives are state-orientated, thus, they are not allowed to add adverbials that relate to the event.

(1)   *Sie ist **gestern** verreist.*

lit. *Yesterday she has gone away.*

This can only be interpreted as a Perfekt sentence.

2. Resultatives are able to add adverbials that are not allowed in Perfekt sentences.

(1)   *Sie will die Datei **bis morgen** geöffnet haben.*

lit. *She want to have the files open(ed) until tomorrow.*

This can only be interpreted as a Resultative sentence.

3. Resultatives are able to apply all T&A forms, even double perfect forms.

(1)   *Sie ist eine Woche verreist gewesen.* (Perfekt tense)

lit. *She has been gone away for one week.*

Knowing the differences between Resultatives and Perfekt, we are capable of analyse German Perfekt sentences and compare Perfekt to present perfect.

**Main differences between Perfekt and present perfect**

As is introduced, the use of German Perfekt is more than English present perfect. There are four main differences that will be elaborated in the following text, as table 1 shows.

Table 1 Four main differences between Present perfekt and Perfekt

| Use | English | German |
|---|---|---|
| Able to state a past event | × | √ |
| Able to relate to the future | × | √ |
| Able to express the meaning of continuous perfect | × | √ |
| Ok with explicit temporal adverbial | × | √ |

1. Perfekt sentences are able to state an event in the past, which can replace most kinds of use of simple past tense. While it is not possible in English present perfect sentences. The differences between Perfect and simple past in English is more salient.

GP:
*Hast du an der heutigen Ausstellung teilgenommen?*

EP: *\*Have you been to today's exhibition?*

ESP: *Did you go to today's exhibition?*

2. Perfekt sentences can relate to the future, while in English this can only be expressed by the future perfect tense. Present perfect can only refer to the events in the past that are related to the present.

GP: *Morgen um zehn hat Peter London verlassen.*

EP: *\*Tomorrow at ten o'clock, Peter has left London.*

EFP:*Tomorrow at ten o'clock, Peter will have left London.*

3. Perfekt sentences are able to express the meaning that in English only continuous perfect denotes.

GP: *Ich habe zwei Stunden auf dich gewartet.*

EP: *\*I have waited for you for two hours.*

ECP: *I have been waiting for you for two hours.*

4. Perfekt sentences are allowed to embed an explicit temporal adverbial. Once a temporal adverbial is involved, the Tense and aspect of a sentence can change. This difference can be caused by the three different uses above, as German Perfekt can not only refer to the past event relevant to the present but also past events irrelevant to the present and even future events.

GP: *Gestern hat Peter London verlassen.*

EP: *\*Yesterday, Peter has left London.*

Of course, these are not exhaustive. With these different uses, how would German sentences be, in the five situations where present perfect must be employed in English that Anderson (1982) suggests?

(1) When referring to a specific experience, it is more common to use simple past in German：

EP: *Have you (ever) been to Japan*?

GP: *Bist du in Japan gewesen?* (less common)

GSP: *Warst du schon in Japan*?

However, when the verb in the sentence is lexical, Perfekt is the obligatory choice.

EP: *Have you ever eaten sushi*?

GP: *Hast du Sushi je gegessen*?

GSP: *\*Aßest du Sushi*?

(2) When referring to a past event with current relevance, German Perfekt is also obligatory like English present perfect.

(3) When the resulting state is expressed, Klein (1998) call it a "result perfect". If the sentence is viewed as a final result, Perfekt is obligatory;

*(Gestern abend war es unruhig) Das Kind ist eingeschlafen (, aber bald wieder aufgewacht).*

lit.*( Last night it was unrestful) The child has fallen asleep (, but then has woken up later).*

if the sentence is a temporary state during a process, it should be replaced by a simple past sentence (Klein, 1998).

*(Gestern abend war es unruhig.) Das Kind schlief ein (, wachte aber bald wieder auf).*

lit. *(Last nigh it was unrestful) The child fall asleep (, but woke up later).*

(4) When referring to the hot news, it is common to use Perfekt.

(5) When referring to a continuous process, both Perfekt and simple past tense can be used. However, there is a subtle distinction between their lexical meaning.

P: *Ich habe hier (jetzt) zwei Stunden lang gewartet.*

lit. *I have waited here two hours.*

SP: *Ich warte hier (schon) zwei Stunden lang.*

lit. *I waited here two hours.*

The first sentence using Perfekt expresses that by now there is a three-hour waiting, while the second sentence can be understood as the act of waiting can extend to the future, if there is no adverbial like "schon" (Klein, 1998). When adding a future adverbial into the first sentence, it can refer to a situation in the future, which can only be expressed by a future perfect continuous sentence.

***In zehn Minuten** habe ich hier zwei Stunden lang gewartet, und dann gebe ich es auf.*

*'In ten minutes I will have been waiting here for two hours, and then I will give up.'*

**Temporal relations analytical models**

Tenses are basically divided into past, present and future. While basic aspects involves imperfective, perfective and perfect. Imperfective and Perfective are expressed in the same form in German (Löbner, 2015).

*Als das Kind geweint hat, habe ich das Essen gekocht.* (Als clause: Past Perfective; main clause: Past Imperfective)

*'When the child cried, I was just cooking the meal.'*

There are ten basic T&A forms in English, namely Simple Past, Past Continuous, Past Perfect, Past Perfect Continuous, Present Progressive, Present, Present Perfect, Future and Future Perfect. There are six basic T&A verb forms in German, namely Past

(Präteritum), Present, Future, Present Perfect (Perfekt), Past Perfect and Future Perfect. How can German express the same meaning with fewer forms? Some T&A temporal relation models are proposed, among which the most famous one is ERS Model put forward by Reichenbach (1947). E refers to the time of event, R refers to the time of reference and S refers to the time of speech. Tense involves relationship between S and R, while aspect involves the relationship between R and E. The relationship between S and E have no contribution to T&A (Johnson, 1981; Jin, 2008). The differences between English present perfect and German Perfekt can be analyzed by these relations:

Table 2 Present perfect vs. Perfekt ERS relation

| T&A category | English ERS relation | German ERS relation |
|---|---|---|
| Simple past (Präteritum) | E=R<S | E=R<S |
| Present perfect (Perfekt) | E<S=R | E<S?R |

R in English present perfect is required to be around S, while in German, R is possible to precede and follow S (Ballweg, 1988; Thieroff, 1992; Zeller, 1994; Klein, 1998).

Jin (2008) developed this ERS theory in terms of aspect, establishing a T&A logic model of 29 kinds of situations, which enabled the ERS model to explain more linguistic phenomena. Based on it, Yu (2013) further investigated this model and pointed out that English is not a typical ERS language.

Although the ERS temporal parameters are widely regarded as traditional and typical, there are some limitations in this theory. Firstly, E, R, and S may overlap each other (Klein, 1998). Secondly, he ignored that both E and R can not only be a point of time, but also a time span (Yu, 2013). Finally, there are examples of English simple past in which E does not precede S.

They found John in the bathtub. He was dead. (Klein, 1992)

"He was dead" denotes a state that continue to the time of Speech and to the future. That is to say, E in this sentence does not precede S.

Based on Reichenbach (1947) and Comrie (1985), taking the limitations into consideration, Klein (1994) proposed a new theory that contains Topic Time (TT), Time of situation (TSit), and Time of Utterance (TU). Topic time is employed to refer to the time when the assertion is made about, so it is also called the Assertion time. It can be viewed as a variant of Reichenbach's R. Time of Utterance is the same as Reichenbach's S. Time of Situation refers to the time where the situation formed, which is similar to Reichenbach's E. However, TSit may be permanent in some cases. For example: "Two plus two makes four".

German Perfekt consists of a tense component, that the present auxiliary conveys, and an aspect component, which is reflected by the past participle. Tense involves the TU-TT relation, while aspect is about the TT-TSit relation. Possible relations are BEFORE, AFTER, INCLUDED IN and OVERLAPPING WITH. The analysis of Perfekt and present perfect is as in the table 3:

Table 3 T&A relation of Present perfect and Perfekt

| | Aspect relation | Tense relation |
|---|---|---|
| Present perfect | TT AFTER TSit | TT BEFORE/CONTAINS TU |
| Perfekt | TT AFTER TSit | TT SHIFTABLE WRT TU |

As is shown by table 3, tense relation is the main cause of the dieffernces between English present perfect and German Perfekt. This theory can also explain why German Perfekt is able to relate to the future and able to add temporal adverbials.

As table 3 shows, for Perfekt, TT is shiftable to TU. TT can also be in the future or any time. There is also a case that uses Perfekt in German but not Present perfect in English—articles of law.

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*Wählbar ist, wer das fünfundzwanzigste Lebensjahr vollendet hat.* (GRUNDGESETZ; article 38)

*Eligible is everybody on attaining the age of twentyfive years.*

Both Present perfect and Perfekt require TT AFTER TSit, but Perfekt does not require the relation between TU and TSit. For articles of law, the TU is changable and could be any time. Such a strict T&A relation in Present perfect can not hold all the shiftable situations.

Yu (2013) pointed out that, the theory of Klein is inspiring, whilst there are still some limitations. Firstly, the relation between TT, TSit and TU are mostly presented in forms of time span, where the importance of time point is ignored. Secondly, there are contrary between imperfective and perfective, but not contrast between perfect and imperfect.

To conclude, although there are T&A theories that is helpful in comparing the present perfect and Perfekt, there are still some limitations within them. More inspiring theories and refinements are needed.

**Conclusion**

This article mainly discusses the differences between English Present perfect and German Perfekt. It is found that German Perfekt is more widely used, while English perfect tense is used more strictly. English present perfect tense can only be used to refer to past events related to the present, while German Perfekt can refer to simple past events or future events, and the addition of temporal adverbials is allowed. Researchers often use the relationship between tense and aspect to analyze the causes of this phenomenon. This article briefly introduces Reichenbach's ERS theory of T&A, as well as Klein's (1994) Topic Time theory, and elaborates limitations of these theories pointed out by previous researchers. Hopefully, this article can inspire the refinement of the previous theories and the proposal of the new theory.

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