Commenting on developments in the English language

Present perfect or past simple? April 9, 2014



by <u>Kate Woodford</u>

Present perfect or past simple?

This is a <u>tricky</u> area of the English language for low-level learners, so let's look again at the <u>rules</u>.

When we start <u>studying</u> English, we learn that to talk about an <u>action</u> that started and finished in the past, we use the <u>past simple</u> tense, (for regular verbs, the <u>base</u> verb + -ed):

I finished the course a month ago.

I cooked dinner.

We **saw** Jamie yesterday.

Notice that we <u>naturally</u> use time <u>expressions</u> with the past simple – <u>yesterday</u>, <u>a month ago</u>, <u>2005</u>, etc. Remember that when we use one of these words or phrases, we <u>do not</u> use the <u>present perfect</u> tense:

I've been to the USA in 2008.

I went to the USA in 2008.

So when do we use the present perfect tense to talk about past <u>events</u>? (The present perfect is the verb <u>have</u> + the <u>past participle</u> of a verb.) There are a number of uses, but the one thing that joins them all together is that they in some way <u>relate</u> the past to the present. Let's look at some examples:

- 1 I've lived here since 2006.
- 2 I'm not hungry, thanks I've already had dinner.
- 3 I've been to New York.
- 4 I've seen that film four times.
- 5 Rebecca has had a baby girl.

Example 1

The speaker is talking about a <u>period</u> of time in the past *right up until* the present. The present perfect here expresses the way in which the action started in the past, but *did not finish* in the past.

Example 2

The action of having dinner was in the past, but there is an effect *on the present* – the speaker is not now hungry. Here, the present perfect describes a past event that has a *result now*.

Example 3

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The speaker means that at some point in the <u>whole</u> of their life, (from when they were born right up until the present), they went to New York. They do not tell us exactly when they went. This is an important use of the present perfect.

Example 4

As with Example 3, the time period here is the past right up until the present. Note here the use of the present perfect for talking about how many times something has happened until now.

Example 5

Here, the speaker uses the present perfect to say what has just happened – to announce news. The action is in the past, but it is the very recent past and the effects of the action are still being experienced now. (Remember that when the speaker has announced the news and they then give more information about the event, they usually change to the past simple tense):

Rebecca has had a baby boy! He was born at three o'clock yesterday. It all went really well, apparently.

It is worth noting that American speakers of English use the present perfect less than British speakers to talk about a past event with a present result (Example 2):

(British)

I've hurt my leg and I can't walk properly.

(American)

I've hurt my leg and I can't walk properly. or I hurt my leg and I can't walk properly.

Another <u>difference</u> is that in British English, the words *just*, *yet* and *already* are often used with the present perfect tense. In American English, these words are also used with the past simple tense.

(British)

I've just seen him.

Have you called your mother yet?

I've already invited him.

(American)

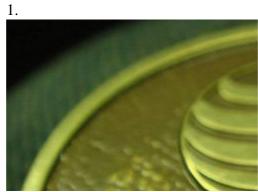
I just saw him or I've just seen him.

Did you call your mother yet? or **Have** you called your mother yet?

I already invited him or I've already invited him.

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18 comments

Very very clear. Thanks a lot

by Pasqualina Nazzaro April 9, 2014 at 4:05 pm

Reply

Thanks for good lesson from you in English

by GHULAM MURTAZA April 9, 2014 at 4:48 pm

Reply

Interesting education so pls update us. Thank you.

by Elias April 9, 2014 at 5:23 pm

Reply

thanks so much for your explanation . it is so clear

by Abdulfatah April 9, 2014 at 5:45 pm

Reply

thanks a lot.i want more lessons on time and tense.kindly give lessons for voice.

by md. mumtaz ali April 9, 2014 at 6:18 pm

Reply

thank, i have got a lot of learning

by khin April 10, 2014 at 8:53 am

Reply

Having spent many years learning other languages myself, I would like to suggest a simple tip: the more you read, the more you learn. The more familiar you become with the patterns of a language, from reading, the easier it becomes to follow them in speaking.

Also, as a native speaker in a very cosmopolitan city (New York), I can tell you that most of us are tolerant of the occasional error. Try your best and, I know from personal observation, at least six New Yorkers will try to help you.

by gothamguide April 10, 2014 at 9:03 am Reply

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Thank you for your interesting lesson.

by S Sureshkumar April 10, 2014 at 3:10 pm

Reply

Thank you for the lesson, that part was always kind of difficult for me!

by Laura Rodriguez April 12, 2014 at 6:46 pm

Reply

than you so much

by arumugam April 13, 2014 at 4:33 pm

Reply

VERY GOOD LESSON

by Hamada Helal April 14, 2014 at 3:16 am

Reply

it is a tailor made session for the confusions people have with these two structures. thanks a ton.

by Nandan April 16, 2014 at 3:54 pm

Reply

Thank you very much for all the kind comments. It's very encouraging to hear that you found the blog useful.

by Cambridge Words April 17, 2014 at 10:50 am

Reply

Thank you for your good presentation, I really enjoy it.

by mohammed yakubu April 20, 2014 at 7:22 pm

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good lesson dear

by montytys April 21, 2014 at 11:38 am

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...a very practical way of explaining. thanks.

by punnyawardena April 22, 2014 at 8:42 am

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Reblogged this on <u>Tuyentranslate</u>.

by tuyentranslate April 24, 2014 at 4:12 pm

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Useful and interesting lesson..

by Birgit Mathiasen June 18, 2014 at 12:18 pm

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