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The Present Perfect in British and American English plays

Abstract. This article deals with the incidence of the use of the Present Perfect Tense in a corpus made up of texts by some British and American writers. Our study measures the usage of the form by representative writers and the distance between the writers in terms of the frequency of its use. The mathematical method applied in the study is capable of detecting stylistic differences between writers and between the two varieties, that is American and British written English, which are evident in their use of the features under study.

It was discovered that the distances between British writers (O. Wilde and B. Shaw) are the closest (distance of 19). We must emphasize that they both are modern British authors. It follows from the distances found that we can differentiate the national peculiarities of the authors on the basis of these 10 chosen grammatical features. That is, British English shows different tendencies in the usage of Present Perfect. It is possible to state that British English has more common features in the usage of Present Perfect than British and American English.

It was also discovered that on the individual level all the authors are different in their use of the Present Perfect Tense. L. Hellman uses the Present Perfect more often than the other three authors.

Introduction

Measuring the frequency of occurrence of certain grammar forms, in this case the peculiarities of the Present Perfect, permits us to determine the degree of stylistic typological similarity between texts of different authors. The stylistic and typological differences between the authors, male and female British and American, taken for this study have never been investigated quantitatively. This is the first attempt to study it from this point of view. Thus the results of the paper are scientifically new. The occurrence of the features chosen precisely indicates the peculiarities of the styles.

An investigation of this sort obtains a lot of new linguistic information. The results of the research are important since they may help to place certain British and American authors accurately and exactly from the standpoint of their special stylistic typological peculiarities. It also can show the differences between British and American oral speech.

Typological and Quantitative Foundations

Before describing our model it is necessary to point out that our approach is both typological and quantitative. By text typology we mean the results of a search of common characteristics of some texts which helps us to put the texts in different groups or classes. This means that we must choose some features which are shared, formal quantitative characteristics of the texts, and construct our comparison on them. It is desirable that the chosen features be basic and that their comparisons be expressed in numbers. Lindsay Whaley proposes to call this partial typology, since it takes into consideration only some features, while holistic typology should consider all the features (Whaley, 1997:23). Indeed, our typology is partial because we took only 10 features, though it is possible to take an unlimited number of features. Our typology is quantitative, since every feature is expressed in numbers. In this case, the typology of texts is very close to the notion of text classification.

In fact, all the models in the Humanities as well as in Natural Sciences which use quantitative features fall under the classification of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who stated that everything in this world has a numerical embodiment. He meant that any linguistic or other object can be substituted for by its measurements. A.V. Jakushev, developing the ideas of I. Kant, calls upon researchers to take into consideration the numerical relationships which can reflect a system fully (Jakushev, 2005:25).

If the texts of one and the same author show less distance in comparison to those of other authors, then one can say that the features which we have chosen are reliable and invariant. Our hypothesis is that one and the same writer has his own style, which depends

upon his thinking process. Consequently, the texts of two different authors must be more different than those of one and the same author. Two authors whose style is similar will have little distance between them. If two different authors are closer than one and the same author, then our tool is sharp enough to distinguish two texts. In this case, the topic of the description may influence the style more than the manner of the description. If one writer wants to imitate the style of the other writer, then his text may be closer to the author in question.

As we have already stated elsewhere, our chosen features characterize a given text as a real object. In this case we consider the text of a certain author to be such an object, to which statistical methods may be applied. These objects may be similar or different to some certain degree. Our model reflects this object in the wholeness of all its features from the point of view of their frequency of occurrence.

Therefore our model reflects both the degree of similarity and the degree of difference by using quantitative characteristics. One can see that we use the terms "similarity" and "distance" in their usual meaning, as reflected in any dictionary, but not in the strict mathematical definition. We understand similarity and distance as a measure of space between two points, places or objects (Hornby, 1984:177). It is the degree or amount of separation between two objects (Webster, 1965:242). Thus, one can say that if the objects (in this case, texts) are more similar, they are closer.

The main assumption in this work is that every text sample of an author is a separate object, characterized by certain values of the selected features which can be measured to determine the distances from other texts. One can assume that the wholeness of all of the objective features of some text may be called the style of the text. In this case we don't speak of the meaning of the text. Our approach is more formal, i.e., our approach takes into consideration the concrete forms of the text, embodied in some forms of words. We measure the numerical characteristics of a certain text to compare it with those of some other texts by

the same or different authors. These numerical characteristics are the frequencies of occurrence of certain chosen forms or features. The values of these features construct the stylistic mosaic of this or that text.

Gustav Herdan wondered in his famous book "The Advanced Theory of Language as Choice and Chance" why it is customary in linguistics to consider literary texts only with regard to the message they are meant to transmit but not with regard to their quantitative characteristics (Herdan, 1966:2-3). One should agree with him that the text is an individual creation of the mind, which is comparable with other such creations and thus can be regarded as instances of a production process. He correctly states that what were regarded before as quite unique events, the products of willful creativity, appear now, when studied quantitatively, as variants of the typical expenditure of linguistic material (Herdan, 1966:3-4).

When reading a book, we may feel that the style of this author is closer to the style of some other. More often than not, we are not aware why we think so. Here we can attempt to formalize our intuition to why we feel two authors are different.

The Corpus of Texts

Texts included in the corpus of this study include those written Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams. The list of all the writers and their texts is provided in the appendix.

The Method of Research

During our research we used one of the methods of mathematics, in particular calculating percentage . To measure the similarity of the frequency values, we use the method of calculating the grammar forms of Present Perfect on the sample of 10,000 words.

Grammatical Features

For our investigation of Present Perfect we have chosen 10 features:

Feature 1: For actions or situations which started in the past and continue up to the present (Bald, 1986: 54; Belyaeva, 1971: 102;   Evans, et al, 2011: 2 ; Kaushanskaya, 1967: 96; Mann, 2010: 6 ; Hewings, 2001: 6; Alexander, 1990: 130 ; Murphy, 1997: 14). Example: She's had her motorbike for over 6 years (Mann, 2010:14).

Feature 2: To talk about a past action which has a visible result in the present (Bald, 1986:54; Belyaeva, 1971:102; Evans, et al, 2011: 2 ; Mann, 2010: 18 ; Murphy, 1997:14; Hewings, 2001: 6; Kachalova, et al., 1957: 162). I've booked the coach tickets (Mann, 2010: 14).

Feature 3: For actions which happened at an unstated time in the past (V. Evans, at al, 2011: 2 ; Belyaeva, 1971:102; M. Hewings, 2001: 6; Kachalova, at al., 1957:162; L. G. Alexander, 1990: 130; Mann, 2010: 18; Murphy, 1997:14). Example: Have you ever flown in a helicopter? (Mann, 2010:18).

Feature 4: For a recently completed action (Belyaeva, 1971:102; Evans, et al, 2011: 2 ; M. Mann, 2010: 6 . ; Kachalova, et al., 1957: 162 ; Kaushanskaya, 1967:96; Murphy, 1997: 14). Example: I haven't received any letters from him lately (Kachalova, et al., 1957:162).

Feature 5: To put emphasis on a number or frequency of some actions (Evans, et al, 2011: 2 ; Hewings, 2001:6; Murphy, 1997:14; Mann, 2010: 240 ; Kachalova et al., 1957: 162). Example: They've been to Chile 3 times.

Feature 6: For series of actions which is continuing up to the moment of speaking (Kachalova et al., 1957:162, Mann, 2010: 6). Example: We've travelled by taxi, bus, plane and train – all in the last 24 hours (Mann, 2010:6).

Feature 7: With the words «today», «this morning/ afternoon/ week», «so far», etc when these periods of time are not finished at the time of speaking

(Belyaeva,1971:102; Evans et al, 2011:2;   Hewings, 2001: 6; Kachalova, 1957: 162; Murphy, 1997:14). Example: He has drunk 2 cups of coffee today.

Feature 8: For the expression of completed actions instead of Future Perfect

(Belyaeva, 1971: 102; Kachalova et al., 1957: 162; Kaushanskaya, 1967:96). Example: I shall go to the country after I have taken my exams (Kachalova et al., 1957:162).

Feature 9: For completed action which was continuing for stated period of time

(Bald, 1986:54; Belyaeva, 1971:102; Hewings, 2001:6; Kachalova, et al., 1957:162; Mann, 2010:6; Murphy, 1997:14;). Example: They've grown such a lot since we last saw them!

Feature 10: With phrases like «This is the first time…» (Mann, 2010:6 ; Murphy, 1997:14). Example: It's the first time he has driven a car (Murphy, 1997:14).

Discussion of the Results of the Investigation

Having analyzed the texts of O. Wild, B. Shaw, T. Williams, and L .Hellman, we obtained the following examples of the functions of Present Perfect.

Feature 1: For actions which started in the past and continue up to the present.

  Examples:

1. Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all the time? (Wilde, 1994 :10).

2. This gentleman and my housekeeper have been here all the time (Shaw,2001 :44).

3. Everything's been so topsy –turvy all evening (Hellman, 1966:26).

Feature 2: To talk about a past action which has a visible result in the present.

Examples:

1. It certainly has changed its colour (Wilde, 1994: 16).

2. I have sent for some clothes for your girl (Shaw, 2001: 46).

3. I have come to the conclusion that your wife considers it vulgar to mention anything by name (Hellman, 1966: 26).

4. I've told you all I know (Williams, 1966:175).

Feature 3: For actions which happened at an unstated time in the past.

Examples:

1. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University (Wilde, 1994:13).

2. I have been rude (Shaw, 2001:58).

3. What has happened, Frederic? (Hellman, 1966: 33).

4. Have you forgotten that your papers were stolen? (Williams, 1966:188) . – забыл,

что твои бумаги украли?

Feature 4: For recently completed actions.

Examples:

1. I've turned round already (Wilde, 1994: 26).

2. Pickering has already straightened himself in the presence of Mrs.Pearce (Shaw, 2001: 27).

3. We've just come (Hellman, 1966: 45).

4. And lately I've found myself listening to hired musicians behind a row of artificial palm trees (Williams, 1966: 180).

Feature 5: To put emphasis on a number or frequency of the same actions.

Examples:

1. You have always told me it was Ernest (Wild, 1994: 11).

2. I have never done such a thing (Shaw, 2001: 38).

3. I've often thought that (Hellman, 1966: 40).

4. So now and then, although we've wounded each other time and again (Williams, 1966: 192).

Feature 6: For series of actions which is continuing up to the moment of speaking.

1. I've told and told her not to live in a dream! (Williams, 1966: 139).

Feature 7: With «today», «this morning/ afternoon/ week», «so far», etc when these periods of time are not finished at the time of speaking.

This feature did not occur here in the texts under research.

Feature 8: For the expression of completed actions instead of Future Perfect.

1. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister (Wilde, 1994: 25).

2. And what is to become of her when you've finished your teaching (Shaw, 2001: 34).

3. It's my firm belief that women only look well in a hat after they've eaten (Hellman, 1966: 67).

Feature 9: For completed actions continuing for a stated period of time

1. Where have you been since last Thursday? (Wild, 1994: 9).

2. I haven't seen the girl these 2 month past (Shaw, 2001: 44).

3. For years I've looked forward to coming back (Hellman, 1966: 50).

4. How long is it since you've been to the travel agencies? (Williams, 1966: 176).

Feature 10: With phrases like «This is the first time…».

This feature was not used in the texts under research.

 Interestingly, it was discovered that the most frequent feature is Feature 2 in our list of features, which represents a completed action at a time in the past which is not mentioned (94 instances). Feature 10, which occurs with the phrases, "This is the first (second) time…," did not occur at all in the corpus.

Having obtained the frequencies of occurrences of the 10 features provided above, we built several tables to show the difference in the stylistic grammatical characteristics of texts between the authors in the corpus of the study.

Table 1. O. Wilde and B. Shaw

Features	O. Wilde	B. Shaw	Distance
1	3	2	1
2	19	6	3
3	13	13	0
4	4	2	2
5	12	5	7
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	1	5	4
9	2	1	1
10	0	0	0
∑	54	44	18

Table 2. O. Wilde and L. Hellman

Features	O. Wilde	L. Hellman	Distance
1	3	4	1
2	19	32	13
3	13	13	0
4	4	2	2
5	12	5	3
6	0	5	5
7	0	0	0
8	1	1	0
9	2	6	4
10	0	0	0
∑	54	78	28

Table 3. O. Wilde and T. Williams

Features	O. Wilde	T. Williams	Distance
1	3	0	3
2	19	27	8
3	13	14	1
4	4	1	3
5	12	1	11
6	0	1	1
7	0	0	0
8	1	0	1
9	2	1	1
10	0	0	0
∑	54	41	29

Table 4. B. Shaw and L. Hellman

Features	B. Shaw	L. Hellman	Distance
1	2	4	2
2	16	32	16
3	13	13	0
4	2	2	0
5	5	15	10
6	0	5	1
7	0	0	0
8	5	1	4
9	1	6	5
10	0	0	0
∑	44	78	38

T\able 5. B. Shaw and T. Williams

Features	B. Shaw	T. Williams	Distance
1	2	0	2
2	16	27	11
3	13	14	2
4	2	1	2
5	5	1	5
6	0	1	1
7	0	0	0
8	5	0	5
9	1	1	1
10	0	0	0
$\sum$	44	41	30

T\able 6. L. Hellman and T. Williams

Features	.Hellman	T. Williams	Distance
1	4	0	4
2	32	27	5
3	13	14	1
4	2	1	1
5	15	1	14
6	5	1	1
7	0	0	0
8	1	0	0
10	0	0	0
$\sum$	78	45	35

Table 7. The total occurrences of features for all authors

Features	O. Wild	B. Shaw	L. Hellman	T. Williams	$\sum$
1	3	2	4	0	9
2	19	16	32	27	94
3	13	13	13	14	53
4	4	2	2	1	9
5	12	5	15	1	33
6	0	0	5	1	6
7	0	0	0	0	0
8	1	5	1	0	7
9	2	1	6	1	10
10	0	0	0	0	0
$\sum$	54	44	78	41	221

Table 8

The ordered series of the authors under investigation from the point of view of the value of the distance between them built by the data of the frequency of the occurrence of the chosen 10 features:

№	Authors	Distances
1	O. Wild – B. Shaw	19
2	O. Wild – T. Williams	29
3	O. Wild – L. Hellman	26
4	B. Shaw – T. Williams	30
5	L. Hellman – T. Williams	35
6	B. Shaw – L. Hellman	38

Conclusions

1. In particular, the most frequent feature is Feature 2, a completed action at a time in the past which is not mentioned (94 occurrences, 45.5% of all Present Perfect forms found in the corpus). In contrast, Feature 10, with phrases "This is the first (second) time…" did not occur at all (see Table 7).

2. The distances between O. Wilde and G.B. Shaw are the closest (19). We must emphasize that they both are British. It follows from the distances that we can differentiate the national peculiarities of the authors on the basis of these 10 chosen grammar features. That is, British English shows different tendencies in the usage of Present Perfect. It is possible to state that a British English has more common features in the usage of Present Perfect than British and American English (see Table 8).

3. On the individual level all the authors are different. L. Hellman uses Present Perfect more often than the other three authors. This demonstrates that elements of her style, that is, the particular way that she individually utilizes the language resources available to her, can be detected by a statistical comparison with other writers. If broader samples of female and male writers were surveyed, statistical methods could be employed to detect the presence of gender differences in the use of the feature.

4. The results obtained and the comparisons that they make available demonstrate that the mathematical model used in this study is capable of detecting individual stylistic differences, which are perceived to result from the frequency of the use of specific grammatical features. This capability has applications in such diverse areas as text authentication and plagiarism detection (see Tambovtsev, 2008), sociolinguistic comparisons among contemporary varieties, historical shifts in the frequency of use of certain features or forms (e.g., Leech, Hunt, Mair, & Smith, 2009), and typological studies including verifying or challenging taxonomies (see Tambovtsev, 2005).

Appendix

The material used in this research was taken from the following works:

L.Hellman. *The Autumn Garden*. – New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966.

G.B. Shaw. *Pygmalion*. - Rostov-on-Don: Phoenix, 2001.

O.Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

T.Williams. *Camino Real*. – New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1966.

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