



THE PRESENT PERFECT:

A MISUNDERSTOOD TENSE FOR BRAZILIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to help English teachers during their classes, when teaching the Present Perfect Tense. It is known that teachers and students feel it difficult to understand since there is not a verb tense like it in Portuguese. But it is possible to work with its correspondent Portuguese verb tenses and make it quite understood.

Resumo:

É sabido que professores e estudantes sentem dificuldade em compreender o Present Perfect Tense, uma vez que não é um tempo verbal em português. Todavia, é possível trabalhar com tempos verbais correspondentes em português. O objetivo desse ensaio é ajudar os professores de inglês no ensino desse tempo verbal.

Palavras-chave:

Inglês, Ensino, Presente Perfect Tense.

The present perfect is a tense which does not exist in the Portuguese Language. For its distinctive characteristics, The Brazilian students feel it difficult to be appropriately used, or they simply apply the simple past tense wrongly. Because of that, a comparative study between Portuguese and English past tenses are done here, in order to find a definition, and/or a pedagogical way to teach it, and have students memorizing /internalizing it.

In the Portuguese language, 'Pretérito (past) indicates a previous fact before someone speaks' (Maia, 1994, p.131). In the Indicative Mood, it is divided into:

- Pretérito Perfeito Simples: it is applied on concluded actions, in a definite period in the past;
- Pretérito Perfeito composto: it is applied on actions that are repeated, or started in the past, and continued in the present;
- Pretérito Imperfeito Simples: it is a past action, but not concluded; may be attached to another one in the simple past; it expresses an action in development, when another one happened/interrupted;
- Pretérito Mais-Que-Perfeito Simples: it is applied on an action which occurred before another past action;
- Pretérito Mais-Que-Perfeito Composto: used like the simple form;
- Futuro do Pretérito: it indicates past processes for the mentioned past moment.

In the Subjunctive Mood, there are:

- Pretérito imperfeito: it indicates processes of not precise limits, before the moment in which one speaks, or writes;
- Pretérito Perfeito: it occurs in a compound form, about previous actions, suggesting they were hopefully concluded when someone talks, or writes;
- Pretérito Mais-Que-Perfeito: it occurs in a compound form, and is about a past action before another one also in the past.

Chart 1 – The Portugues Language – Past Tenses:

MOOD	VERB TENSE	EXAMPLES
INDICATIVE	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO	Meu pai viajou ontem. Comprei um carro novo.
INDICATIVE	PRETÉRITO IMPERFEITO	Eu era famoso
INDICATIVE	PRETÉRITO MAIS-QUE-PERFEITO	Eu acabara de tomar um banho quando ele chegou. Dirigia como se fosse/fora louco.
INDICATIVE	FUTURO DO PRETÉRITO	Nós iríamos à praia, se não chovesse.
SUBJUNCTIVE	PRETÉRITO IMPERFEITO	Se Pedro fosse um bom filho, ajudaria sua mãe.
SUBJUNCTIVE	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO	Espero que você tenha feito sua tarefa escolar!
SUBJUNCTIVE	PRETÉRITO MAIS-QUE-PERFEITO	Sara chorou até que seus pais tivessem chegado para consolá-la.

Let's analyse the past tenses in English:

- The Simple Past: it describes a past action in a definite/known period of time. It answers to the question 'when did the action happen?';
- The Past Continuous: it describes an action that was happening in the past; an action that was occurring in the past, interrupted by a new one expressed in the Simple Past; an intention not realized;
- The Present Perfect: it indicates (1) an indetermined past; (2) an action already finished; (3) actions repeatedly done since the past until the present time; (4) actions happening in a period of time not finished/completed; (5) an action that started in the past and still influences the present;

d) The Present Perfect Continuous: it indicates an action started in the past – generally a determined past – and goes to the present. As the Present Perfect has the same function, the Present Perfect Continuous is the best option, when related to more recent situations. The Present perfect is for more permanent actions;

e) The Past Perfect: It is applied on an action that happened before another one also in the past;

f) *The past Perfect Continuous: it indicates an action being developed before a past one.

Chart 2 – English Language – past tenses

VERB TENSE	EXAMPLES
THE SIMPLE PAST	She went to the movies last week.
THE PAST CONTINUOUS	I was washing my car(,when the rains arrived.) She has gone to the movies. I have just washed my car.
THE PRESENT PERFECT	John has visited her mother many times this month. Peter has lived here since 1980. Here you are! We've been waiting for you for three hours.
THE PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS	He has been working here for the last ten days.
THE PAST PERFECT	When mom arrived, dad had already arrived.
THE PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS	We began working here last week. We had been working here for ten days.

Now, that the Portuguese and English past tenses were separately analysed, a comparative chart among both languages and their pasts are drawn here to find out definitions, and/or similarities related to Portuguese and English past verb tenses.

Chart 3 - Portuguese and English past tenses: a comparison

ENGLISH TENSES	PAST ASSOCIATED TENSES	BRAZILIAN PAST TENSES	PORTUGUESE EXAMPLES	ENGLISH (TRANSLATION) EXAMPLES
THE SIMPLE PAST	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO SIMPLES/ PRETÉRITO IMPERFEITO INDICATIVE MOOD	PRETÉRITO SIMPLES-	Meu pai viajou ontem. Eu era famoso e não sabia.	My father travelled yesterday. I was famous and didn't know it.
THE CONDITIONAL- SIMPLE	FUTURO DO INDICATIVE MOOD	PRETÉRITO-	Nós iríamos à praia, se não chovesse.	We would go to the beach, if it didn't rain.
THE PAST PERFECT	PRETÉRITO MAIS-QUE-PERFEITO SIMPLES-INDICATIVE MOOD	PRETÉRITO	Eu acabara de tomar banho, quando ele chegou.	I had already taken a shower, when he arrived.
THE CONDITIONAL	1st. PRETÉRITO SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD	PRETÉRITO SIMPLES	– Se Pedro fosse um bom filho, ele ajudaria sua mãe.	If Pedro were a good son, he would help his mother.
THE PERFECT	PRESENT PRETÉRITO PERFEITO COMPOSTO/ PRETÉRITO MAIS-QUE-PERFEITO COMPOSTO– SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD	PRETÉRITO COMPOSTO/ PRETÉRITO MAIS-QUE-PERFEITO COMPOSTO	Espero que você tenha feito sua tarefa escolar! Sara chorou até que seus pais tivessem chegado para consolá-la.	I hope you have done your homework! Sara had cried until her parents arrived to comfort her.

As we see, one of the results in the relations that can be done with the English Present perfect and the Brazilian past tenses are the Pretérito Perfeito and the Pretérito Perfeito Composto, in the Subjunctive Mood. But let's use examples according to the previous definitions of the present perfect in this research to check if there is any other Portuguese related tense.

Chart 4 The present perfect tense: English and Portuguese analogies:

USES	ENGLISH EXAMPLES	PORTUGUESE VERB TENSE	PORTUGUESE EXAMPLES
An indetermined period of past	Have you ever eaten Caviare?	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO SIMPLES – INDICATIVE MOOD	Você já comeu caviar?
An Action already finished	I have just arrived here!	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO SIMPLES – INDICATIVE MOOD	Eu acabei de chegar aqui!
Actions repeatedly done since the past until the present time	She has written scientific essays lately. She has been there many times.	PRETÉRITO PERFEITO COMPOSTO – INDICATIVE MOOD	Ela tem escrito artigos científicos ultimamente. Ela tem estado lá muitas vezes.
Actions happening in a period of time not finished	I have lived here since 1989.	PRESENTE SIMPLES INDICATIVE MOOD	– Eu moro aqui Desde 1989. Eu não o vejo desde o ano passado. Or Eu não o tenho visto desde o ano passado.
An action that started in the past and still influences the present	I haven't seen him since last year. We have been together for ages!	PRESENTE SIMPLES/ PRETÉRITO COMPOSTO – INDICATIVE MOOD	Nós estamos juntos há anos. Or Nós temos estado junto há anos.

So, the Present Perfect tense can also be associated to the 'Presente Simples and to the 'Pretérito Perfeito Composto' of the Indicative Mood in Portuguese language, as following:

THE PRESENT PERFECT TENSE – EXAMPLES	PORTUGUESE TENSES	VERB INDICATIVE MOOD EXAMPLES	PORTUGUESE EXAMPLES	APPROACHED SITUATION IN ENGLISH
I have seen this film before.	Pretérito Simples	Perfeito	Eu assisti a esse filme antes	Undetermined past
Someone has stolen my	Pretérito	Perfeito	Alguém roubou meu dinheiro	Undetermined past.

money.	Simple			
He has just left.	Pretérito Simple	Perfeito	Ele acabou de sair.	The action has just happened.
They've arrived from the market just now.	Pretérito Simple	Perfeito	Eles chegaram do mercado agora.	The action has just happened.
Jill has worked here since 1980.	Presente Simple/ Pretérito Composto	Perfeito	Jill trabalha aqui desde 1980./ Jill tem trabalhado aqui desde 1980.	The action started in the past and still continued in the present.
Sheyla has worked hard all morning. I don't think we'll have lunch together.	Pretérito Simple	Perfeito	Sheyla trabalhou durante toda manhã.	The action started in the past and still influences the present
I haven't seen her since last week.	Presente Pretérito Composto	Simple/ Perfeito	Eu não a vejo desde a semana passada./ Eu não a tenho visto desde a semana passada	The action started in an undetermined past and goes on in the present, completed or not, in the moment one speaks.
We've waited for you for over two hours! There you are finally!	Presente Simple		Esperamos você por mais de duas horas! Ai está você finalmente!	The action started in the past and still influences the present.

The conclusion is that the Present perfect tense can be associated to the 'Presente Simple', the 'Pretérito Perfeito Simple', and the 'Pretérito Perfeito Composto' of the Indicative Mood, in The Portuguese Verb system, almost all the time.

The exceptions are for especial cases in the Subjunctive Mood, in the Portuguese Language, for structures as:

I hope you have done your homework! (Present Perfect)

Eu espero que você Tenha feito sua tarefa escolar! (Pretérito Perfeito)

Sara had cried until her parents arrived to comfort her. (Present Perfect)

Sara chorou até que seus tivessem chegado para consolá-la. (Pretérito Mais-Que-Perfeito)

Or

Sara chorou até que seus pais chegassem para consolá-la. (Pretérito Imperfeito/Subjunctive Mood)

The choice of the right tense depends on the semantic aspect of the structure. In order to make the Present Perfect understood, I suggest a comparison between both English and Portuguese structures to deal with the meaning of the speech. Only by that approach, Brazilian students will be able to internalize such a complex tense as the Present Perfect tense is.

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