This short paper concerns the preterite in English, and more specifically certain uses which are seen to evince a perfectal meaning in lieu of the expected aoristic function. The existence of a hybrid perfectal aorist is posited.

Teasing apart the respective functions of the simple past and the periphrastic perfect in languages which have both tenses is no easy task.

Emile Benveniste (1966: 249) proposes a distinction based on language use where those tenses are separated on the basis of their respective predilections for (a) narratives (= “histoire”) or (b) instances of discourse (= “discours”). Although Benveniste’s considerations rest on examples chosen in Present-Day French, the case has been made for a universal reading of this theory (Arrivé, 1997).

In narratives (i.e. Histoire), says Benveniste

1) “[l]es événements (…) semblent se raconter d’eux-mêmes’ (ibid.: 249)
2) “A dire vrai il n’y a même plus alors de narrateur. Les événements sont posés comme ils se sont produits à mesure qu’ils apparaissent à l’horizon de l’histoire. Personne ne parle ici: les événements semblent se raconter eux-mêmes. Le temps fondamental est l’aoriste, qui est le temps de l’événement hors de la personne d’un narrateur.” (ibid.: 241)

In contradistinction, says Benveniste

3) “[le parfait] établit un lien vivant entre l’événement passé et le présent où son évocation trouve place. C’est le temps de celui qui relate les faits en témoin, en participant”. (ibid.: 244)

He thus opposes “Il fit”, “qui objectivise l’événement en le détachant du présent” and “il a fait”, which “[met] en liaison le passé avec notre présent”. (ibid.: 249)

This theoretical approach clearly informs the topological model expounded in Culioli (1980), Desclés (1980) and Boulle (1981). Now, strap yourselves because this is hard stuff:

4) “[il put franchir la rivière]: “l’aoristique entraîne la construction du fermé de /franchir/: ceci élimine toute valeur stative ou conative. En effet, construisons à partir de la notion (p, p’) l’intervalle (donc connexe) des instants où la relation prédicative est validée, noté W de (p,p’). W est un fermé (opération aoristique); son complémentaire est un ouvert. Or, dans un espace aoristique, l’ouvert est disjoint et ininterprétable linguistiquement. Donc, la valeur stative est éliminée. Quant à la valeur conative de la notion, elle est éliminée par construction, puisque l’opération aoristique ferme l’ouvert p de la notion prédicative (p,p’).” (Culioli, 1980: 193)

5) “(…) sur le domaine aoristique, on a une topologie où l’on est obligé d’interdire des chevauchements entre fermés: je n’ai que des fermés avec, éventuellement, emboîtement, mais pas d’intersection. C’est le domaine d’une certaine succession (…)”. (Desclés, 1980: 48)
6) “Les formes aoristiques présentent des propriétés aspectuelles (variables selon les langues, mais ramenables à l’unité) qui sont inséparables d’une propriété modale-énonciative fondamentale: l’absence de lien explicite à l’énonciateur et à la situation d’énonciation (…)” (Boulle, 1981: 146)

In keeping with the topological properties just defined, a string of events narrated in the preterite (7)a-b-c will iconically mirror their chronological order of occurrence, while the same string of events in the perfect (8) will carry no indication whatsoever of sequential ordering, and will merely offer a random list of events with typical perfect properties: (a) these no longer need to be carried out, if such were implicitly or explicitly the aim,¹ and (b) their consequences obtain at the moment of speech:

7) [What did he do yesterday?]
   a) He baked a cake, he washed the dishes, and he had a nap.
   b) He washed the dishes, he baked a cake, and he had a nap.
   c) He had a nap, he washed the dishes, and he baked a cake.

8) [What has he done today?]
   He’s baked a cake, he’s washed the dishes, and he’s had a nap.

References abound in the literature to the state of disjunction relative to the moment of speech pertaining to the Preterite. Thus for Bryan:

9) “The preterite tense represents an action or state as having occurred or having existed at a past moment or during a past period of time that is definitely separated from the actual present moment (…).” (Bryan, 1936: 363)

Yet, for all its merits with a wealth of instances, this approach falls short of painting the whole picture of preterite use. To explore the matter further, let us turn to Dionysius Thrax (Denys de Thrace, 170-90 BC). The Greek grammarian conceived of four “sub-species” of the past tenses: “imperfect, perfect, pluperfect, and aorist”. He termed the present perfect “parakeímenos”, i.e. “lying near”.²

The term of “aorist”, by the way, comes from the Greek verb horizon (“to define, to limit”) so that with the privative meaning of the prefix, aorist comes to mean something like “indefinite”. This notion of indefiniteness must be viewed in the light of the central role attributed by Greek, and in their wake, Latin grammarians, to the aspectual notions of completeness v. incompleteness.

Now, Dionysius Thrax is essentially known through the later glosses made of the rare fragments of his works, and it is relevant to note how the ⁶th century AD Latin grammarian Priscian, in his commentaries, adds the crucial observation that just as in Latin the praeteritum perfectum tense is able to refer to an event completed either recently or long ago, likewise in Greek, the aorist is liable to express adjacency (“adiacens”) through the addition of an adverb like árti (“just now”) (cf. Binnick, 1991: 11).

What I have just outlined briefly encapsulates a debate which has long raged among linguists as to the properties of the preterite in instances such as (10-11) which, in my reckoning, it would be rash to discard as exclusively archaic and so foreign to Present-Day English:

¹ Conation is, as often as not, a crucial component of the semantics of the perfect.
² Cf. the notion of “adjacency” implicit by contrast in Culioli’s “aoristique” as defining the state of disjunction with the right-most boundary of a temporal interval, -- disjunction, that is, with respect to the deictic point of origin, the ego, hic et nunc..
10) Kings of Natolia and of Hungarie, We came from Turky to confime a league, And not to dare ech other to the field [(1590) Marlowe, Tamburlaine the Great, Part 2, 2440; in Ando, 1976: 99]

11) To sit, and talke with thee I hether came, That thou maiest know with loue thou mak’st me flame [(1582) Marlowe, Ovid’s Elegies; in Ando, 1976: 99]

12) [about the preterite in (10-11)] “the speaker’s attention is directed to some definite point of time in the past rather than to the present result” [Ando, 1976: 100]

Ando here echoes a point of view formulated before him by Otto Jespersen:

13) “A person on arriving may say, I have come (in order to ...) or else I came …; the idea of the latter sentence is something like: when I decided to come, my reason was…” [Jespersen, 1931: 66]

To which Kruisinga retorts with ex. (14), counter Jespersen’s temporal analysis:

14) I called to ask you, if you would join us. [= preterite of modesty: “the preterite would seem to be more polite, or modest” [Kruisinga, 1931: 25]

Now, this notion of a “preterite of modesty” is of course at once reminiscent of one of the guises of the French imperfect known as “imparfait d’atténuation”, e.g. (15):

15) Qu’est-ce que je vous sers? / J’avais envie d’une glace au chocolat. [Anscombe 2004: 79]

Note here that a similar effect obtains with the preterite in (16):

16) Hi, I wanted to ask you if you knew when The Tiger’s Curse movie is coming out in theaters? [https://www.goodreads.com/questions/512070]

But note too that in (15-16), the past tense is seen to alternate not with the perfect, but with a present tense probably felt to be too blunt and direct for good manners (e.g. “j’ai envie d’une glace” / “I want to ask you”). By contrast, the past tense (both imparfait and preterite) aptly sheds temporal distance in favour of intersubjective distance, and is thus best viewed as modal in nature3 in that the preterite weakens the illocutionary force of the request.

So, yes, Kruisinga is certainly right to call upon the notions of “politeness” and “modesty” within the general scope of intersubjective communication and qualify in such terms various non-temporal uses of the preterite, and yes too, these notions are fully consonant with the attenuative effect ascribed elsewhere to the French imparfait. But in the context of (14), I believe Kruisinga’s modal attenuative analysis to be wholly inadequate and frankly mistaken. Instead, I contend that the meaning of (14) falls squarely within the broad range of meanings once afforded to the Greek aorist, namely that of completive aspect with current relevance. This shade of meaning is found in the likes of (17-19):

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3 There is a range of non-temporal uses pertaining to both the French imparfait and the English preterite, encompassing partly or fully derealising effects. They will not be described in this overview, which concentrates on temporal and aspectual functions.
17) I brought the bust up with me (...). Here it is. [1905, Conan Doyle, *Return of Sherlock Holmes*].


19) Oops! I broke my glasses and I can’t see.

Quite evidently, this shade of meaning clashes with a strict interpretation of the Benvenistian tenets mentioned before, where a functional dichotomy is posited between *Histoire* and *Discours* (in this paper, *Narrative v. Discourse*) and where the French Passé Simple is entirely circumscribed within the domain of *Histoire*.

This narrow interpretation has over the years taken a lot of stick for failing, precisely, to account for linguistic instances where respectively simple or periphrastic tenses fail to comply with the expected *Histoire / Discours* dichotomy.

Feuillet (1985) is one such ardent critic, who goes so far as to deny the Narrative / Discourse opposition any relevance for Balkan languages (cf. (20)):

20) “(...) dans les langues balkaniques modernes (albanais, bulgare, grec), l’aoriste est d’un emploi constant à toutes les personnes dans ce que Benveniste appelle le ‘discours’ et (...) le parfait est beaucoup plus rare. Autrement dit, la distinction discours / histoire n’a pratiquement pas de valeur opératoire dans ces langues, car tous les temps peuvent être employés dans le discours.” (1985: 5)

Clearly, the question deserves further analysis... But in the meantime, I would resolutely argue that (17-18-19) do not in any way ruin the analysis given for (7)a-b-c in the introductory part of this paper: these events are undisputedly presented in a chronological sequence mirroring their narrative sequential ordering, and each event is clearly disjoined from preceding or following sub-events in the sequence. But, and this is a big “but”, what (17-18-19) do show, by comparison, is that next to the narrative aoristic function held by the preterite in (7)a-b-c, this tense is also liable to function with perfectal implications of current relevance, though crucially in non-sequential contexts.

“How is that possible?” one will ask. Because, in spite of the expansion of the perfect over the course of time, the English preterite, obviously, never fully relinquished to that tense the perfectal functions that had once been its exclusive prerogative, among a whole range of meanings.

The chart in (21) actually highlights the fact that after an initial phase of expansion of the perfect at the expense of the preterite between roughly 1350 and 1800, there actually followed a clear statistical reversal in favour of the preterite, and this both in American and British English:
21) Productivity of the Preterite and Perfect tenses (Elsness, 1989: 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>have Perfect %</th>
<th>be Perfect %</th>
<th>Preterite %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O.E.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c1200</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c1350-1400</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c1550-1600</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750-1800 British E.</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>62.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present-day British E.</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750-1800 American E.</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present-day American E.</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This resilience of the preterite is better known and documented for Am.E. – to wit the so-called “Colloquial American preterite” (Vanneck, 1958) – and a number of temporal adverbs are indeed reputed to favour the preterite over the perfect in Am. E., and vice versa. Such is definitely the case for already and yet, which vacillate to some extent between preterite and perfect in Am.E. but, by contrast, distinctly favour the perfect in Br. E. Concerning just, ever, never, since, the marked preference for the perfect in Br. E. is characteristic of prescriptive usage, and in fact not quite so overwhelming if one takes into account regional Englishes, where usage may still reflect a lesser degree of diffusion overall of a prestige-driven perfect tense, at least, that is, in lower registers.

Quite remarkably, this particular point of tense use is felt to be so iconic of proper English that it warrants a special place in language use handbooks for the general public (e.g. Burchfield (1996), Greenbaum and Whitcut (1988)), generally in the form of harsh pronouncements on the ungrammaticality of the preterite with yet or already. And as pronouncements go, they do not come any harsher than the following, from right-wing British politician Enoch Powell:

“Written – and spoken – English is rapidly becoming the tongue of those who do not know Latin. We are for instance losing – as transatlantic English has already lost – the expressive resource of the difference in English (uniquely among European languages) between the aorist (I saw) and the perfect (I have seen). “What is your judgement of George Eliot as a writer of English? I ask because I have just reread The Mill on the Floss.” As likely as not, the wording today would be: “I just reread The Mill on the Floss,” spoken without the least consciousness – grammatical consciousness – of what has been sacrificed by degrading the perfect have read into the aorist read. The result is English impoverished because it is English ungrammatical.” Enoch Powell (1990)

And yet, beyond the obtuse chauvinistic stance probably lies the keen perception by Powell – a Trinity College man, after all – that something may actually be happening to the Perfect… Perhaps under the influence of the decreasing sway held by prescriptive English over general usage in the British Isles and, perhaps too, as a testimony of the undeniable power of attraction exerted by American-influenced media.

The question is of some merit as the former type of influence – from lower class speakers – could only illustrate change brought about from “below”, that is to say, unconscious structural change induced by the normativisation of vernacular usage, while the latter influence – from American English – would fall under the category of “change from above”, that is to say change knowingly instigated by speakers of the “trend-setting” type, as likely as not of the higher or socially mobile classes.
References


