

Variation Between the Simple Past and the Present Perfect and its Pedagogical Implications

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Evidence is presented to demonstrate that approximately 80 percent of prescribed uses of the present perfect in North American English may enter into variation with the simple past, thus giving the latter a considerably greater functional load than the present perfect. Further data from British English and English used in the press of other countries manifests this same variation but at much reduced frequency levels. It is suggested that such a marked difference between prescriptive and contemporary English should have interesting pedagogical implications. These will vary according to the many variables related to teaching and learning situations. In cases where examinations necessitate a prescriptive approach, such implications will be minimal. Where the purpose is to minimize the learning load and at the same time enable students to acquire an ability to use everyday language, the findings may be fully reflected in the syllabus. Between these two extremes, a variety of options are available to teachers.

単純過去形と現在完了形間の変動とその英語教育上の示唆

本研究ではまず、アメリカ英語の実態調査から、規範文法で示されている現在完了形の用法の内、約80%が過去形によって代用され、その結果過去形の担っている機能がかかり、相当増大していることを示している。次に、イギリス英語、ならびに英、米以外の国々で使用されている主にジャーナリズムの英語でも同様の傾向のあることが指摘している。このような現状を踏まえたうえで、本稿では異なる教育的背景も考慮して、過去形と現在完了形に関するいくつかの教授上の示唆を述べている。

1. Introduction

The various uses of the simple and the present perfect tenses offer a challenge to teachers and pose learning problems for students. These largely result from the fact that most other languages do not have a present perfect form and those which do, Spanish, for example, do not have the same range of meanings as does the present perfect in English. They do have, however, a simple past form; non-native speakers, therefore, tend often to use this tense

in English instead of the present perfect. A consequence of this in terms of course content design is a giving of more or less equal importance to the two forms and an emphasis on the contrast between them. This is perfectly justifiable if one bases one's teaching on the prescriptive use of the present perfect. However, a descriptive analysis of North American usage shows that the simple past is frequently used in place of the present perfect, thus giving it a considerably greater functional load than the latter. The relationship between the simple past and the present perfect is, therefore, characterized by some degree of contrast but also by a large degree of variation. This paper describes the constraints on this variation and then discusses their implications for the teaching of ESL/EFL.

The question of this variation has already been addressed in the literature (see Marshall, 1979; Peterson, 1970; Richards, 1979; Vanneck, 1958). However, none of these authors attempted to present an overall account of the relationship between the present perfect and the simple present in terms of the constraints on the variation. Such an attempt was made in Sheen (1984). That analysis was based on data collected from television, newspapers, and films in the USA and Canada in the seventies and eighties.¹ It was hypothesized therein that the simple past may be used in place of the present perfect in those cases where the current relevance conveyed by the present perfect is also represented by contextual and situational factors. Thus in the utterance *I haven't finished yet*, current relevance is conveyed by both the verbal form and the word *yet*. This verbal form is, therefore, redundant, thus permitting the use of the simple past as in *I didn't finish yet* without loss of meaning.

Since that time, observation of British usage in the newspapers, on TV, and in films has permitted the collection of a number of examples of the simple past where one would expect the present perfect, which would appear to indicate that British English is beginning to manifest the variation prevalent in North America.² Before discussing this new data, I will first discuss the question of current relevance in the use of the present perfect and then give a summary of an analysis of the various data.

2. Current Relevance in the Present Perfect

The present perfect is used when one wishes to express the current relevance of an event or state.³ However, such current relevance may be viewed from different viewpoints as in the following:

1. We have both lived in many countries.
—Indefinite past with event verbs referring to some past event which one regards as part of one's experience of life.

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2. Has the mail arrived?

—Such uses implicitly have a known period of time of which both speakers are aware. The adverb *yet* is implicit in the utterance and the time reference is the recent past.

3. We've done ten so far.

—This example is related to 2. However, the up to the present meaning is indicated by the presence of an appropriate adverb. Examples are *yet, already, just, so far, up to now, until now, always, recently, lately, never, ever, before, in the past/last* + a period of time such as a month, *this* + a time period not yet finished such as *morning, a number + times, as in three times*.

4. He has played here for years.

He has been here since 1980.

—Habit or state leading up to the present usually associated with *since, for*, or synonymous circumlocutions.

5. You've broken my doll.

—This refers to an event the result of which is evident. In this case, the doll is broken.

6. Do not speak until he has finished.

—A use of the present perfect with future reference used in subordinate adverbial clauses of time introduced by *until, before, after, and when*. As the event occurs in the future, there is no current relevance.

The current relevance in examples 1 to 5 may also frequently be expressed by the context and/or situation in which the utterance is made, thus rendering the use of the present perfect as opposed to the simple past to some degree redundant. Examples such as 1 are often made in situations where one is talking about one's previous experience leading up to the present, thus clearly implying current relevance. In 2, the implicit presence of *yet* conveys the current relevance. In 3, it is conveyed by the adverbs. In 4, in the case of the preposition *for* there is no redundancy because this preposition is neutral in terms of the time to which a period extends. It can extend up to the present or up to a moment in the past or future, indicated by the tense or aspect of the verb. Thus the use of the simple past with *for* does not necessarily imply current relevance. In the sentence, *He lived here for five years*, the subject, *he*, no longer lives at that place. On the other hand, *since* does not share this same neutral status. It necessarily extends from a moment in the past up to the present

moment and, therefore, conveys current relevance. In 5, it is conveyed by the result of the event, the speaker implicitly referring to the presence of the subject of the verb. It is for this reason that the imperative *Look* is associated with this use, as in for example a child's saying, *Look, you've broken my doll*. In 6 there is no current relevance as one is talking about future events.

3. The North American Data

Redundancy characterizes many of the uses of the present perfect. Where it exists, the simple past may enter into variation with it. Following are examples taken from the North American media of uses of the simple past in the contexts and situations 1 to 5 described above (indicated here as 3.1 through 3.5). In these examples, as in all others cited, the relevant use of the simple past is underlined.

- 3.1
1. James Stewart, who appeared in eighty films, recently entered hospital. (He was still an active actor at the time. *CBC 10 O'Clock News*: February 4, 1980)⁴
 2. I killed many people. (Film: *Godfather III*, 1991)
 3. He's the worst type of packager there is. We bought better programs from film students. (Film: *Max Headroom* No. 5, 1985)
 4. It's from *Casablanca*. I waited all my life to say it. (Film: *Play It Again, Sam*, 1972)
 5. I wanted to do that all my life. (Film: *Back To The Future II*, 1989)
 6. I made a lot of money for Fox. (Film: *Guilty by Suspicion*, 1991)
- 3.2
1. Did you two have breakfast? (Film: *Psycho*, 1960)
 2. Wait a minute; I didn't finish. (Film: *Straw Dogs*, 1971)
- 3.3
1. We didn't have the cake yet. (Film: *Anna*, 1987)
 2. A: Get me on the next flight.
B: I already did. (Film: *The Spy Who Loved Me*, 1977)
 3. They just told us the announcement will be delayed. (*ABC World News*: May 3, 1992)
 4. They found twelve bodies so far. (*CBC 10 O'Clock News*: September 20, 1979)
 5. Up to now, he won all his matches in straight sets. (*ABC Wide World of Sports*: June 27, 1978)
 6. Until now, we didn't use laser bombs. (*PBS News Hour*: March 13, 1991)

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7. They missed ten free throws tonight so far. (NBC commentary on basketball match between The Bulls and The Cavaliers: June 2, 1992)
 8. Sales almost doubled over the past four years. (*ABC World News*: June 20, 1992)
 9. Oh, Max, you said that already. (Film: *Rocket Gibraltar*, 1988)
 10. I never paid for sex in my life. (Film: *New York Stories*, 1991)
 11. That's probably the best run you ever had. (CBC Sports-cast: March 23, 1982)
 12. Like our children who never saw anything like this before. (*ABC World News*: May 3, 1992)
 13. The punter was on; now he went back. (*NBC Sports*: November 2, 1977)
 14. In the past six months, Armenian troops forged a bridge-head linking Nagorno Karabak with Armenia itself. (*PBS News Hour*: May 26, 1992)
 15. It was the fourth time the two teams met this season. (Said before end of the season, *ABC Wide World of Sports*: April 3, 1982)
 16. It's the first time in fifteen months that the judges met. (*NBC World News*: December 14, 1981)
- 3.4
1. You seemed so far away since you came back. (Film: *Coming Home*, 1978)
 2. Since the war ended, they found time to proclaim Christopher Columbus an honorary citizen. (*ABC Nightline*: March 28, 1991)
 3. I waited a long time since my wife died. (Film: *Between Friends*, 1983)
 4. Since then, he gained respect for the bird trappers. (*CNN Headline News*: April 27, 1992)
 5. Since the first period, they played well. (Said during the third period on *CBC Hockey Night in Canada*: March 20, 1992)
- 3.5
1. Sure they trimmed the overall length about ten inches and shortened the wheel base. (Said in a commercial by a man standing beside and indicating a new Camaro automobile on ABC TV: March 2, 1982)
 2. I changed my mind; follow that Porsche. (Film: *Spy People*, 1987)

[Abbreviations used in the above examples: ABC: American Broadcasting Corporation; NBC: National Broadcasting Corporation; CBC: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; CBS: Columbia Broadcasting System; CNN: Cable News Network; PBS: Public Broadcasting System.]

The fact that such examples as these occur frequently does not allow one to arrive at broad generalizations about the acceptability and extent of use of such forms as variants of the present perfect. In order to permit the making of such generalizations, two steps were taken. First an attempt was made to tap the intuitions of North American speakers. Fifty university students of Canadian and American origin were presented with examples such as the above and were asked to correct anything they would not say in casual conversation with their friends. Their attention was not directed to any particular words. Furthermore, the examples were presented in the wider context in which they were collected. Thus the example *Did you two have breakfast yet?* taken from the Hitchcock film *Psycho* was presented in the following manner: "A couple have spent the night in a motel. Next morning they enter the motel restaurant and the hotel manager asks the question, *Did you two have breakfast yet?*"

In those cases where students changed the simple past to the present, variation was deemed to be unacceptable.⁶ The findings of this analysis indicated an acceptability rating ranging from 85 per cent and 100 per cent for all the examples, with the exception of uses of the simple past with *since* and *now*, the ratings for which were 72 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively. From these general findings, it was hypothesized that apart from the uses with *since* and *now*, all the other uses indicated above are representative of North American usage.⁷

A second step was taken in order to estimate the proportion of present perfects in general usage which may enter into variation with the simple past. In order to do this, the novel *The Paper Dragon* by Evan Hunter (1967) was taken as a sample text. It was selected for two reasons. Its theme was a trial, thus providing ample dialogue. The trial concerned a case of plagiarism. It, therefore, contained substantial amounts of dialogue related to past events.

Each occurrence of a present perfect which could enter into variation with the simple past based on the criteria of the acceptability rating discussed above was noted. Those cases of simple pasts which were used in the text as variants of the present perfect were considered as examples of the same variation. The finding of this procedure indicated that 80 per cent of such occurrences permitted variation.

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As a final step, those present perfect uses not susceptible to variation were subjected to a detailed analysis in order to isolate their distinctive features. The conclusions of this analysis are that the present perfect may enter into variation with the simple past except in the following cases:

1. Use with *for*, *since*, and *now*, taking into account. (However, see notes 5 and 8.)
2. Use in adverbial clauses introduced by *when*, *until*, *before*, and *after*—that is, in clauses referring to a future event.
3. Use of the present perfect without adverbial modification which if replaced by the simple past would result in reference to a past event without current relevance. To illustrate this, take the following example from *The Paper Dragon* (p. 122):

Brackman: No, he could have seen the play in performance.
Judge : We've got down to the point, have we not, where in order to show access, we must also show that Mr. Driscoll saw the play.

The use of the simple past for the present perfect would clearly be inappropriate in this case as it would not refer to that moment of speaking but to some past moment. In other words, there is no redundancy in the use of the present perfect here. A frequently encountered example of this usage is the first sentence in a news announcement such as *The violence in Los Angeles has left eleven dead and at least 200 injured* (*BBC Nine O'Clock News*: April 30, 1992). The implication of such usage is that of just-breaking news; the present perfect is, therefore, required to indicate the current relevance of the event.

4. The British Data

It was on the basis of this description of these constraints on the variation that the area of research was extended to British English. Samples of British English were observed during the '80s and '90s in order to ascertain if this particular variety of English contained uses similar to those of the North American data.⁹ The sources of these data were the same as those used earlier: newspapers, television, and films. Following are examples of this data:

1. We built several new prisons already. (*BBC Breakfast News*: April 9, 1990)
2. The Government always anticipated problems with the Poll Tax. (*BBC Nine O'Clock News*: February 27, 1990)
3. I lectured on the subject a number of times. (*Channel 4 After Dark*: December 2, 1987)

4. She won three events so far. (*ITV Sports*: August 29, 1987)
5. Some of you tried nicking things from a train before. (Film: *Buster*, 1988)
6. I met Ian Maxwell only once, very briefly. (*The Sunday Times*: December 22, 1991)
7. Bruce Springsteen's tour has been on tour all this year. The album sold 4 million copies so far world-wide. (*BBC 2 Rough Guide to Europe*: August 14, 1987)
8. He broke the record which stood since the 1964 Olympics. (*BBC Grandstand*: August 16, 1987)
9. Both of them were married before. (Comment on two people still living on *BBC 2 Film Review*: July 4, 1990)
10. I always stood for certain values. (*The Sunday Times*: June 3, 1990)
11. The main target is Dubrovnik which suffered the worst bombing yet. (*BBC Nine O'Clock News*: November 12, 1991)
12. In the analysis we just heard now. (*BBC Newsnight*: November 24, 1991)
13. They just marked the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack. (*BBC Six O'Clock News*: February 27, 1992)
13. Did you set up the appointment with Brodie yet? (Film: *Hidden Agenda*, 1990)
14. This is a great chance for the man who scored in every round so far. (BBC commentary on F. A. Cup Final: May 9, 1992)
15. Well, we waited long enough for a try. (Said near the end of the game during BBC rugby commentary, Ireland versus Wales: January 15, 1992)
16. I used him for 15 years. (Newspaper reporter referring to an informant still working for him. Film: *Defence of the Realm*, 1985)
17. The daughter says that until now the German government did little to help her father. (*BBC Nine O'Clock News*: December 12, 1991)
18. For the first, time since the 1820's, the governing party won four elections on the trot. (*The Observer*: April 4, 1992)
19. The series of dramatic releases numbered nine since August. (British reporter, *CNN Headline News*: December 4, 1991)

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20. Because of the Poll Tax, they already had to pick up the bill.
(Liberal Party Spokesman, *BBC Nine O' Clock News*: April 7, 1992)

[Abbreviations: BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation; ITV: Independent Television.]

The five categories of uses of the present perfect discussed above in relation to North American English are represented here. However, I am not suggesting that because of this that one can propose that the variation in these categories is characteristic of British English. The subtle differences between the two verbal forms still retain a high functional load. Furthermore, the frequency of occurrence of these forms in the British data is extremely low compared to that of the North American data. Whereas the collection of the latter presented no problems as any film, TV programme, or newspaper contained numerous examples, the same media in Britain produced only infrequent examples, most of which are given in this article. I would suggest, however, that infrequent though they may be, such uses represent the beginnings of change in British English¹⁰ and that given the pervasive influence of American English on the English spoken in Britain, the low frequency will inevitably increase.

In summary, then, variation between the present perfect and the simple past appears to be a marked characteristic of North American English. Furthermore, it is suggested that this pattern of usage is becoming increasingly evident in British English and that its presence in the English language press of non-anglophone countries such as Japan and those of the Arabian Gulf (Sheen, 1990) is indicative of the pervasive influence of the North American variety of English.

5. Pedagogical Implications

To a large degree, the extensive variation described above is either paid scant attention or simply ignored by grammar reference books, pedagogical grammars, and course books. As an example of the first, the standard work of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartik (1973) makes no mention of it. Leech (1986, p. 36) and Quirk and Greenbaum (1985, p. 44) comment on the American tendency to replace the present perfect with the simple past but do not attempt a systematic analysis. Leech (1986) does, however, make reference to many of the uses cited in this paper. Three pedagogical reference books, Swan (1982), Thomson and Martinet (1980), and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1990) do not address the problem. Course books such as

American Kernel Lessons (O'Neill, Kingsbury, Yeadon, & Cornelius, 1978), *American Streamline* (Hartley & Viney, 1986), *Side by Side* (Molinsky & Bliss, 1983), and *Fundamentals of English Grammar* (Azar, 1985) make no explicit reference to it.

What is perhaps implicit in this omission in the pedagogical grammars and the course books is a covert element of prescriptivism. The use of the simple past as a variant of the present perfect is not regarded as good English. Such books do not, therefore, perhaps wish students to learn what is regarded as erroneous usage.

It is not my intention here to enter into a long polemic on the prescriptive-descriptive controversy. My purpose in raising the issue is rather to discuss the pedagogical implications of the variation discussed in this article, as considerable time is spent in EFL classes all over the world with the problem of the differences between these two forms. Course books devote considerable space and time to both explanation and/or practice of the two forms. Furthermore, the present perfect is frequently introduced shortly after students have encountered the simple past. Later exercises then entail a choice between the two forms. As two examples of this take *American Kernel Lessons* (O'Neill et al.), and *The New Cambridge English Course* (Swan & Walter, 1990). In the case of the former, both the simple past and the present perfect are introduced in the first half of the Intermediate book and subsequently, sections 15 and 16 are devoted to contrasting the two forms. In the Cambridge course, the present perfect is introduced in Book 1 (p. 96) when one of its immediate concerns (p. 99) is the contrast between the present perfect and the simple past.

I am not implying criticism of these two course books. The approach may be quite valid for many purposes as in, for example, the various teaching situations in which anything less than a fully prescriptive approach to teaching English is unacceptable. The variation between the simple past and present perfect would have no relevance in such a prescriptive examination-oriented situation in which a student would certainly be penalised for writing, for example, *We finished three exercises so far*, despite the fact that a number of North Americans would find it quite acceptable. All that one might propose here is that teachers in such a system should be aware of the variation in order to be prepared to respond to the keen student who, seeing her *so far* + simple past construction marked wrong, remarks that she heard it in a movie last week.¹¹

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However, there are many teaching situations in which the principal objective is to enable students to acquire a working knowledge of English as it is used in the everyday world. A prescriptive approach is inappropriate here. It is in such situations that I would suggest that one can exploit the findings on the variation reported herein with the aim of simplifying the learning task. This may be achieved in three ways:

1. The simple past may be used to assume both its own functional load and that of the present perfect where variation is possible. This would delay appreciably the introduction of the present perfect. As an added positive side effect, it would allow the simple past to become the dominant form in the students' minds to express past events before being confused by the opposition with the present perfect.
2. When the present perfect is introduced, it should be done in the specific context of its use with *for* and *since*. This obviates the necessity of contrasting it with the simple past, thus appreciably reducing the learning load.
3. The introduction of those uses of the present perfect without adverbial modification which do not permit variation may be delayed considerably. An appropriate time might be just before the students' first encounter with the present perfect progressive. The present perfect of the verb *to be* might be stressed at this time as it forms the basis of it.

Between these two pedagogical extremes, teachers might exploit their knowledge of the variation in a variety of ways, all of which would entail making students aware of it to a greater or lesser degree. However, opting for this middle ground creates problems, for it involves presenting students with nuanced choices. This might be feasible for highly motivated advanced students but might prove to be somewhat ambitious for the majority of students, who typically tend to prefer black and white choices.

6. Conclusion

Data on contemporary use of the simple past and present perfect in North America have demonstrated that these two forms may enter into variation in approximately 80 percent of the prescribed uses of the present perfect. Furthermore, data from British English is beginning to manifest a tendency towards this same variation; however, it cannot as yet be regarded as characteristic of this variety of English. As the majority of course books in

general adopt a normally prescriptive approach to the teaching of the two forms, they do not reflect contemporary North American usage. Although the continuation of such a prescriptive approach is justified in situations in which examinations are characterized by prescriptive criteria, one cannot validly maintain such an approach with students whose main aim is to acquire a working knowledge of contemporary English. In such situations, one can reduce the learning load of the students and still meet their needs by initially concentrating on the simple past and then introducing the present perfect in the limited contexts and situations in which variation is not possible, and without an overemphasis on the contrast between the two.

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¹ A problem in the collection of oral data is caused by reduced forms of the auxiliary with regular verbs. Thus, one might think that one has heard, for example, *I changed my mind*, when in actual fact the barely audible . . . 've may have escaped one's notice. It is for this reason that written data is more reliable unless, that is, one is able to record the oral data. This I have been able to do in recent years. Although even with this advantage, it is remarkable how difficult it is to detect reduced forms even after listening to them several times.

² In using the word *beginning*, I am going out on something of a long limb, for in matters of language change it is extremely difficult to state with certainty when a particular instance of it actually begins. In this case, I base it on a close observation of variation in North America and Britain English since the '70s. It is only in the late '80s that I was able to observe examples in the British media similar to those of the North American data, excluding, of course, those uses with *never* and *ever* which have long been characteristic of British English (see note 9).

³ There are a number of instances in which the presence or absence of current relevance depends very much on the person's viewpoint. For example, in *I always found his confrontational style impressive* (*The Times*: July 25, 1987), the writer is referring to a person who is still living but who has just changed his position. This may well have resulted in the writer's conceiving of the extent of the time period only up to that moment and not right up to the actual moment of speaking. This particularly applies with adverbials such as *in the last/past* + a time period such as *month*. Clearly, there is frequently no way of knowing what is in the mind of the speaker or writer. It is, therefore, possible that some examples in my data may fall into this category. An example of this is the following from the BBC production of John Le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*:

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About Tom. Hold his hand for me. He's the best thing I had.

Here, Magnus Pym is about to commit suicide; therefore, in writing *had*, the implication would appear to be that his life is finished and that, therefore, there is no longer current relevance for him.

⁴ Some readers might be struck by the omission of the definite article before *hospital* in this example for American English does not usually omit it. However, this example is taken from Canadian English which often manifests characteristics of both American and British English.

⁵ There are, however, uses in which the time period following *for* may explicitly extend up to the present moment where one still finds a simple past, such as

For the past few months, it slowed down a lot. (*CNN News*: March 9, 1991)

In this case a shopkeeper is complaining about the loss of business since the departure of troops to the Gulf War. At this time, they had still not returned. However, I should point out that since 1970 when I began collecting data, I have come across very few examples of this type. The *for* may also be left understood as in:

We had an intensive drug program the whole year. (*CNN News*: March 27, 1991)

In such cases, there is often both situational and contextual redundancy.

⁶ Clearly, asking respondents to explicitly express their views on acceptability is not ideal. One would wish to observe their production whilst remaining unobserved. However, this presents virtually insurmountable difficulties for the collection of a representative corpus.

⁷ The choice of 85 per cent is clearly arbitrary and as such susceptible to criticism. However, few would argue that a usage rate of this level does not indicate typical usage.

⁸ However, despite this, I have recently collected a number of such uses which may indicate that it is becoming increasingly acceptable. They are

I loved you since I knew you. (Sting's song "Roxanne")

I raped three women since then. (Film: *Talk Radio*, 1988)

Since then the Navy tried to change the policy. (*ABC News*: January 13, 1991)

They were here since I arrived. (General Schwarzkopf during an ABC Barbara Walters interview: March 18, 1991)

Since I knew Ron, things got better. (*ABC Oprah Winfrey Show*)

Since the summer, they reduced the rate three times. (*ABC World News*: February 3, 1992)

On a stylistic note it is a long time since I heard such an awesome display of alliteration. (*The Guardian*: August 23, 1988)

⁹ British English has long been characterised by variation with the adverbs *never* and *ever*. Here are two examples from *Nicholas Nickleby* (Dickens: 1964 [1838], pp. 298, 317):

Where you ever learnt to act as you do?

I am sure I never saw you before.

¹⁰ If, indeed, I am right and we are witnessing change taking place, it is an extremely rare event. Grammatical change would normally take place at such a rate as to escape notice by language users and would certainly take time well beyond the normal life span.

¹¹ Some readers might regard this as an unlikely event. However, a colleague, D. MacArthur (personal communication), informs me that it was not an infrequent occurrence during his service as an AET.

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