Feature Article

Making Friends with the Present Perfect

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Abstract

While the present perfect is difficult for English Language Learners (ELLs) to master, this study seeks to provide evidence of its integral pragmatic function in the social task of initiating and developing relationships. Through analysis of the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, the frequency of the present perfect, the pragmatic functions of the present perfect, and its ease of replacement with the simple past are examined. Results show that while the present perfect does occur somewhat more often when developing a friendship, there were no significant patterns in how the present perfect is used. It was also found that though it is rarely necessary to use the present perfect rather than the simple past, a speaker's choice to do so has important pragmatic implications.

Key Words: *present perfect, corpus linguistics, simple past, pragmatics*

Introduction

The present perfect is a particularly tricky concept for English language learners (ELLs) in terms of form, meaning and use. As a periphrastic structure, there are two components to deal with, and irregular past participles can be difficult to memorize. As for meaning, the present perfect and simple past are semantically indistinguishable in their decontextualized form as both refer to an aspect of priorness, and the differences are only made evident through use and context (McCoard, 1978). Usage of the present perfect creates a whole other slew of complications as its use may coincide with the simple past or refer to incomplete states or actions. These uses may overlap or have specific syntactic demands that curtail certain adverbial use and entail specific semantic constraints.

Meanwhile, the present perfect is declining in frequency of use and has been doing so for centuries (Schaden, 2009; Yao, 2014). It is being supplanted by its main competitor, the simple past. Today, perfects (overwhelmingly represented by the present perfect) make up only 5%-10% of spoken American English verb use, and are even less prevalent in speaking than writing (Biber, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999). As infrequently as the present perfect occurs in speech, ELLs hear it even less because irregular past participles can be auditorily indistinguishable from the simple past for many, especially when paired with regular past participles (Yao & Collins, 2012). The actual and perceived absence of

the present perfect creates a fairly low level of input and few opportunities for noticing. This can lead to lower motivation concerning the present perfect and to student complaints that "Americans don't use the present perfect, so why do we have to learn it?"

With all of these obstacles, how do ELLs navigate the use of the present perfect? Generally, the present perfect is introduced through adverbials of time. Students are instructed to use the present perfect with adverbs like *before* and *since*, but not with specific past times like *yesterday* and *last week*. While this is a sensible starting point, too often comprehension, and even instruction, ends there. This tends to lead to a limited understanding of adverbs rather than acquisition of the present perfect (Moy, 1977). Furthermore, despite learning these rules, incorrect formations and use often persist (Bardovi-Harlig, 1997). Another flaw of tying the present perfect to adverbial use is that more often than not, the present perfect is used without temporal adverbs, particularly in writing (Schlüter, 2002). With all this confusion, many learners are left intimidated and may use avoidance strategies when confronted with the present perfect (Moy, 1977).

This is a loss for ELLs. What the perfect aspects share is the idea of connection between two points in time; with the present perfect connecting the past to the present. When we as English speakers talk about who we are as individuals, we understand that we are the sum of all our prior experience. It is through the present perfect that we make our pasts relevant to who we are today. The present perfect changes a simple statement such as *I swam with sharks* into an implication that the listener should take note. It is a way of saying *this is my experience and by knowing this about me, you can know me better as a person*.

Such implications are especially relevant to ELLs. Being able to interact with native speakers is one of the main motivations for learning a language, particularly for those with an integrative orientation (Lambert, 1974). Moreover, interacting, and even befriending native speakers, is an authentic way to develop language proficiency. Not being able to employ the present perfect appropriately and neglecting the pragmatic implications intended by others leads ELLs to miss out on one of the most important tools for bridging the divide between strangers.

In fact, the present perfect may be the first tool. Even before two people embark on getting to know one another, the present perfect is often used to initialize discourse. Upon meeting a native speaker, the ELL's country of origin is a likely topic. To get a conversation going on this topic, an ELL might ask one of the following questions:

1. Did you go to my country?
2. Have you been to my country?

Question 1 is a poor choice and could lead a listener to wonder what misunderstanding led the questioner to believe she had gone to this country. The reason for this is that the

use of the simple past relies on shared knowledge, and sentences in the past tense are often "anomalous as a discourse-initial assertion" (Michaelis, 1994, p. 122). *Did you* indicates that the questioner has reason to believe that such an action or circumstance may have taken place. In order to ask a question when there are no such assumptions, it is necessary to use the present perfect. Without this tool, ELLs are bound to encounter awkward exchanges or misunderstandings that only increase the anxiety associated with talking to native speakers.

Once a conversation is underway, the present perfect continues to be useful. It serves as an excellent device for negotiating topics (Nishiyama & Koenig, 2008). *Let's talk about X* or *I want to talk about X* can be overly direct when speaking with those we do not know well. Instead, H*ave you seen (movie)?* or *Have you been to (place)?* are adept ways of offering up a topic of conversation or steering conversation into more familiar waters. This is a handy way of maneuvering between topics for anyone, but especially so for nervous ELLs.

Once two people begin talking, they must determine how far they would like the interaction to go. Here, the existential, or experiential, form of the present perfect serves an important purpose. It serves to establish the qualifications of both speakers so that they may determine the next step in the conversation—or even in the relationship. If both speaker A and speaker B have been to Mexico, they share a common experience to discuss. This past experience is relevant now for their discussion and serves as a qualification for conversation, developing the relationship, and even becoming friends. Just as the present perfect is ideal in sharing one's experience and qualifications in a job interview, it has a very similar role in the subconscious interview process that leads to friendships.

All of this is not to say that we cannot form new acquaintances or friendships without the present perfect. It is, however, asserting that the present perfect is a useful tool in such a task. Having knowledge of and confidence to use such resources would most certainly be directly useful and indirectly serve to lessen anxiety for ELLs when talking to native speakers.

Purpose of the Study

Considering these factors, this study explored the present perfect's pragmatic role in conversational language related to making friends and developing relationships. Through a better understanding of this function, instructors can better teach and motivate learners to apply the present perfect in such situations and enter conversations with greater confidence. To this end, corpus analysis was conducted to determine

- if the corpus supports the use of the present perfect in making friends and acquaintances

- how the present perfect is used in such circumstances
- if the simple past can be used easily to substitute for the present perfect

Corpus analysis was employed because it moves us beyond our assumptions about language and objectively examines how language is used.

Methodology

This study used the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, which is comprised of both conversational and task-based speech and is available in recorded and transcribed forms. The recordings were released by the University of California, Santa Barbara's (UCSB) Department of Linguistics in four parts from 2000-2005 (Du Bois *et al*., 2000-2005). The Santa Barbara Corpus is mainly representative of spontaneous spoken American English in the larger International Corpus of English, and as such, was chosen for this study. Each conversation is a sampling taken "not randomly but avoiding the (more self-conscious) initial portion" (J. Dubois, personal communication, July 22, 2017). The result is a "snapshot" of conversation on topics that have emerged naturally and are discussed without any evident self-monitoring.

AntConc, (Anthony, 2014), a freeware concordance tool, was selected in order to perform searches for the present perfect on the Santa Barbara Corpus. It is a freely available and easy-to-use program created by Laurence Anthony out of Waseda University in Tokyo.

Based on the summary descriptions available on the UCSB Department of Linguistics website, the 35 recordings labeled as conversations were uploaded into AntConc and a wildcard search of *related contractions* was performed, resulting in over 1,450 hits. This list was then manually searched for instances of the present perfect. Perfect formations (*have* or *has* plus the past participle) that would be considered future, continuous, modal, or infinitive were not included in the final list, nor were constructions such as *have got to*. While such examples share the structure of the present perfect, their meaning and function are quite different.

After reading through the texts to check form within context, 396 instances of the present perfect remained. Next, the 35 recordings were listened to in order to get a better sense of the interactions between the participants. Based on these interpretations, the recordings were divided into two categories: *related* and *unrelated*. Recordings were deemed *related* if the interactions involved getting to know each other (in the case of strangers) or further developing a relationship as with friends or family members. In other words, these conversations were *related* to the purpose of the study. Conversations that were considered *unrelated* occurred between participants who already had a close relationship and whose conversations did not seem to afford any opportunity for furthering the relationship. Such conversations were often comprised of complaints, daily minutiae,

and superficial exchanges of information; ultimately, there seemed to be no change in the closeness of the participants. This resulted in18 *related* recordings and 17 *unrelated* recordings.

These two groups, *related* and *unrelated*, were then measured for frequencies of the present perfect as well as for averages. Because the transcriptions of the Santa Barbara Corpus include numerous prosodic annotations and detailed time counts, it was not possible to do an exact word count for the purposes of normalizing the data. Therefore, an approximation was done by subtracting the standard time counts from the overall word count. As a result, all frequencies and averages are approximations that are useful for comparing conversations within this corpus but are not accurate measures of the present perfect overall.

The *related* group of conversations that featured elements of developing relationships was then analyzed further for the types of present perfect being used. The categories were labeled *introduction/negotiation*, *experience*, *relevancy*, and *other* (mainly grammatically necessitated uses that had little relevance to the study).

Finally, all instances of the present perfect in the *related* group were again reviewed to determine if they could be replaced by the simple past. Examples in which replacement with the preterite form would result in no change in meaning received a three; those that would be slightly affected or would benefit from further syntactical tweaking received a two; and a score of one was given to those that would be significantly altered by a replacement with the simple past form. These numbers were validated by a second reader and conflicting ratings were settled by a third rater, all of whom are native speakers of American English. The second and third rater were supplied with target utterances and links to the full transcript and recordings. All ratings were done blindly with no knowledge of the others' scores. Figure 1 shows the process by which the instances of present perfect were sorted for the purposes of this research.

Results

The primary question in this study was whether the present perfect plays an important role when people are getting to know one another or developing a relationship. Analysis of the Santa Barbara Corpus indicates that it does. In the 18 conversations that exemplified such interactions, the present perfect was used in 266 cases, averaging 0.23% of said conversations. In the 17 recordings that did not exemplify the target interaction, there were 130 present perfect uses, less than half the number in the first group, with an average of only 0.13%. Based on both the overall frequency and average, it seems the present perfect is employed more often in conversations in which people are trying to form or further a relationship.

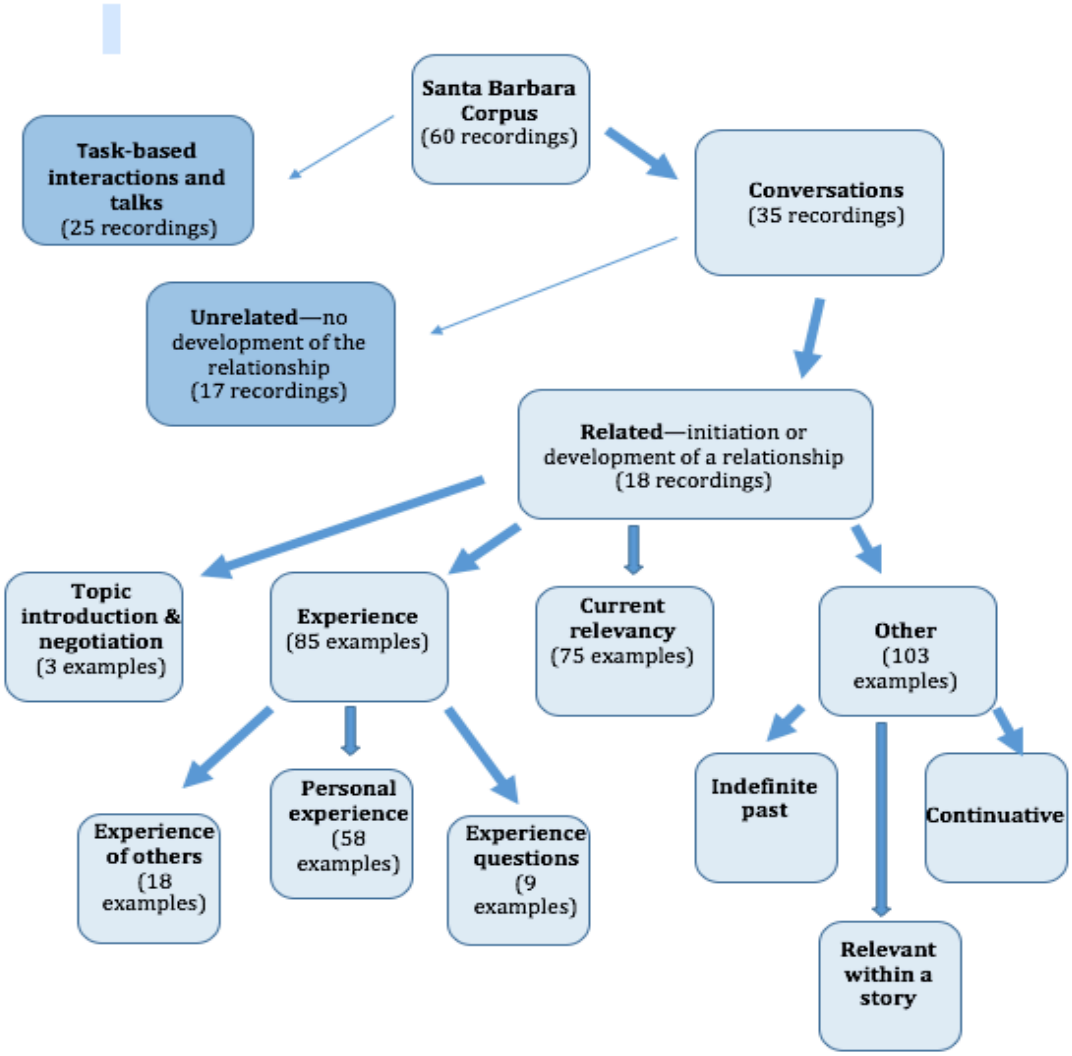

Figure 1—Organization of Categories

The eighteen exemplary conversations were then analyzed and placed into the categories of *topic negotiation*, *experience*, *relevance*, and *other*. There was a total of three examples of *topic negotiation*, one of which follows. In it, the speaker uses present perfect in an abrupt change in topic.

1. Wess: "Yeah the long sticks are venison, and the cold meat's venison, and there's another cold meat sausage."

   Cam: "So have you talked to Mary Lou?" (*You Baked*, 1231.041 1239.771)

(Note: All samples taken from the Santa Barbara Corpus have been edited for ease of reading in that all annotations have been removed.)

The category of *experience* totaled 85 examples (32% of present perfect use) but was further divided into *personal experience* (58 hits), *experience of others* (18 hits), and *experience questions* (9 hits), as exemplified below.

2. "I've put a few of those [furnaces] in." (*Ancient Furnace,* 765.180 766.200)

3. "My dad has done it." (*What is a Brand Inspection,* 702.878 703.735)

4. "You've never seen a Bette Davis movie?" (*A Book about Death,* 413.50 415.89)

Utterances whose main purpose was to provide past information that was relevant to the current situation but did not seem to be evidence of experience was labeled *current relevance* and comprised 75 of the present perfect structures, or 28% of present perfect use.

5. "We haven't been able to reach him. (*Handshakes All Around,* 1011.900 102.862)

The group entitled *other* encompassed forms of the present perfect that did not fit into the first three categories and included uses that referred to general indefinite past or continuative past. While this group was the largest (39% of present perfect use), it was not further broken down because indefinite and continuative anteriority have the strongest links to a purely syntactic function of the present perfect and were of least interest to this study. Though higher uses of the first three categories was anticipated, the dominance of the *other* category is in keeping with other findings (Nishiyama & Koenig, 2006) regarding the frequency of the continuative form of the present perfect. Making or furthering a friendship does not seem to affect which type of present perfect is used. Of course, categorizing types of present perfects is not an exact science. The uses often overlap, especially when dealing with current relevance and experience (Michaelis, 1994). In fact, most often experience is touted because of its relevance.

Finally, instances of the present perfect in the collection of *related* conversations were examined to determine how easily the simple past could be substituted for the present perfect. Most uses of the present perfect were easily replaced by either direct substitution with the simple past or substitution and a minor alteration elsewhere in the sentence. Of the 266 instances of the present perfect, 141, or 54%, received a rating of three, meaning a substitution of the simple past resulted in no change in meaning as seen below:

6. "That's what I've read." (*Deadly Diseases*, 1094.38 1095.570)

The difference between #6 and the simple past form of *That's what I read* is negligible at best.

Fifty-nine, or 22% were rated a two and deemed somewhat suitable for a substitution of the preterite form. Such examples necessitated slight changes of wording elsewhere in the sentence.

7. “I’ve never been back.” (*Shaggy Dog Story*, 496.287 497.314)

In the above example, a simple change in tense would have an awkward result.

8. *I never was back.*

However, an additional lexical substitution with the verb *go* results in a natural sentence with a meaning similar to the original.

9. *I never went back.*

A rating of one was assigned to 63 instances, indicating that 24% of the present perfect utterances could not be changed to the simple past without changing the meaning or creating ungrammatical sentences. Three of the 266 examples could not be rated as they were incomplete formations.

These examples refute the hypothesis that the present perfect is essential in initiating friendships. It was initially thought that the simple past’s inability to initialize discourse would render it unfit for such circumstances and so the present perfect would be predominant and necessary in such interactions. There are very few examples of the present perfect—particularly *have you* questions—that begin a discussion or change the topic of a discussion. This may in part be due to the lack of conversation beginnings in this corpus. Regardless, this study cannot verify the hypothesis that the present perfect is necessary to start of a conversation with a potential friend.

Discussion of Results

Does the present perfect play a role in building relationships?

It seems that the present perfect does play a role in making friends and deepening relationships. There was an increased presence of the present perfect in the conversations that were selected for their features relevant to this study. Two conversations stood out as having an average of more than 0.4% use of the present perfect: *Shaggy Dog Story,* with an average of 0.49%, and *A Book about Death* with 0.45% contained the highest percentage of the present perfect. In the first recording, a man tells his coworker, Jon, about his travel experiences. While Jon does most of the listening, Alan seems to earnestly want to give Jon a better sense of himself. The second conversation, *A Book about Death,* is of a much more personal nature. While in bed before sleeping, Pamela tries to explain her view of the world and her fascination with death as her husband Darryl tries to make sense of it. Such conversations would certainly seem to result in people having a better understanding of one another.

An average of 0.2% to 0.34% present perfect use characterized nine of the conversations and occurred between a diverse range of relationships including new

acquaintances, friends, family members, and neighbors. The present perfect averaged 0.17% or less for seven of the conversations with the lowest average being 0.05%.

While the differences in averages supports the hypothesis that the present perfect is prevalent in language used in relationship development, the contrast is not overwhelming, with 10% higher use of the present perfect in the related conversations as opposed to the conversations unrelated to forming and developing a relationship.

How is the present perfect used?

There seems to be nothing of particular note in how the present perfect is used in friendship making, as opposed to other types of conversation. Most often the present perfect did not denote experience, relevance, or an attempt to introduce or negotiate a topic of conversation. Instead, most uses were textbook variety examples of the present perfect used to indicate a simple indefinite past or were of a continuative nature. In fact, there were only 15 of the *have you* questions that are indicative of Michaelis's (1994) assertion that the present perfect introduces information which can then be elaborated on by the simple past. In fact, none of these *have you* questions in the related conversations even necessitated the present perfect. Nevertheless, that there were not many of these examples may be a symptom of the Santa Barbara Corpus itself. In an effort to provide speech samples that are free of self- conscientiousness and monitoring, the beginnings of a meeting or interaction are almost never included. Perhaps enough common ground had already been established to negate the need for the present perfect in this sense.

An additional and unanticipated trend in the group of conversations that exemplified the target interaction was how prevalent the present perfect was in conversations that were dominated by one or two individuals. Four of the five highest-averaging conversations can almost be described as monologues. It seems that these people were trying to develop their friendships by impressing their listeners. These conversations tended to have some the highest uses of experience-type perfects.

Can it be easily substituted?

Linked to this notion that the present perfect opens up the possibility of conversation between two people who do not know one another is the idea that the present perfect cannot easily be replaced by the simple past in such a context. However, as the corpus provided little to no such context, this question will have to be deferred for now.

In other contexts, nevertheless, the simple past could replace the present perfect with little to no change in the rest of the sentence and with no alteration of core meaning. This may prove quite meaningful. In many cases where speakers could choose the simpler, less marked simple past, they did not. Instead, they deliberately (though perhaps unconsciously) opted for the more marked form. This speaks to the implicative nature of

the present perfect. Frequently, the selection of the present perfect—and often paired with a time adverbial—added emphasis and weight to whatever was being said.

10. "But I have really, probably, in my whole life, have enjoyed the last two years more than anything." (*Handshakes All Around*, 1573.185 1582.529)

Frequently, this emphasis implied pride, sometimes to the point of bragging. The present perfect is a rational choice as it is a way to make past accomplishments relevant to the current situation.

11. "I've always been very independent." (*He Knows*, 58.261 60.754)

Another way that the present perfect added emphasis in these recordings was to give a pejorative connotation to a statement or imply judgment.

12. "This uh, thing he's put up?" (*Handshakes All Around,* 855.717-858.092)

This was said in response to a question about a fence that the neighbor had recently built and began an anecdote about a disagreement that led to the fence building.

Complaints were another common theme when employing the present perfect.

13. "It's always been like that." (*On the Lot,* 106.898-107.951)

This was part of a discussion about unfair treatment at work. The present perfect paired with *always* ensures that the incident spoken of was not seen as unique, but rather a pattern of treatment.

Many such examples, including #10 through #12 were determined by the author and the second rater to be sentences that could easily be substituted for by the simple past. It is therefore meaningful that the speakers intentionally chose *not* to use the simple past.

Perhaps it is the additional wording provided by the present perfect's periphrastic structure, its markedness as a structure, its implication of relevance, or a combination of all three that adds weight to a speaker's words. This aligns with Scheibman (2002) and Verhagen's (1995) assertion that language choices and syntactical patterns are not objective, but are motivated by how we want our listeners to perceive our communications. So, while the present perfect has lost out to the simple past as the dominant structure to communicate past events (Schaden, 2009) generally, it has found an important niche role in subjective expression.

Implications for Teaching

So, what does all of this mean for our learners? For lower level instruction, it may mean that we devote less time to the present perfect. An understanding of adverbial patterns and constraints should suffice at this time. However, for higher level learners seeking to attain true proficiency, instruction and learning must extend beyond this. As

such, dogmatic gap-fills that encourage learners to look for adverbs that signal verb tense should be minimized. Not only do such exercises not lead to acquisition (Moy, 1977), but the discrepancies between the raters' assessment of when the simple past could be used in place of the present perfect suggest that there is also a great deal of flexibility in terms of the simple past's pairing with adverbs and other lexicogrammatical items once prescribed to the present perfect. Instead, as Moy (1977) advocated a contextual approach conducive to noticing and consciousness-raising, activities and exercises that call attention to the present perfect's subjective role as an emphasizer of pride, judgment, complaint may prove useful for ELL's in their acquisition process. Listening activities that include authentic uses of the present perfect might be used for practice in drawing inferences or noting a speaker's tone or attitude. Learners should also be encouraged to use the present perfect in communicating such perspectives with activities that promote use of the target grammar. Activities such as skits or role-plays that incorporate boasting, judging, or complaining paired with the present perfect and attendant intonation to provide emphasis could prove fun and useful. Ideally, such activities will increase learner awareness of the present perfect's inferential quality and encourage them to adopt it as a tool in their own communication.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine through corpus analysis whether the present perfect plays a significant pragmatic role in the process of friendship making, how it is specifically used, and if the same function can be performed by the simple past. In a comparison of conversations that exemplified people making and furthering relationships and conversations that did not, the present perfect was present in 0.23% of utterances compared to 0.13%. This is an indication that the present perfect serves a pragmatic role. It should be noted here that though these numbers are of interest and imply significance, they do not carry the weight of proven statistical significance. Because of the nature of the Santa Barbara Corpus and the need to approximate word counts, a true sample size could not be obtained. To do so, one would need to comb through each transcript to remove all time markers and prosodic annotations. It would also be ideal to have another researcher confirm the classification of the *related* and *unrelated* conversations.

As to how the present perfect is employed in this process of relationship development, this study found no strong patterns, and the expected uses did not make a significant appearance and proved difficult to investigate. In part, this again may be due to the corpus itself. Most of the conversations occur between close friends or family members, offering few examples of strangers conversing. Moreover, in an effort to capture natural dialog that is free of the self-consciousness of being recorded, most of the recordings omit the initialization of conversation, which was of most interest to this study. A similar analysis of Switchboard Corpus, which contains phone recordings between

strangers, could provide greater clues as to whether and how the present perfect is used to provide common ground between strangers.

The hypothesis that the present perfect is essential in these target interactions and cannot be replaced by the simple past was also refuted as it was found that 54% of the present perfect uses could easily be substituted for by the simple past with no change in meaning. While the initial prediction proved to be incorrect, the resulting findings exposed important implications regarding why people choose to use the present perfect when it is not necessary to do so. Examples revealed that speakers often seem to select the present perfect as a way to give weight and import their words, supporting the notion that communication structures are far more subjective than objective. Such findings indicate that in teaching the present perfect to learners, instructors have a responsibility to call attention to this function and urge students to make use of this tool in their own communications, whether for the purpose of forming friendships or otherwise.

While there is an abundance of literature on the present perfect and much of it claims to provide pragmatic analysis of this structure, there is very little research into its actual, specific use in day-to-day conversation, let alone in the specific area of friendship making. There is much to still be learned about this complex and still-evolving verb form.

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