

Have induced errors been forgotten?

What Portuguese teachers of English have to cope with.

Change is a natural part of life, and the history of language teaching has certainly been rich in new theories. But are today's learners any better equipped than their predecessors to speak a foreign language well?

Teachers and linguists have always been concerned with student errors and with new teaching methodologies. At times, they have argued in favour of knowledge and awareness of the contrasts between languages, at others, their focus has been on communicative techniques, and at yet others, the concern has been to develop linguistic awareness. What they have sometimes forgotten to do, however, is to take a close look at the course books on offer to learners, which often repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

The main aim of this work is to rethink some of the explanations provided by most grammar books for the most problematic areas of the teaching of English. Rethinking these grammatical rules should not be read as rejecting them because of any weaknesses identified, but rather in an effort at proposing linguistic alternatives which can help to overcome such shortcomings and hence avoid the same mistakes continuing over time with teachers and students confronted by the same difficulties and, above all, those difficulties induced by the teachers themselves.

The importance of the mother tongue in the learning or acquisition of a foreign language has long been remembered and then forgotten, remembered again, and perhaps forgotten once more. Back in 1540, Portuguese grammarians such as João de Barros (16th century) and Bento Pereira (17th century), clearly swimming against the tides of academic practice of their times, both advocated that Portuguese grammar be studied before students began any serious study of foreign languages (at the time, the most commonly studied foreign language was

Latin), and in 1830 Jerónimo Soares Barbosa, in praise of João de Barros, added that the teaching of Portuguese grammar should first be completed, throughout six months if that be the number necessary. In effect, students were directly introduced to the study of Latin without knowing their Portuguese grammar. A similar idea had already been expressed by Bento Pereira who, in 1711, edited a grammar book divided into three sections:

The first is of rules common to the Latin and Portuguese languages. The second deals only with those of Latin. The third concerns itself with Portuguese.

The intention here is, by no means, to provide a history of contrastive studies. The sole purpose of the reference to João de Barros, Bento Pereira and Jerónimo Soares Barbosa is to demonstrate that there has long been awareness of the importance that knowledge of the mother tongue plays in the learning or acquisition of a foreign language.

In more recent times, the work of Robert Lado provided the first sign of the need within the science of linguistics to produce systematic contrasts of the two different languages: the mother tongue and the foreign language. Although Contrastive Linguistics was first put to use in the learning of foreign languages, we should recall that this was not its sole purpose. The systematic, descriptive comparison of languages also received the attention of translators and of studies in pragmatics dedicated, above all, to the semantics of intercultural human relationships. Nevertheless, it was, indeed, in the field of teaching and learning foreign languages that Contrastive Analysis had the greatest impact. Having been abandoned for unfounded reasons, contrastive studies were later given a new impetus.

One task of applied contrastive studies is thus to identify probable areas of difficulty in the acquisition or learning of a foreign language. Contrastive Analysis bases itself on the premise that all students, when confronted with a foreign language, will have particular difficulty in studying those elements which

differ from their mother tongue, while the same will not be true with elements which are similar in the two languages.

Contrastive Analysis plays a highly significant role when applied to the study of a foreign language, since it can predict difficulty given the differences and, to some extent, allow for 'short cuts' to be taken in areas of similarity. However, in addition to the importance of this contrastive approach, there is now also the concept of linguistic awareness that has been growing in importance, gaining methodological ground and attracting avid fans, especially as regards teaching both the mother tongue and foreign languages. The British Language Awareness Movement was born out of the concern felt by linguists — whether or not teachers — regarding the high academic drop out rate in the area of foreign languages. A study by the British Department of Education and Science (DES) found that two out of every three students who began studying a foreign language had dropped out before the end of the planned period of study. The need was thus felt to "raise awareness" of linguistic knowledge, necessarily beginning with teachers. The final report of the study concluded with the recommendation that: "all teachers of English require an explicit understanding of the forms and usages of the English language".

Thus, it was deemed necessary to raise awareness of linguistic knowledge, and as a speaker's implicit knowledge was proving insufficient, this process had to begin from some point. The specialists concluded that this would logically be in the training of teachers.

Furthermore, teachers have always proved to be heavily dependent on books and texts. If we wish to search for reasons, one of these must certainly be the guarantee of success, at least in the attempt to survive, in the classroom. This then became the easiest, most interesting and possibly most creative and best supported task.

We therefore propose that the central aim of this paper is to foster the scientific, rather than pedagogical or didactic, training of teachers incorporating a

rethinking of the manuals, grammars, and textbooks that are available to teachers. Always bearing in mind the need to raise awareness of knowledge of the languages in question – Portuguese as the mother tongue and English as the foreign language –, the area most immediately susceptible to progress requires attention be focused on the manuals, grammars and textbooks teachers have at their disposal.

In terms of the difficulties identified, we deal here with only two examples of induced errors:

1. an error derived from explanatory shortcomings in the manuals available to teachers and students, and,
2. an error induced by the difficulty created by the contrast between the mother tongue and target language in addition to shortcomings and failures in teaching materials.

Of the difficulties included in this first group, we here highlight the teaching of the verbal tenses, and specifically the Simple Present. In the Portuguese language, *grosso modo*, this takes on the same values and which, in accordance with the principles of Contrastive Linguistics, would not pose any particular source of obstacle were it not for the explanatory deficiencies in manuals.

Of the difficulties falling into the latter group, the teaching and the difficulties inherent to the Present Perfect take on particular relevance. In practice, the English Present Perfect takes on the values of other perfect tenses in French, Spanish, Italian and German. Only Portuguese seems to have turned away from this understanding common to all the other languages. Indeed, the contrast between the two languages comes with an explanation found in all English textbooks that seems tailor made for the Portuguese language and thus in our opinion is totally out of keeping with its English reality.

Let us begin with the description that the grammar manuals attribute to the Present Tense.

The verbal tense is defined as a category that locates a specific event within a timeline. Contrary to the perfect category, which finds its primary objective in identifying the ways and means of the action, the time taken, at least theoretically, and the function of locating the situation at its point or period in time prevail. The Portuguese grammar books declare:

TIME is the variation that indicates the moment in which the fact expressed by the very action is stated.

The three **natural** times are the present, the preterit (or past) and the future, which respectively designate a fact occurring *at the moment of talking, prior to that moment or after that moment of speech.*

[my translation] [my highlight]

This perspective has dominated linguistic traditions. This quotation is taken from the best, most popular and most accessible Portuguese language grammar (Cunha e Cintra, 1989: 379). It in fact considers that this tripartite division between past, present and future is some kind of "natural" division that would therefore logically be found in all languages. This distinction may be traced back to the very earliest grammars as from the 16th century. Never have such grammatical works stopped to consider this formulation of the present moment as a deictic point, as a reference it becomes a "natural" fact and logically extendable to all languages.

A similar situation can be found in English grammars but the diversification, product of Greco-Latin heritage, is far from being universal:

The category of *tense* has to do with time-relations in so far as these are expressed by systematic grammatical contrasts. Three such contrasts were recognized by traditional grammarians in the analysis of Greek and Latin: 'past', 'present' and 'future'. And it has often been supposed that

the same three-way opposition of tense is a universal feature of language.
This is not so.

J. Lyons, 1968: 304

While languages do in fact seem to structure along timelines, it is important to note that different linguistic systems organise different situations in different ways over the course of time. There are languages, such as Hebrew for example, that do not distinguish between past, present and future organising the timeline in accordance with situations deemed finished (or perfective) and unfinished (or imperfective): certainly unfinished are those situations ongoing at the present moment (or the time of speaking), the non-factive situations, that is, situations that have yet to take place (therefore future) and some past situations such as those begun in the past and continue into the present or past situations that are viewed from their interior.

In effect, the traditional tripartite division between the past, present and future proves itself inadequate. While it is true that, with certain exceptions¹, the Simple Past refers to past time situations, it is equally true that the Simple Present actually rarely refers to real present time situations. Sentences such as *Mary is my sister* or *The Earth is round* take on such an extended sense of temporal value that, in the former example, they are truly part of our daily life and in the latter they even serve as atemporal, of gnomic aspectual value. Furthermore, sentences such as *John speaks French very well* or *English is a very interesting language* do not relate to the specific moment of speaking but take in an extended scope of time that far exceeds any actual specific point in time.

Two problems are raised here. The first is posed by considering that the verbal tense locates the described situation and that there is coincidence between tense and time. The other problem derives from considering that the

¹ There are two instances when the Simple Past does not express a real past time: the Hypothetical Past and the Attitudinal Past. Both occurrences also correspond to Portuguese language norms.

verb attributes the core of temporal understanding. Indeed, neither of these premises holds either in Portuguese or in English. Should we compare the sentences *Exams start next week* and *My sister drives to work*, we find that **Exams start* is not acceptable in English given that it is lacking in the adverbial and while it may be true that *My sister drives to work*, it is not the case that she is necessarily doing that at that moment in time. The sentence means that it is a habit: *My sister always / usually drives to work*. Should anyone call at my house, whoever attends the visitor cannot answer that I cannot receive them **because she eats* or **She has dinner*, but rather *She's eating* or *She's having dinner*. Were the present tense in fact to represent a situation located at the point in time of speaking, these sentences would all be possible. The same holds true for Portuguese and thus should not represent any hindrance to language learners.

Given that the present tense does not reflect the factual reality of the situation in present time, or in other words, when referring to what is actually taking place at the moment of speaking, English – just like Portuguese – takes recourse to aspectual expressive mechanisms to highlight ongoing situations: *She's having dinner*. Thus is the incapacity for temporal expression overcome. The learner needs to understand that the language resorts to aspectual mechanisms precisely because the present tense does not serve to temporally locate the situation in question.

However, grammars continue to defend the idea that present time refers to a situation taking place at that particular moment and that the verbal tense establishes the means for temporal definition and that adverbial adjuncts only serve to "reinforce" or assist in specifying that attribution. The *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1990: 245) takes recourse to the vague and comfortable cushion of *sometimes*:

Sometimes the point in time that the clause relates to is sufficiently indicated by the tense of the verb group, and no other time reference is required. However, if you want to draw attention to the time of the action, you use an **adjunct** of time. [my highlight]

Giving the example:

She's moving tomorrow.

We do not consider that what is at issue here is drawing attention to the time of action. What is important is knowing whether, in *She's moving*, the form of the verb is or is not located temporally to the action. We do not believe so. We believe that at least relative to non-past situations, the verb tense proves insufficient to temporally locate the situation described.

Some of these explanations that are here being termed as lacking are due to — as has been highlighted — the fact that they serve as a temporal organisational base for the deictic moment of enunciation, accepting the point in time of speaking as the point of reference. However, we believe that this is also due to the fact that time as a flexional category only takes shape in the verb. This does not however mean that the verb is taken as the centre of temporal information.

In fact, languages as English and Portuguese, for example, have resources available for the efficient expression of temporality beyond the verb. These languages resort highly effectively to temporal lexemes and morphemes as is the case with *semester / semestre, year / ano, recently / recentemente, yet / já, still / ainda*, etc.

Palmer (1974: 60) stated:

There are two reasons why the simple present is rarely used in its non-habitual sense. First, a non-progressive form merely reports an activity, but it is rarely that we need to report a present activity, for the simple, but non-linguistic, reason that if the speaker can observe it (at the present time) so too in most circumstances can the hearer. Past activity, on the contrary, is often reported by a speaker who observed it (or heard about it) to a hearer who did not. With the past tense, therefore, unlike the

present, non-habitual activity is commonly referred to, as well as habitual activity.

The facts are known. The reasoning provided by Palmer is however frequently overlooked.

The durative nature of some situations does not allow them to coincide with the present tense for the simple fact that the periods of time demanded by durative verbs cannot possibly coincide with the point in time of speaking. However, this durative nature blocks any coincidence with a strictly present tense. The extra-linguistic conditions rarely call on the speaker to describe events as he is speaking.

However, in that very type of situation, such utilisation is justified: the Simple Present and the corresponding Portuguese tense, the *Presente do Indicativo*, provide for a real time when describing dynamic ongoing events in cases where the speaker and listener are not present in the same place: the speaker observes on or intervenes in the situation described to the listener. This is the case, for example, with radio commentaries (*Figo gets the ball and scores!*), or televised cookery demonstrations where the speaker accepts the possibility that the viewer is not appropriately following events and accompanying them with description (*In goes the sugar and I mix it with the eggs*).

Such usage, denominated as the **instantaneous present** in English grammars, takes place in dynamic situations. It occurs only in highly specific contexts generally meeting the requisites set down by Palmer: that the hearer is not actually present in the situation. And, should we look very closely at the situation we can conclude that only very rarely do they coincide with the point in time of speaking. Often, when the commentator announces a goal is scored the ball is already in the back of the net or it is about to be overruled by the referee. These are, in fact, events of such brief duration that in describing them, they are already past.

The other facet to this article generates a great deal of complication for teachers of the English language. All teachers quickly encounter the difficulties that Portuguese learners of English experience in attempting to master the Present Perfect. Firstly, and as explained above, the apparently corresponding tense, the *Pretérito Perfeito Composto*, does not take on the same values and thus it is to be expected that learning the Present Perfect represents a difficulty. However, to make matters worse, English language grammars present this tense either as a list of values without the learner being able to discern what is their connecting logic or as a basic and inaccurate explanation:

Both the present perfect and the simple past tense are used to refer to an event or state in the past. In addition both can be used to refer to a state of affairs that existed for a period of time. The primary difference in meaning between the two is that the present perfect describes a situation that continues to exist up to the present time, while the past tense describes a situation that no longer exists or an event that took place at a particular time in the past.

Biber, 1999: 467

Four related uses of the present perfect may be noted:

(A) Past events with results in the present time

[...]

(B) Indefinite event(s) in a period leading up to the present time

[...]

(C) Habit in a period leading up to the present time

[...]

(D) State leading up to the present time

Leech and Svartvik (1975: 70)

We use the Present Perfect for a state which has gone on up to the present.

[...]

We use the present perfect for actions in a period of time up to the present.

[...]

We use the past simple for a state in the past, in a period which is finished.

[...]

We use the past simple for actions in the past, a period which is finished.

Eastwood, 1992: 34

Such a perspective, worryingly consensual, raises eyebrows as it actually sets out the imperfective value of the Portuguese *Pretérito Perfeito Composto* rather than the English language Present Perfect. The fact that the Present Perfect may incorporate various semantic types of verbs seems generally accepted. However, the idea of an action or a state that is continued or repeated through to the present is not in the slightest the meaning conferred by this form. And that is an explanation that fits the Portuguese language reality like a glove. The Present Perfect is a past form of a perfective nature. Hence, while sentences *John has been killed* or *John has worked in this bank* hold up grammatically so do their Portuguese equivalents *o João (já) está morto* (*John is already dead*) and *o João (já) não trabalha neste banco* (*John does not work in this bank anymore*). The period of time in which these actions took place does **not** continue through to either present time or the time of enunciation. And hence, this form is termed the *Present Perfect*: a tense that refers to situations that in the *present*, are *perfect* (or completed).

The examples that Leech and Svartvik (1975: 70) provide of the Present Perfect are:

The taxi has arrived.

All police leave have been cancelled.

Her doll has been broken.

In such sentences, all the events have been completed. The actions behind *arrive*, *cancel* and *break* have taken place at a time previous to that of the information being conveyed. The taxi is there and awaiting, taking leave is not an option and that doll is probably on its way to the bin.

The grammars in order to cover such cases refer to a past of current relevance. This is the first breach in the rule established: the action is past but the effects remain.

Grammars also state that the Present Perfect does not accept specific temporal adverbials. In effect, the true difference between the Simple Past and the Present Perfect, while both describe perfective situations at the point in time of speaking, lies in how the Present Perfect describes a verified situation in an undefined past, and where the intention or objective does not include any temporal definition with the Simple Past deployed in situations, also past, but taking place at defined points in time. Hence, in choosing the Present Perfect the speaker seeks to centre attention on the fact and not the specific moment at which it occurred. It thus does not make sense to show that one is not interested in the point in time but rather the opportunity is taken to make explicit reference to it. This may similarly be applied to the Simple Past. Choosing the Simple Past implies that the interest lies in when the fact occurs and not rendering explicit the moment or period in time would run counter to logic. This is basically a question of attitude and interest:

As a matter of fact, great difficulties may arise when we have to choose between these two forms of the verb to express an action which is complete, but only if we fail to grasp a fundamental difference in our attitude: are we interested in the **fact**² or in **when** it took place? In the examples above this difference can be explained as follows: in *I have seen John*, I am only interested in the **fact** of having seen John, whereas in *I saw John*, I am primarily interested in **when** (or **where**) I saw him.

Casanova *et alii* (1993: 156)

² Hence, the reason for the Present Perfect being so commonly deployed in hot news and news reports, those situations in which the facts matter more than the actual point in time when they took place: *The Queen has announced that she is to divorce. University staff have been awarded an above inflation pay increase. The European Central Bank has raised interest rates by half a percentage point.*

Hence, sentences such as *I saw John* do not frequently occur as in itself it makes little sense. Far more natural are sentences such as *I saw John yesterday / at the bar / with his girlfriend*, that is, involving the additional details: the time, the place or the circumstances. Such a sentence, defined as making little sense, shows that the speaker is to a greater or lesser extent confused or undecided:

A 'muddle-headed' speaker

As a logical consequence of what we have been saying, the following sentence [...]

* I have seen John yesterday.

is ungrammatical (*) because it is inconsistent. A speaker who utters this unacceptable sentence is like someone who is unable to decide which attitude or viewpoint he wants to adopt: whether to focus on the fact of seeing John (and use the present perfect) or to turn his attention to the time when he saw him (and use the past tense).

Casanova *et alii* (1993: 157)

Thus, we return to our idea that if our interest lies in the fact, and not the moment, and when speaking about it even in past terms, why should we have to where it is simply not relevant?

In general terms, grammars begin by saying that the Present Perfect refers to an action begun in the past and carried over to the present. Given the unavoidable fact that some situations are totally past and do not continue into the present, as is the case with *John has been killed*, they then move onto state that the fact is in the past but the effects continue. It is certainly an unavoidable truth that if *John has been killed*, he remains dead in the present:

The tense is marked for the perfective aspect which indicates that the event has occurred in the period before-now and is at least partially completed. The event may be completed (*I've broken my leg*) but it still has present significance.

Broughton, 1990: 244

Or, where the fact does not have any current relevance, it may instead have taken place in the recent past:

The event present perfect refers to one or more events that haven't place in a period that precedes the present time of speaking. The period within which the event or events took place is viewed as relevant to the present. It may be relevant because the event has just been revealed, as in news broadcasts [...] or reports in newspapers. [...] Or the event may have just happened.

Greenbaum, 1996: 271

And the grammars provide examples along the line of *I've just washed my hair* or *Have you had lunch?*

None of these verbal forms issues us with the information about the recent occurrence of the event. The sentence *I've just washed my hair* effectively reports to a recent past: however, that information is not conveyed to us by the Present Perfect, but rather by the adverbial *just*. Without a shadow of a doubt, the sentence *Have you had lunch* also relates to a recent event. However, again it is not the Present Perfect that contains this temporal information but rather the universe of reference. In reality, asking if somebody has had lunch is unlikely to meet the literal answer of "at some stage in my life". The hearer is certainly not going to take any other meaning apart from with reference to the recent past. It would not be rationally possible to respond: *Well, I have a vague recollection that once, when I was young, on my grandfather's farm, I did indeed have lunch*. If, in accordance with the Cooperation Principle proposed by Grice, we are requested to assume that cooperation exists between participants in the act of talking, we are only left to question this interpretation of the recent past or the coherently relevant past.

On what grounds would somebody proffer information such as *The taxi has arrived* or *Her doll has been broken* were such information not of relevance?

Compare, for example, with *Have you been to China?* or *Have you read Hamlet?* that can be answered by: *Yes, when I was a child.*

Linguistic reality would seem far simpler: the Present Perfect refers to a situation (event, state or process) that is perfect in the present. Hence the term Present Perfect is attributed to this verbal paradigm. The situation has in fact got its place in the past but in a past that the speaker either cannot define or is unwilling to do so. Therefore, this also does not allow cooccurrence with specific temporal adverbials. Correspondingly, one may say: *John has died*, but not **John has died at 8.00 o'clock today*. Given that the speaker is interested in the fact and not the moment of its occurrence, the latter phrase is rendered incoherent.

This compromised explanation, so often repeated in so many of the English grammars and manuals in use in Portugal, results in serious difficulties for the teaching of English, especially as regards Portuguese students. This happens as the Portuguese form (the *Preterito Perfeito Composto*) does differ and yet the explanation provided so accurately fits Portuguese usage.

This is one issue that is known to represent a learning challenge as the Present Perfect differs from its Portuguese correspondent that actually does refer to a situation begun in the past and continues on into the present. But not in English, French, German and Italian. Just as the English *I have lived in Paris, I have been to the theatre* so do the sentences *J'ai habité à Paris, Je suis allée au théâtre; Ich habe im Paris gewohnt, Ich bin zum Theater gegangen, Io ho vissuto a Parigi, Io sono andato a teatro* refer to situations terminated at some point prior to their being spoken.

Where does this idea — and from our perspective this erroneous idea — that the Present Perfect indicates an action that began in the past but continues through to the present come from? In considering the examples given, we note that such meaning may only be identified when the verbs co-occurs with open ended durative adverbials such as *always, since 1982, for twenty years*.

It is in fact the adverbial responsible for this continuation through to the moment of speaking. This may be demonstrated by observation of what happens when the adverbial is omitted:

John has (always) lived with his parents.

I've worked in this bank (since 1982).

They have been married (for twenty years)

With the adverbials removed, the sentences regain their value in perfective terms. As happens with poor interpretations of the adverbial *just*, yet again a value is attributed to the Present Perfect for which the tense simply is not responsible. Indeed, it is a similar case with the examples that Quirk *et alii* (1985: 192) provide for situations "leading up to the present":

That house has been empty **for ages**.

Have you **ever** been to France?

My Terry has sung in this choir **ever since he was a boy**.

The province has suffered from disastrous floods **throughout its history**.

[my highlights]

It is the presence of the durative open-ended adverbials in highlight that "extends" the situations described through to the present moment. Should such adverbials be left out then the sentences describe perfective situations so specific to this form that the present declares them perfect.

The fact that grammar books have not taken up this true meaning of the Present Perfect and the sheer importance of the presence of the adverbial results in complicated and unfounded interpretations. Murphy (1985: 26), such a common grammar for secondary school teachers in Portugal, declares as regards the sentences *Tom is looking for his key. He can't find it. He has lost his key*. explaining: "**He has lost his key**' means that **he lost it a short time ago and still hasn't got it**". It should further be noted that accompanying this explanation is a cartoon with a figure looking under the bed as if in search for something. It would seem entirely ridiculous to the extent of mental insanity for

this Tom to be still looking for a key that he had lost when a child, for example. It is not the present perfect but the very situation that in this case conveys the idea of a recent event in the sentence.

As is so common, linguistic reality is far simpler and more coherent than the texts books portray it. It would make no sense for it to be any other way just as it makes no sense for a student of grammar to be presented with a list of meanings for each form but where the learner is simply unable to unravel the common factor that underpins their meaning. Meanings are not a free option for the speaker. The Present Perfect refers merely to a situation that in the present is perfect (hence its name) except where co-occurring with open ended durative adverbials. In these cases, it is the presence of the adverbial that "extends" the situation through to the present moment with such meaning conveyed not through the Present Perfect, but rather through the presence of the adverbial.

The teaching and learning of the Present Perfect has always represented a major headache to any English teacher in Portugal with the difficulty caused by the contrast between the two languages compounded by the ineffective explanations provided in the available grammars. English language grammars are on the one hand characterised by a distinct lack of accuracy and on the other by an excessive stringency that combine to render their explanations dysfunctional: just as the mother strived to ensure spotlessness, so is the baby lost to the bathwater!

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