

How Discourse Helps Us Understand Grammar More Fully: The Past Perfect ¹

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Introduction

Most EFL teachers still envision the teaching and learning of grammar as a sentence-level exercise or activity. This view raises both theoretical and pedagogical problems. From a theoretical perspective, if it is true that not all meanings and uses of grammatical forms can be described and explicated with reference to the sentence level, then sentence-level approaches will be incomplete and inadequate in terms of description. From a pedagogical perspective, most language teachers are now trying to get their learners to communicate rather than having them acquire linguistic knowledge for its own sake. Since we do not necessarily communicate messages through sentences but rather through utterances or texts functioning at the discourse level, many teachers feel that sentence-level rules and exercises do not transfer when their students try to communicate.

In this article I would like to use the past perfect tense as a test case. Not all uses of this tense can be explicated at the sentence level. This fact requires that we step back and consider what types of grammar learning activities we can use when grammar “rules” apply at the discourse level rather than at the sentence level. I will illustrate my discourse-level pedagogical approach, drawing heavily on descriptions presented in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, Chapters seven, nine, twenty-seven and thirty-three).

Sentence-level uses of the past perfect

Most Mexican EFL teachers probably feel that teaching the past perfect tense to their students is not a high priority. Certainly, beginners do not need it. However, for intermediate and advanced learners this tense becomes useful since it is needed to form past conditionals:

- (1) If John had arrived earlier, we could have gone to the movies.
- (2) I would have gone to the party if I had known you were coming.

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Notice that such past conditionals are counterfactual, i.e., the event reported in the past perfect did not take place:

- (1') John did not arrive earlier.
- (2') I did not know you were coming.

This same counterfactual sense of the past perfect appears in other contexts as well—such as in clauses occurring after the verb “wish” that refer to the past:

- (3) I wish I had said that.
- (4) I wish you had been there.

Again, we know that these sentences are counterfactual because the events that occur after “wish” did not in fact take place:

- (3') I didn't say that.
- (4') You weren't there.

Occasionally, in sentences with “before” clauses, the past perfect again clearly conveys a counterfactual sense:

- (5) The teacher collected the tests before I had finished mine.
- (6) We left the theater before the play had ended.

We know that these “before” clauses contain counterfactual uses of the past perfect because the following paraphrases are true:

- (5') I had not finished my test when the teacher collected it.
- (6') The play had not ended when we left the theater.

Thus we know that the past perfect is an important resource for expressing past counterfactual meanings in English in a variety of sentence types.

Another important function of the past perfect is suggested by sentences (5) and (6) above since we often think of the past perfect—first and foremost—as a form that is used to signal the fact that one event occurred before another in real time:

- (7) Before I arrived, Ann had cooked dinner.
- (8) Peter had washed the car when I went to get it out of the garage.

In these sentences there is nothing counterfactual about the use of the past perfect. We know that “Ann cooked dinner” and “Peter washed the car”. What the past perfect signals here is that the event encoded with the past perfect occurred in real time prior to the event encoded with the simple past.

One other environment where we sometimes find that the past perfect is used instead of the simple past or the present perfect is in indirectly reported speech where the reporting verb (usually “say”) occurs in the past tense and influences the tense of the verb in the reported utterance to shift back in time:

(9) Mr. Jones said that he had sold his car last week.

(10) Myra said that she had just talked with Stan.

Here it is not unreasonable to reconstruct the sentences that were originally spoken as:

(9') Jones: I sold my car last week.

(10') Myra: I've just talked with Stan.

However, these sentences are different from the preceding ones in that use of the past perfect is rarely obligatory in such indirect reports. Indeed its use is quite formal and prescriptive; it would probably not occur in informal oral indirect reports. Nonetheless, when the backshifting of tense does occur in reported speech and results in use of a past perfect form, one can argue that the event in the quoted utterance marked with the past perfect tense did indeed occur before the report, i.e. the reporter's saying of it. In this sense the use of the past perfect in past indirect reports can be seen as being related to the use of the past perfect to mark a temporally prior event in the past.

Occasionally, sentences like (5) and (6) above have been cited to show that the past perfect does not always signal what occurs before something else. However, what we need to recognize is that, at the sentence-level (and we are talking about the complex sentence level here), there are three different uses of the past perfect in English (two are very different and two are related):

- (1) counterfactual past event
- priority
 - -(2) event prior to a past event
 - -(3) shifted tense in a past indirect report

Discourse Level Uses of the Past Perfect

If one were to peruse a large amount of written English discourse and identify all instances of the past perfect, many of these instances would be signaling past counterfactual events or prior past events or shifted past reports. However, some instances would also be quite different and would defy a sentence-level explanation. Consider the following two texts:

(11) “The Convocation”

The students sat in the bleachers of Pauley Pavillion, watching the faculty enter in their caps and gowns. Dignitaries continued to arrive while the band played a festive melody for the onlookers. To the cheers of the crowd, President Clinton came in and took his assigned seat on the podium...UCLA’s 75th anniversary had begun. (*UCLA Daily Bruin*, May 24, 1994)

(12) “The Case of Koko”

In the 1980’s researchers at Stanford University were trying to teach American Sign Language to Koko, a female gorilla. Koko was well cared for and was surrounded by interesting objects. Her caretakers continually exposed her to signs for the foods and toys in her environment. Koko particularly loved to eat bananas and play with kittens. One day she was hungry but couldn’t find any bananas. She went to the researcher and made a good approximation of the sign for “banana”. Koko was immediately rewarded with a banana, but even more importantly, the research team knew that Koko had made the connection between a sign and the object it represented. (author data)

What is the function of the past perfect occurring in the final sentence of both texts? It does not signal a prior event/report or a past counterfactual event. It signals a climax or an author’s coda of sorts. By using the past perfect, the writers of these past narratives are saying, somewhat dramatically, “Pay attention; this is why I am telling you this story.” Because the past perfect is a marked form (in contrast to the simple past), authors can use it to signal some important climax, breakthrough, or discovery with respect

to the past narrative they have been recounting. Even the verbs used in the past perfect in texts like these are quite limited in terms of their lexical aspect: they reinforce the significant moment when something happened: something had begun/started, a discovery/ breakthrough had been made, etc. This is not a sentence-level use of the past perfect, but a discourse-level use that can only be conveyed to learners through exposure to and engagement with appropriate authentic texts.

A Pedagogical Strategy

How might we teach something like the discourse-level use of the past perfect that the above texts illustrate? In my own ESL classes I have used texts like the two above (it would be good to use at least one more). First, I direct students to read the texts and ask me questions about any vocabulary items and structures that are unclear. Second, we discuss the literal meaning of the texts. I then ask students to work in groups to answer questions like the following about the texts:

1. *Where does the past perfect occur in these texts?*
2. *What other tense(s) occur(s)?*
3. *What is the function in the text of the sentence that contains the past perfect?*
4. *What kind of a verb takes the past perfect in such a text?*

Once the groups have come up with their explanations, we discuss them and use the best of the suggested explanations as the grammar explanation for this phenomenon.

As the final step, I ask the students to try to think of some past event they are familiar with that involves some important climax, result, or turning point that one might want to mention at the end of a narrative about the event. Ask them to write their own short narratives (in groups or individually) in the simple past but to use the past perfect for the somewhat dramatic climax.

I did in fact try this exercise with a class of advanced ESL students and many of them wrote good narratives; the best one was written by a student majoring in archeology, and I'd like to share it with you (it has been edited for minor errors):

(13) "The Rosetta Stone"

Before 1800 no one knew how to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. In 1799 archaeologists found a basalt tablet in the town of Rosetta, Egypt, which later was called the Rosetta Stone. This stone was important because it contained the same message written in Egyptian hieroglyphics, in Egyptian Demotic script, and in Greek. Because the researchers already knew how to read Demotic script and Greek, they were able to figure out the meaning of the hieroglyphics for the first time. The code had finally been cracked.

Conclusion

What has become increasingly clear to me in my ongoing study of English grammar is that we can explain only part of grammar at the sentence level (sometimes an important part as with the past perfect, sometimes very little as with articles). To fully understand any form or construction, we must also understand how it functions at the discourse level—this is true even for structures we can describe at the sentence level since teachers (and learners) still need to know in what discourse contexts such sentences normally occur. Once we change our perspective from sentence-level to discourse level, we are in a position to teach grammar both as a resource for creating discourse and as a resource for using language to communicate. Since this is what most of us are in fact trying to do, such discourse level analyses of English grammar which supplement and go beyond existing sentence-level accounts have the potential to enrich and transform the way we teach grammar and the way students learn grammar. I hope my example in point (the past perfect tense) has helped illustrate this new analytical and pedagogical perspective.

Reference

Celce-Murcia, M. and D. Larsen-Freeman with H. Williams (1999). *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course, 2nd Edition*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.