

Focus and Time Adjuncts in Tenses

Focal differences between simple past and present perfect¹

What is the speaker/writer focusing on?

1. General or specific focus? Present perfect is used when we're talking in a general and abstract way about something in the past (which has a relationship with the present); we use simple past when we are talking about a past event in a specific and concrete way. If, for example, I ask you, "Have you studied Chinese?", I am not referring to any specific time or situation. If I ask you, "Did you study Chinese?", I am most likely thinking about a specific point in the past; my question may be in reply to your statement that you attended a language institute in China.

2. Present or past focus? Another way that present perfect and simple past are used differently is that present perfect focuses on the present; with present perfect, we are looking at a past state or event with a focus on the present. Something in the past serves as background for something in the present. Simple past tense focuses only on the past. We use simple past tense if to focus on a specific point in the past (like "last year" in "The volcano erupted last year") and not now. We often use a time adjunct that expresses this specific point, like "last year." If there is no specific point (as there is none in "The volcano has erupted"), and if there is some relationship between the past event and the time of speaking about it, we use present perfect.

We can see the two focuses in this dialog:

A: Have you been to Rome? (A is asking generally; "A" may be wondering if B knows about Rome, so we can say that A is focusing on B's present knowledge.)

B: Yes, I have. (B's focus is also general and present, since he is answering according to the way that A asked.) I visited Rome just last year. (Now B is focusing on a specific time in the past. B used a time adjunct — "last year" — that shows focus on the past.)

A: What did you do there? (Specific and past focus.)

B: I have visited a lot of old churches. (Wrong. Maintain the specific, past focus.)

Present perfect with and without a time adjunct

If we use present perfect, the presence or absence of a time adjunct can change meaning. When we use a time "present perfect time adjunct" (e.g., "for ten years") it usually means that the state or event is still true. When we don't use a present perfect time adjunct, it often means that the state or event is not still true.

She has been married.

I have studied English.

Without a time adjunct the listener might understand that she's not married now and he's not studying now.

Present perfect shows a relationship between past and present which can mean that a state or event either 1) is true in the past and present or 2) that it was true in the past (not in the present) but has an influence on the present. When we want to clarify that the event or state is true in the past and present, we usually add a time adjunct that implies that the event or state is still true² (e.g., *for 10 years*, *since elementary school*). When we use present perfect without such a time adjunct, in certain situations the listener will probably think that the state or event is finished and infer that the state or event is not true in the present.

Without a time adjunct:

I have lived in Busan. (I lived there for 3 years, but now I live in Seoul).

I have studied English. (I studied English up till last year, but then I had to stop.)

Adding an appropriate time adjunct tells us that the state or event is still happening.

I have lived in Seoul *for my whole life*.

I have studied English *since middle school*.

But if you use the present perfect *continuous*, it is clear that the event is still true even without a time adjunct.

I have been studying English.

How about the second sentence in this dialog?

A: She's a great student.

B: Yes, and she should get an A because she has studied very hard.

Even without a time adjunct we know that she is still studying very hard. How do we know this? We know because of context. A said that the student is a great student; this tells us that the focus is on the present. If the student weren't still studying very hard, B would have disagreed, and would have used the simple past *studied* or *used to study* to show that she no longer studies very hard.

1) Some of the ideas and text in this article are borrowed from Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D. 1983. *The Grammar Book*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

2) Not all time adjuncts show that the event is still true. For example, the preposition *by* in "I will have been married by 2005" prevents the time adjunct from showing this.