

THE DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF PRESENT PERFECT AND SIMPLE PAST BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to analyze differences in the use of the present perfect (henceforth PP) and the simple past (henceforth SP) between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). Both PP and SP 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 PP and SP is that while the former describes a situation that continues to exist up to the present time, the latter describes a situation that no longer exists or an event that took place at a particular time in the past. This meaning difference is often made explicit by temporal adverbs accompanying the main verb (Biber et al., 1999, 467). In an attempt to examine the differences in the use of PP and SP between BrE and AmE, the present study employs six temporal adverbs: already, just, never, ever, yet, and before. These adverbs have been used because some of these are the most frequent temporal adverbs in English (Biber et al., 1999, 795-99) and these adverbs have been explored in many of the previous studies (e.g., Quirk et al., 1985; Easiness 1997; Hundt and Smith 2009; Yao and Collins 2012) in relation to their use in PP and SP.

KEYWORDS: *BrE and AmE, Analyzing the Occurrences*

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INTRODUCTION

A number of studies provide a detailed treatment of the differences between AmE and BrE in the use of PP and SP. For example, Elsness (1997), as mentioned in Zetko (2010, 30-31), studies the difference between PP and SP in the two varieties of English. He finds that PP is more frequent in BrE than in AmE. In his elicitation test, which was designed to find the difference between the BrE and AmE use of SP, Elsness (1997) finds that SP is more acceptable in AmE, whereas in BrE it is the PP.

Yao and Collins (2012) observe that PP has undergone a more significant decline in AmE than in BrE since the late eighteenth century, with the result that in present-day English PP is used less frequently in AmE than in BrE. Hundt and Smith's (2009) study, based on the Brown family quartet, suggests that the tendency for PP to be losing ground to SP has continued into the late twentieth century. The study reveals that, in general, the frequency of PP has decreased slightly between the 1960s and the 1990s.

The present paper attempts to extend the previous research on the use of PP and SP with temporal adverbs in BrE and AmE and addresses the following two research questions:

- What differences in frequencies are noticeable in the use of PP and SP with the temporal adverbs in BrE and AmE?
- What trajectories of change emerge in the use of PP and SP with the adverbs in the two varieties of English during the second half of the twentieth century?

METHODS

Using CQP web, the Brown Family of Corpora were used in this study in order to track changes in the use of PP and SP with the temporal adverbs in BrE and AmE. Brown and LOB corpora provide an ideal basis for the comparison of the two major varieties of English as used in the early 1960s. FLOB and Frown corpora, on the other hand, provide a basis for comparing the use of temporal adverbs in the two varieties in the early 1990s. British English 2006 and American English 2006 were also used to track the changes in the mid-2000s (decade). The six corpora used in this study are of equal size, i.e., each containing roughly one million words. Since all the corpora contain different written text types, the present study is focused on investigating written British and American English.

The Method section discusses the procedure used in this study for searching and analyzing the occurrences of PP and SP with the six temporal adverbs in BrE and AmE. The adverbs under investigation were searched one by one in all the six corpora using search strings as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Search Strings For the Temporal Adverbs

Adverbs	Search Strings
Just	Just *_{VERB}
Already	Already RR*
Yet	Yet RR*
Never	Never RR*
Ever	Ever RR*
Before	Before (.\ ,\ ?)

Just

In order to find out the occurrences of PP and SP with the adverb just, an attempt was made to locate the position of just in a clause or a sentence. The adverb just usually occurs to the left of the verb. The plane has just landed is the example given in Quirk et al. (1985, 194) for BrE; I just came back the example for AmE. I came back just or the plane just has landed or Just the plane has landed are very unlikely to occur with the ‘very recently’ meaning of just. Hence a query into the adverb just was made with the search string just *{VERB} where the verb occurs to the right of just. The query returned varied number of matches in each of the corpora (table 2). Instances of PP and SP were manually sorted from the matches returned by the corpora. The valid tokens of PP and SP were then converted into percentage. FLOB Corpus, for example, returned 371 matches from where 44 tokens of PP and 13 tokens of SP were found representing 77% and 23% respectively. While sorting the tokens, instances such as past perfect were excluded.

The Following Instances of Participle Clause were also Disregarded as Participle Clauses are Non-Finite and therefore Tense Less:

- It looked all the more dramatic, somehow, having just been abandoned. (FLOB K14)
- Having just paid a visit to Kenya and having met and talked with a cross-section[...] (LOB B11)
- Having just completed 18 months of consolidation, since the management buy-out in 1989, [...] (FLOB F22)

The Following Token was also Disregarded Because it Could not be Decided Whether this is an Instance of Past Perfect or Present Perfect.

- I didn't know you could do that. Perhaps he just been unlucky. (FLOBA17)

The semantics of just were also considered. The following tokens were excluded because the meaning of just in these cases is 'only' and not 'very recently':

- I just said that to tease Oster. (FLOB N12)
- I didn't know what I was entitled to, I just accepted what I got [...] (BE06 J54)
- He didn't want to know about wine; he just wanted to drink it. (AmE06 K11)
- When it was dark, we just made a fire and lay down. (Frown N21)
- Some valid instances of PP and SP found in the corpora include the following:
- The Middle Way group has just published data on wounding and it does not make pleasant reading. (BE06 B03)
- She has just launched an exclusive make-up range called I-Imam, [...] (BE06 E19)
- "The West Coast office just checked in", she told them as she entered the living room [...] (AmE06 L07)

Already

The adverb already was searched in all the six corpora using the search string already RR* where RR, according to UCREL CLAWS7 Tag set, refers to "general adverb". Table 3(3rd row) shows the number of matches each of the corpora returned.

From the randomized tokens that the corpus returned, I started to collect instances of PP and SP and continued until I got 100 valid tokens of PP and SP. Fourth row of Table 3 shows the number of randomized tokens analyzed in order to collect 100 instances of PP and SP. Total number of occurrences of the adverb already in LOB corpus, for example, was 362. It required me to analyze 279 randomized tokens in order to collect 100 tokens of PP and SP. From these 100 tokens, I got 71 instances of PP and 29 instances of SP. These 100 instances of PP and SP would allow me to demonstrate the result in percentage.

Some of the Occurrences of PP and SP with already are given below:

- Tailback James Saxton already has surpassed his rushing total for his brilliant sophomore season, [...]. (Brown A12)
- R J Calling has already made his mark with some of his charges, [...]. (LOB A32)
- [...] the movie has already generated substantial pre-Oscars buzz on the internet. (BE06 C17)
- This young man already spent a lot of time alone, [...]. (BE06 N06)
- "I already paid for it." "So let's go." (BE06 L11)

Yet

The adverb yet was queried in all the six corpora with the search string yet RR*. Table 4 shows the number of occurrences of yet in each of the corpora and the instances of PP and SP with their percentage.

While sorting the tokens of PP and SP with yet, the following instances were excluded because the adverb yet in these cases has been used to 'emphasize a word', not to 'refer to time':

- Thatcher has yet again put her finger on the crucial issue. (FLOB F17)
- Deng Xiaoping was stripped of his posts and purged yet again. (FLOB F25)

- And they have yet another unique characteristic: they are the only animals that sleep. (Frown F31)
- Johnson consoled himself with yet another long drink of delightful, home-brewed rye whiskey. (AmE06 N15)
- Some of the valid instances of PP and SP with *yet* included in this study are given below:
- The baby's name has not yet been announced. (BE06 A08)
- Not a single one of the new songs has yet been played in concert, [...]. (BE06 E30)
- So, did you get your license yet? (Frown P24)

Never

Using the search string *never* RR*, the adverb *never* was searched in all the six corpora. From the randomized tokens, 100 tokens of PP and SP were collected from each of the corpora (table 5).

The Following are Some of the examples of PP and SP with *never* that have been Included in this Study:

- I have never put words into their mouths or added any detail that wasn't actually there. (BE06 G39)
- Public opinion in this country has never really supported ideas along these lines.(LOB G56)
- Have you never visited a chiroprapist? (BE06 K11)
- That's fine with Greenfield. "I never supported that concept, because the filter only addresses pulmonary embolism," he says.(AmE06 E04)
- The word *never* left my mind.(AmE06 G44)
- He never did anything without first asking permission.(LOB G10)

Table 2: Occurrences of Just

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	264	278	371	415	494	525
Instances of PP with Percentage	31 (79%)	25 (51%)	44 (77%)	19 (35%)	44 (69%)	20 (29%)
Instances of SP with Percentage	8 (21%)	24 (49%)	13 (23%)	35 (65%)	20 (31%)	50 (71%)

Table 3: Occurrences of Already

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	362	273	329	284	362	307
Randomized Tokens Analyzed (in Order to Collect 100 Instances of PP and SP)	279	243	295	230	291	299
Instances of PP (Out of 100 Tokens)	071	60	59	48	56	43
Instances of SP (Out of 100 Tokens)	29	40	41	52	44	57

Table 4: Occurrences of Yet

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	376	419	413	399	359	401
Instances of PP with Percentage	30 (61%)	28 (60%)	35 (71%)	26 (55%)	33 (73%)	27 (53%)
Instances of SP with Percentage	19 (39%)	19 (40%)	14 (29%)	21 (45%)	12 (27%)	24 (47%)

Table 5: Occurrences of Never

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	689	698	650	685	619	622
Randomized Tokens Analyzed (in Order to Collect 100 Instances of PP and SP)	299	241	286	292	245	256
Instances of PP (Out of 100 Tokens)	39	27	31	26	36	29
Instances of SP (Out of 100 Tokens)	61	73	69	74	64	71

Ever

The search string ever RR* was used to search instances of PP and SP with ever in the two varieties of English. Table 6 shows that from the randomized tokens of the three corpora, i.e. Brown, Frown, and American English 2006, 100 tokens of PP and SP with ever were collected. However, from the other three corpora, it was not possible to collect 100 tokens of PP and SP with ever; the three corpora, LOB, FLOB, and British English 2006, yielded 83, 55, and 90 instances respectively. Instances of PP and SP found in each of the three corpora were then converted into percentage. While sorting instances of PP and SP with ever, the following tokens were disregarded as the tense of these instances could not be decided:

- You ever seen her here before? (FLOB M06)
- Ever see Mary Barton in that park?(Frown L11)
- Ever been out in a submarine?(LOB N04)

Some of the Valid Instances of PP and SP Found in the Corpora are given below:

- Did you ever wonder what the angels are? (FLOB M03)
- No American leader has ever left a more important legacy. (Frown G13)
- Did she ever scold me for scaring you? (Frown P08)
- Has southerner ever arrived in the early hours at one of the London stations?(LOB B23)
- Did you ever try law-book theory against a cocked pistol, Bell? (LOB N14)
- No meteorites have ever been recovered from pale explosion craters[...] (Brown J72)

Before

In the case of the adverb before, the search string before (.\,|\?) has been used. When before is used as an adverb, it usually comes at the end of a clause or a sentence and is followed by a period (.), a comma (,), or a question mark (?). For example, “I have met her before.”, “Since I have been here before, this time it feels different” or “Did you see this film before?” table 7 shows the number of occurrences of before in each of the corpora and instances of PP and SP with percentage.

Some of the Instances of PP and SP with before are given below:

- He’s never chivvied us before. (LOB M05)
- We have faced and handled adversity before,[...]. (Frown A19)
- Have you beaten her before? (BE06 L20)
- “Why didn't you tell us that before?” I asked. (AmE06 G03)
- Nobody gave me flowers before. (Brown P16)

Table 6: Occurrences of Ever

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	359	344	279	334	349	330
Randomized Tokens Analyzed (in Order to Collect 100 Instances of PP and SP)	359 (83 PP & SP found)	260	279 (55 PP & SP found)	316	349 (90 PP & SP found)	268
Instances of PP	40 (48%)	34	27 (49%)	44	43 (48%)	43
Instances of SP	43 (52%)	66	28 (51%)	56	47 (52%)	57

Table 7: Occurrences of Before

Year	1961		1991		2006	
Corpus	LOB	Brown	FLOB	Frown	British English 2006	American English 2006
Total Number of Occurrences in the Corpus	114	116	91	101	128	101
Instances of PP with Percentage	24 (80%)	14 (61%)	19 (66%)	21 (66%)	23 (77%)	20 (67%)
Instances of SP with Percentage	6 (20%)	9 (39%)	10 (34%)	11 (34%)	7 (23%)	10 (33%)

RESULTS

The results section discusses the findings of the occurrences of PP and SP with the six temporal adverbs in BrE and AmE.

Already

The use of PP and SP with the adverb already shows similarities and divergences in the two varieties of English. Figure 1 demonstrates that the use of SP in both BrE and AmE has increased gradually from 1961 to 2006. In BrE the use of SP has increased from 29% to 44%, and in AmE it has increased from 40% to 57%. On the other hand, the use of PP has steadily decreased in both the varieties of language. In BrE the use of PP has fallen from 71% to 56%, while in AmE it has fallen from 60% to 43%. The rate of increase in the use of SP and the rate of decrease in the use of PP in the two varieties are almost the same.

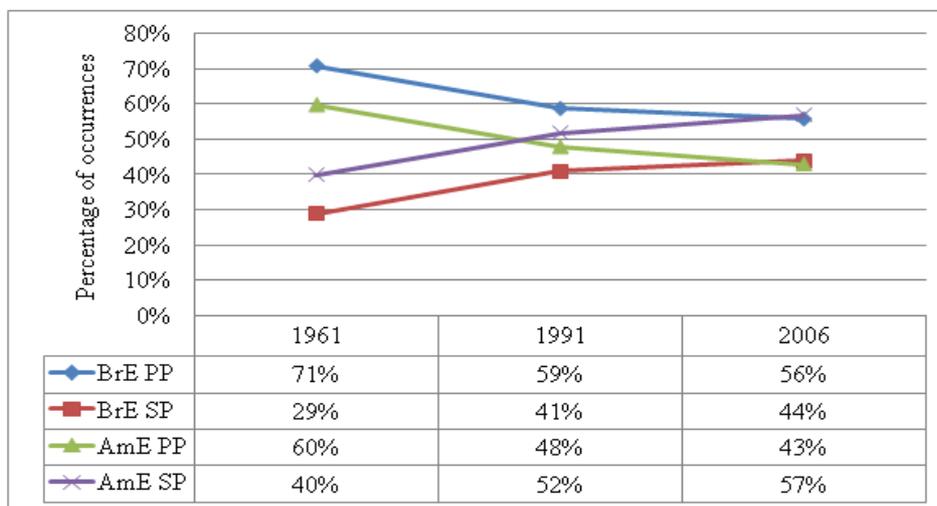


Figure 1: Use of PP and SP with already in BrE and AmE From 1961 to 2006.

It has also been found that in BrE the adverb already is predominantly used in PP. However, the difference between PP and SP has decreased rapidly over the time in LOB, FLOB, and British English 2006 with 42%, 18%, and 12% respectively. On the other hand, in AmE, although PP was predominant in 1961, the scenario has completely changed in 1991 and 2006 when the use of SP becomes supreme.

Yet

In the case of the adverb yet, the use of PP has always been higher than the use of SP in both BrE and AmE. However, when considering the differences between PP and SP, the differences have been found to be fewer in AmE than in BrE in all the three time periods, especially in 1991 and in 2006 (table 8).

In AmE the use of SP with yet (45% and 47%) is found to be relatively higher than the use of SP in BrE (29% and 27%) towards the end of the twentieth century (figure 2). On the other hand, the occurrences of PP in AmE have been observed to be gradually decreasing over time (e.g., 60%, 55%, 53%) while the use of PP in BrE has been increasing (e.g., 61%, 71%, 73%). These facts result in the fewer differences between PP and SP in AmE in the late twentieth century.

Table 8: Differences in the Use of Yet In PP and SP in the Two Varieties

Year	Differences between PP and SP in BrE	Differences between PP and SP in AmE
1961	22%	20%
1991	42%	10%
2006	46%	6%

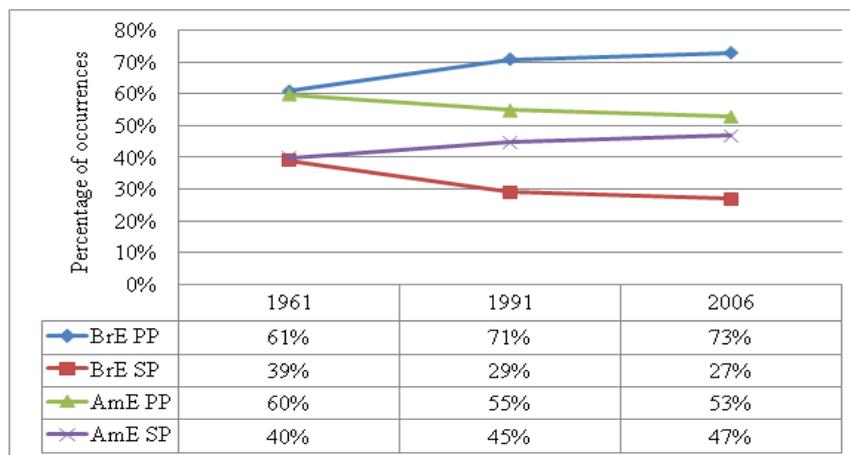


Figure 2: Use of PP And SP with Yet in BrE and AmE From 1961 to 2006.

Never

The adverb never is used more in SP than in PP in both the varieties of English. In all the six corpora, the occurrence of never with SP is 69%, whereas its occurrence with PP is only 31%. However a difference between the two varieties is noticeable in the use of PP. Table 9 shows that with never PP has been used more in BrE than in AmE in the three time periods.

On the other hand, table 10 shows that, in using SP with *never*, AmE is always ahead than BrE. In 1961, 1991, and 2006, SP has been used more in AmE than in BrE by 12%, 5%, and 7% respectively.

Ever

With the adverb ever, SP has been used more than PP in all the corpora. However, in BrE the differences between PP and SP are much higher than the differences between PP and SP in AmE in all the three time periods (table 11). Higher percentage of

occurrences of SP than the occurrences of PP in AmE result in the greater differences between PP and SP in this variety.

It has also been observed that the adverb ever has been used with SP more in AmE (54%) than in BrE (46%). In contrast, PP tends to occur more in BrE (55%) than in AmE (45%) in all the six corpora.

Table 9: Occurrences of PP with Never in BrE and AmE

Year	Percentage of Occurrences of PP in BrE	Percentage of Occurrences of PP in AmE
1961	39%	27%
1991	31%	26%
2006	36%	29%

Table 10: Occurrences of SP With Never in BrE and AmE

Year	Percentage of Occurrences of SP in BrE	Percentage of Occurrences of SP in AmE
1961	61%	73%
1991	69%	74%
2006	64%	71%

Table 11: Differences in the Use of Ever in PP and SP in the Two Varieties

Year	Differences Between PP and SP in BrE	Differences Between PP and SP in AmE
1961	4%	32%
1991	2%	12%
2006	4%	14%

Before

Over the period of 45 years, the adverb before has occurred more in PP than it has occurred in SP in both the varieties of English. However, PP with before tends to occur more in BrE than in AmE. For example, in 1961, 1991, and 2006, PP has been used in BrE more than in AmE by 19%, 3% and 10% respectively. On the other hand, SP has occurred more in AmE than in BrE in the three periods of time. Besides, differences between PP and SP in BrE and AmE in each of the corpora are obvious from 1961 to 2006 (figure 3). The differences remain higher in BrE than in AmE throughout the period.

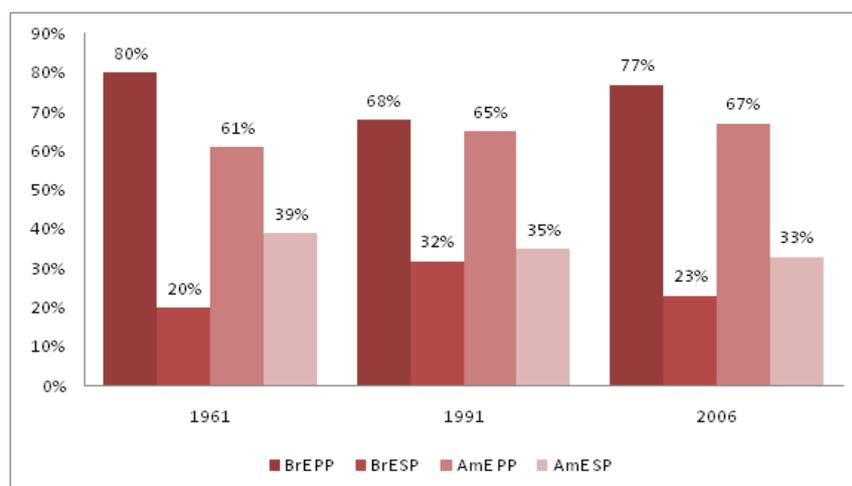


Figure 3: Use of PP and SP with Before in BrE and AmE From 1961 to 2006.

Just

In the case of the adverb just, a gradual decrease in PP and a steady increase in SP over the 45 years are apparent in both BrE and AmE (figure 4). However, from 1961 to 2006, the rate of decrease in PP and the rate of increase in SP are much

higher in AmE than in BrE. For example, over the 45 years, while the use of PP decreases by 10% in BrE, it decreases by 22% in AmE. Again the use of SP increases in BrE by 10%, whereas

Its use in AmE increases at the rate of slightly more than twice (i.e. 22%). Another noteworthy point is that SP is used at a significantly higher rate in AmE than in BrE with the adverb just. In contrast, BrE shows a stronger preference for PP than AmE.

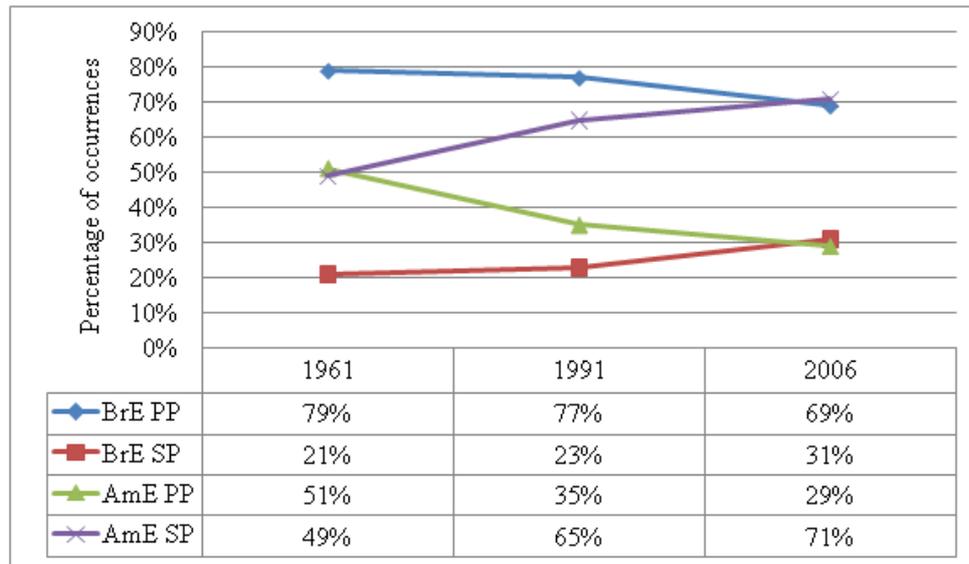


Figure 4: Use of PP and SP With Just in Bre and Ame From 1961 to 2006.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSIONS

Both BrE and AmE show diversity in the use of PP and SP with the six temporal adverbs. In the case of the adverbs already and just, PP is predominantly used in BrE; in contrast, SP is preferred in AmE. In the case of the adverbs never and ever, SP is predominant in both the varieties of English. On the other hand, yet and before reveal that PP is preferred in both BrE and AmE.

However, when considering the frequency or the percentage of occurrences of PP and SP in the two varieties, the present study shows that the preference for PP is much more marked in BrE; on the other hand, SP is more frequently used in AmE. For example, in the case of yet, PP is predominantly used in both BrE and AmE, but BrE is ahead of AmE in terms of the number of occurrences of PP. Again, with never, SP is predominantly used in both BrE and AmE; however, in terms of the frequency of occurrences of SP, AmE is well ahead of BrE.

As far as the diachronic study of the use of PP and SP is concerned, the present study confirms some of the findings of the previous research. The use of PP with the adverbs already and just shows a downward trajectory in both the varieties of English. However in AmE the decrease is more noticeable. This finding echoes Easiness’s (2009, 243) observation that “in the decline of the English present perfect [PP] it is AmE that seems to have been leading the way”. In the case of the use of SP with already and just, the general trend to be observed is that of an upward trajectory in both the varieties of English, which is again led by AmE. This observation supports Yao and Collins’s (2012, 388) finding that PP has continued to lose ground to SP in the twentieth century American English.

In the case of the adverb yet, the diachronic study reveals that in BrE the use of SP with yet decreases while the use of SP in AmE increases. The continuing decrease in the occurrence of SP with yet in the corpus British English 2006

extends Hundt and Smith's (2009, 53) findings of the progressing decrease in the use of SP with yet in LOB and FLOB. Again, the increase in the use of SP in the corpus American English 2006 is a continuation of Hundt and Smith's (2009, 53) observation of its increase in occurrences in Brown and Frown.

To conclude, this paper brings out differences in the use PP and SP with temporal adverbs between BrE and AmE and shows the trajectories of change that the two varieties have undergone in the use of PP and SP from 1961 to 2006. The study also reveals that the two corpora, British English 2006 and American English 2006, almost fairly maintain the general trend as found in the use of PP and SP in the previous studies based on LOB-FLOB and Brown-Frown. Thus the inclusion of British English 2006 and American English 2006 along with the Brown family quartet further extends the investigation of the use of PP and SP with temporal adverbs in the two varieties of English.

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