IS THE BE-PERFECT GONE?

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This article discusses the use of the auxiliary *be + past participle* in the English language between the middle of the 18th c. and the middle of the 19th C. as documented in the literature of the period. The interest in this familiar grammatical structure, albeit rarely used in the modern language, has been spurred by the question when in the history of the English language this structure has been overtaken by the now standard construction of the auxiliary *have + past participle* to express aspectual meanings. Also, the analysis argues that contrary to the popular belief that suggests that Jane Austen and her contemporaries used the *be + past participle* to mark pomposity and high register, writers at the end of the 18th C. and the beginning of the 19th C. used the *be + past participle* with certain intransitive verbs as fixed expressions which belonged to an everyday, colloquial register similar to the way we use the few expressions such as *He is gone, Christ is risen*, *I am done, The sun is set*, etc.ii that are well entrenched in everyday language .

Key words: Old English, Middle English, 18th C. English literature, 19th C. English literature, *have*-perfect, *be*-perfect, grammaticalization, colloquial language, fixed expressions.

Introduction

This article discusses the use of the auxiliary *be + past participle* in the English language between the middle of the 18th C. and the middle of the 19th C. as documented in the literature of the period. The interest in this familiar grammatical structure, albeit rarely used in the modern language, has been spurred by a question as to when in the history of the English language this structure was overtaken by the construction of the auxiliary *have + past participle* to express aspectual meanings, that is now standard. There is no agreement among historical linguists as to the answer to this question, just as there is no agreement to an answer to the question when these forms became fully grammaticalized forms of the present and the past perfect tenses. Mustanoja (1960: 499) believes that the forms of the perfect tenses were fully established in the Old English (OE) period while Friden (1949: 3), who studied the use of tense forms from Chaucer to Shakespeare, did not find big

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differences between usage of perfect forms and past tense forms during the Middle English (ME) period and the Early Modern English (EModE) period. Visser (1973: 749) claims that perfect tenses as separate grammatical categories developed as late as the middle 17th C.

Also, the author's analysis argues that contrary to the received opinion (Rastorgueva 1989: 98) which suggests that *be + past participle* was used to mark pomposity and high register, writers at the end of the 18th c. and the beginning of the 19th C. used *be + past participle* of certain intransitive verbs as fixed expressions which belonged to an everyday, colloquial register similar to the way we use expressions such as *He is gone*, *Christ is risen*, *I am done*, etc, that have become well entrenched in everyday language.

A Short Historical Review

Compared with many of their Indo-European relatives the Germanic languages inherited substantially reduced verbal systems. The aspectual distinctions were particularly poorly represented and we find a growing tendency in Old English (OE) to use semantically colourless verbs like *beon* 'be*'* and *haban* 'have*'* with the deverbal adjectives known as participles used in order to create complex forms to express the desired shades of meaning (Robinson 1993: 168). These two structures in OE were in complimentary distribution. In the *habban*-constructions the past participles formed from transitive verbs, while the constructions with *beon* + past participles were used only with past participles of intransitive verbs.

Examples with *habban*

The origin of *habban* + past participle rests in the main meaning of the verb *habban* 'have', namely 'possess'. As shown in the examples below the past participle is an adjective with passive meaning, modifying the object of the possessive verb which formally is expressed by a concord in gender, case and number between the object and the past participle.

(1) ac   hi   hæfdon   Þa   heora   stemn
     But   they~nom. had~past.pl.   then   their~gen.pl.   service~acc.sg.

     ge-setten**ne** and   hiora   mete   genotud**ne**
     set.pp.acc.sg. and   their   meat.sg.acc. used.pp.acc.sg.
       masc.strong   masc.strong

"and they had served their military service and eaten the food." (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 894)

The past tense of *habban* is followed by a direct object *stemn* and the past participles of the transitive verbs *settan* 'set' and *notian* 'use, employ'. The past participles obviously served as attributes to the object as they are in agreement with the object in terms of case, number and gender. Past participles were as adjectives in OE, and could be employed both attributively and predicatively. In the example above they are employed predicatively. The meaning of the construction can be interpreted as follows: the subject possessed a thing denoted by the noun in object position which was characterised by a certain state which was a result from a previous action marked by the verb from which the past participle was derived. In shorthand, the word order of this sentence can be represented as

$S + V_{poss} + O + PP_{trans}$

It closely follows the Modern English (ModE) construction of the type *I had my car cleaned yesterday.*

(2) He us   hafað   Þ æs   leohtes   bescyrede
   He us$_{acc.pl.}$ has   that$_{gen}$ light$_{n.gen}$ deprived $_{pp.acc.pl.strong}$

   "He has deprived us of that light."

The present tense of *habban* is followed by the past participle *bescyrede* which obviously agrees with the object *us* and modifies it. In shorthand the word order can be represented as

$S + O + V_{poss} + C + PP_{trans}$

In examples 1. and 2. the syntactic distance between the possessed object and its attribute expressed by the past participle does not impair this interpretation as both elements are marked and are in concord in terms of gender, case and number.

However, a sign that *habban* was beginning to lose its meaning of possession and had already stepped on the road of grammaticalization as early as the OE period were the numerous examples in which the past participle did not agree with the object as in example 3.

(3) Hæfde se   cyning   his fierd   on tu   tonumen. (A-S Chronicle 894)
   Had this$_{nom}$ king$_{nom}$ his army$_{sg.}$ on two divided$_{pp.}$**unmarked**
                                                      for case and gender

Another sign of the grammaticalization of *habban* + past participle was that the modern arrangement in which the past participle precedes the object was also found.

(4) Nu   ðu   hæfst   ongiten   ða   wanclan   truwa
     Now   thou$_{nom.}$ hast   grasped$_0$ this$_{acc.}$ unstable$_{acc}$ faith$_{acc.}$

Þæs   blindan   lustes
that$_{gen.}$ blind$_{gen.}$ lust$_{gen.}$

"Now you have realised the fickle loyalty of blind pleasure."

The word order can be represented as follows
$S + V_{poss} + PP + O$

Originally the verb *habban* was used only with past participles of transitive verbs, but then it could be used with past participles of intransitive verbs, too. This was yet another sign that it had started down the road of auxiliariness.

(5) for   sefenn winnterr haffde he ben   in Egypte (Ormulum c.1200)
     For   seven   winters   had   he been in Egypt

Examples with *beon*

In constructions with *beon* the past participle always was of an intransitive nature. These constructions could be analysed as true predicative constructions which denoted a quality or state which resulted from the activity performed. The participle did not always agree with the Subject as example 7. shows.

(6) wæron   Þa   menn   on lande   agan**e** (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 897)
    were   then menn$_{.nom.pl.}$ on land$_{.dat.}$ gone$_{.nom.masc.pl.strong}$

These men then went over this land.
$V_{be} + S + Adv + PP$

(7) Hæsten   wæs Þa ut   afaren   on hergaÞ (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 894)
    Hasten   was then out gone$_{unmarked}$ on raid
    $S + V_{be} + PP$

According to Rastorgueva (1989:96) the use of the auxiliary *ben* caused a major shift towards the grammaticalization of the perfect con-

structions, as it provided a larger lexical range with the introduction of the intransitive verbs.

In the 14th c. *have and beon (ben)* were in free distribution, which is usually taken as a sign of the complete desemantization of these verbs. Examples 8 and 9. illustrate this point.

(8) Heo   beoð   hider   iriden   ut   of Romleoden.
    She   be3p.s. hither   riden   out   of   R

(9) We   habb   hii-riden   al   niht. (Brut)
    We   have   riden   all   night.

However, gradually the use of *be + past participle* became limited to verbs of motion. As were their OE prototypes, these constructions had the meaning of 'state at the end of an action'. The meaning of (10) below was not simply 'He came' but 'He came and is here now'.

(10) To Rome is come that holy creature (Chaucer *Canterbury Tales*).

According to Trnka (1930: 25) Shakespeare used *be* with the following verbs of motion: *flee, retire, enter, meet, creep, go, ride, escape, set forth, turn, fall, walk, die, vanish, steal, cease, grow*. There is an example from Shakespeare below.

(11) These children, which accidentally are met together [1590 Shakes. Com. Err. v. i. 361].

This situation has been taken as an indication that the grammatical category of the perfect tense with its present day form and meaning was fully grammaticalized after Shakespeare (Visser 1973: 749), and the *be*-perfect having fulfilled its task to include the intransitive verbs in the field of perfectivity was pushed to the periphery and became a stylistic marker of the written literary register. In everyday talk it was confined only to the verbs *come* and *go*. Rastorgueva (1989: 97) illustrates this idea, comparing the use of the auxiliaries *have* and *be* in the same sentences from two different translations of the Bibles, the Wycliff Bible from the 14th c. and the Tyndall Bible from the 16th c. The sentences taken from the Gospel of Matthew are shown in the examples below:

(12) Forsothe when Jhesus *hadde comen* doun fro the hil, many cumpanyes folewiden hym. (Wycliff's translation)

(13) When Jesus *was come* downe from the mountaynmoch people followed him. (Tyndall's translation)

(14) Sothely when he *hadde entride* in to Capharnaum, centurio neigde to hym, preying hym. (Wycliff's translation)

(15) When Jesus *was entered* into Capernaum, there cam vnto him a certayne Centurion, besechyng him. (Tyndall's translation)

Rastorgueva argues that in the 14th c. Wycliff used the *have*-perfect to mark completion of a preceding action, while in the 16th c. Tyndall replaced the auxiliary *have* with *be* contrary to the predominant tendency. Apparently this happened because of *be* having become archaic, meaning solemnity and marking a higher register.

My contention is exactly the opposite. William Tyndall was a radical Protestant reformer and worked fervently towards introducing biblical texts in the vernacular. In this sense he was truly democratic, and the English language he used in his translation probably reflected spoken variants rather than archaic forms. Furthermore, he is believed to have contributed towards the development of the English at least as much as Shakespeare did. Therefore, I believe that he used the more informal *be + past participle* forms rather than *have + past participle*. The *be*-perfect construction stayed in the language for a long time (albeit limited to verbs of motion), in fact, all the way to modern day English as an element in fixed expressions which were very common, as the verbs of motion which participated in these expressions were amongst the most common verbs in the language. It turned out that its life was maintained, and it was used on a relatively large scale, with a limited number of verbs such as *arrive*, *become, go*, *return*, *fall*, *recover*, *grow,* etc. in the literature of the Romantic period as shown in Table 1. below.

Summary of the Findings

For this study I used selected texts of all kinds, except for poetry, from Project Gutenberg. The size of the corpora for each author varies, but for the purpose of this article this is irrelevant as the question I tried to address is whether the *be + past participle* construction with intransitive verbs of motion continued to be used in the English language of the second

half of the 18th C. and the first half of the 19th C., which is well within the Modern English period.

The names of the authors are presented below in alphabetical order. As their short biographies show, they came primarily from the south of England (one from Ireland), most of the men were educated at public schools, while the four women were mostly home schooled. Also they wrote in a variety of styles and genres.

Arnold, Matthew (1822 – 1888), a poet and cultural critic, went to Rugby School and Oxford.

Austen, Jane (1775 – 1817), a novelist, born and lived in Hampshire, educated at home.

Bentham, Jeremy (1748 – 1832), a philosopher, jurist and social reformer, born in London, went to Westminster school and Oxford.

Burke, Edmund (1729 – 1797), an author, orator, philosopher, born in Dublin, lived in London, went to Trinity College, Dublin.

Cobbett, William (1763 – 1835), a pamphleteer, born in Surrey, educated at home by his father.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1772 – 1834), a poet, literary critic and philosopher, born in Devon, went to a grammar school and Cambridge, lived in Somerset.

Edgeworth, Maria (1768 – 1849), a children's writer, of Anglo-Irish extraction, went to school in London for a while but was primarily educated by her father at home.

Godwin, William (1756 – 1836), a journalist, political philosopher and novelist, born in Cambridgeshire, went to Hoxton Academy to become a minister.

Lamb, Charles (1775 – 1834), a writer and essayist, born in London, went to Christ's charity boarding school.

Radcliffe, Anne (1764 – 1823), a writer, born in London, little is known about her private life

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft (1797 – 1851) a writer born in London, educated at home

Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792– 1822) a poet, born in West Sussex, educated at Eton and Oxford.

Walpole, Horace (1717 – 1797) an art historian and a man of letters, born in London, educated at Eton and Cambridge.

What follows is a list of types of intransitive verbs of motion which appear in the *be + past participle* construction in the selected texts, and the number of tokens of each type. Also, the table shows the number of tokens that appear in the *have + past participle* constructions in the selected texts.

The + sign indicates a preponderance of tokens with the *have + past participle* construction.

Table 1. Types of verbs and the number of tokens in *be + past participle* constructions and *have +past participle* constructions in texts by 18th – 19th c. English writers

	arrive		become		go		grow		fall		return		recover		total	
	be	have	be	have	be	have	be	have	be	have	be	have	be	have	be	have
Arnold					1	1									1	1
Austen	2	1	1	0	34	7	2	0	0	2	2	1	5	0	46	4
Bentham	1	1	2		3	0			2	1					8	2
Burke			3	1	5	1	1	2	2	1					13	2
Cobbett			1		35	17				1					34	18
Coleridge			3		3			2						1	7	2
Edgeworth					25	7	3		1	1					29	8
Godwin	2		2	1	10	2	1		2	4					17	7
Lamb	1	3	4	3	14	16	3	4			1				23	26
Radcliffe	16	8									9	8			25	16/
Shelley, M	1	+	2	+	12	4	3	1		+	1	2	1	1	20	+
Shelley, P																
Walpole	1				8	+	2		1						10	+
Total	24		18	5	150			14	9	8		13	11	7	1	

A bird's eye view of the table shows that the type of intransitive verb of motion which appears predominantly in the *be + past participle* construction is *go*. This comes as no surprise, as it is the verb of motion with the least specified kind of motion. In other words, it represents what in cognitive linguistics is called a basic level or generic level category. As such it is a deeply entrenched category, and so is the whole construction with the auxiliary *be* to form the perfect tense. It is so entrenched that it has survived in present day English, as the title of the article has demonstrated.

The other verbs in the sample rank far below *go* in terms of their frequency of appearing in the *be + past participle* construction, but in most cases they appear more frequently with the *be* auxiliary to mark aspectual meanings than with the *have* auxiliary. For example, in the sample from Jane Austen's works, the number of tokens of the *be + past participle* construction with the verbs in the table (excluding *go*) compared to the number of tokens with the *have + past participle* construction is 12 to 4, in Bentham's sample – 5 to 2, Burk's – 6 to 4, Radcliffe's – 25 to 16, etc. This rather crude initial statistics shows that similarly to the verb *go* other verbs of motion were used with the *be* auxiliary in the language of the period as a standard norm rather than as a stylistic device, although the construction with *have* was becoming more and more common.

As the table shows the only author in the sample who did not have any tokens of the *be + past participle* construction was Percy Shelley. Also, it may be noted that the authors whose texts have shown the least tokens are male and highly educated. However, this sample is too small to provide viable evidence for a claim which correlates the social status of the writer with the frequency of *be*-perfect. The data, however, provides enough evidence that in the language of the period the construction was still alive in combination with some of the most common verbs of motion and did not mark any particular genre or register.

Is the be – perfect gone in Modern English?

All of the verbs that I have examined have been mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) description of the *be + past participle* construction which I am quoting below.

> *be* in combination with intransitive verbs, forming perfect tenses, which use is now largely displaced by have after the pattern of transitive verbs: be being retained only with *come*, *go*, *rise*, *set*, *fall*, *arrive*, *depart*, *grow*, and the like, when we express the condition or state now attained, rather than the action of reaching it, as *The sun is set*, *Our guests are gone*, *Babylon is fallen*, *The children are all grown up*.

In other words, the meaning which the construction retained is the *resultative* which many authors believe was the first one out of which the other senses of the perfect evolved (Lee 2003: 393). Some diagnostic tests, however, show that the two constructions are not entirely the same. While sentences like (16) and (17) and (18) and (19) seem identical, native speakers have reported that the use of *be gone* with adverbials for location cause a problem as in sentences (20), (21) and (22).

(16) He is gone out of the house.
(17) He has gone out of the house.

(18) He was gone before I got there.
(19) He had gone before I got there.

(20) ?Father is gone onto the roof to repair it.
(21) ?Jane was gone to the supermarket for 2 hours.
(22) ?Peter is gone away from the house just now

In conclusion the story of the *be-perfect* is a common story of language variation and change in which one form is gradually marginalized, and finally almost completely replaced by another. But it is also a story of how certain forms get entrenched in the minds of speakers and persist in the living, everyday language of a speech community.

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