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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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Editorial

I hope that our readers were able to relax and enjoy the Christmas holidays and that everyone got off to a good start this year. So often we get caught up in our hectic, fast-paced lives that we forget to take time out for ourselves. Fast/*schnell*... That is the hallmark of our times. It is also the topic of one of our articles dealing with collocations. Is *schnell* always fast? How would you translate *ein schnelles Essen*, *ein Schnellzug* or even *schnell duschen*? Read on to find out more.

In this issue we will also be taking a closer look at the present perfect by exploring the differences between

present perfect simple and present perfect continuous. Granted, this is a finer point of grammar, but one that an advanced speaker of English should certainly master.

To round off our newsletter we will touch on a rather English phenomenon, hedging. As you will see, English speakers generally like to play it safe.

John Nixon



Comments



Subscription

Upcoming Issues :

- tips for CVs and job applications

To get a taste, listen to this radio broadcast



Audio!

Addendum

In our article on academic titles in the last issue of our newsletter we failed to comment on the term *docent*.

This term is not widely used for university instructors. It is chiefly American and generally refers to a museum guide.

Currently on Offer

If you are interested in any of the following, please **contact us**.

- **Workshops in February and March :**
 - Socializing and Networking in Academic Settings:** February 6 (8:15 to 11:30)
 - Accent Reduction and Voice Training:** February 25, March 4 and 11 (9:30 to 12:15)
 - Academic Writing in English:** February 27, March 6 and 13 (8:15 to 11:30)
 - Expert English for Academic Staff:** March 10 and 11 (8:30 to 16:30)
 - Conference English/Academic Presentations:** March 17 and 18 (8:30 to 16:30)
- **Editing Service:** Do you have a paper, abstract or other document that needs to be looked over by a native English speaker before it is published? If so, we can help.
- **Coaching:** One-on-one coaching is available upon request. This is especially helpful if you are preparing for a presentation or planning a new course in English.
- **Innovative Courses in SoSe 2015:**
 - English through Music; Business English Online; Grammar Online; University Online: English through MOOCs; Academic English at the University of Toronto (Distance Learning)

Glossary

get caught up with/in sth.:
 to become very/overly
 involved with/in sth.

hallmark: significant
 feature

granted: admittedly

play it safe: not take risks

fail to do sth.: forget to
 do sth. that was
 expected (in this
 context)

Grammar

Present Perfect Continuous versus Present Perfect Simple

Let's look at the difference between

I've been reading your report.

and

I have read your report.

The present perfect continuous generally stresses how long an action has been taking place

In the first sentence the activity hasn't been finished – "I'm still reading your report". The present perfect simple in our second sentence, however, expresses completion: "Here's your report. You can have it back". Similarly

I've been writing my dissertation.

I've written my dissertation.

"... and there is no end in sight".

"I'm going to hand it in on Monday".

Present perfect continuous is used:

1. for activities continuing up to the present, often with an emphasis on length, with keywords related to time such as: *how long?*, *for / since*, *lately / recently*

I've been working on my project all afternoon.

I've been studying the data for months and hope to publish my results soon.

How long have you been reading Law?

2. to explain a present situation and give background information

I'm completely knackered. I've been slaving away trying to get this assignment finished.

We've closed the cafeteria because it hasn't been making enough money.

3. for repeated activities going on up to now

I've been phoning Peter every day since he gave his presentation.

Susan has been working late this week.

4. with *consider*, *mean*, *think*

I've been thinking of changing my job.

I've been meaning to get in touch with my tutor.

There are two important aspects when present perfect simple is used:

1. when the activity expresses a quantity: keywords are *how much?*, *how many?* and *how many times?*

I've read the first 10 pages of your dissertation.

How many Chinese lessons have you had?

2. with *it / that / this is the first / the second / the only / the last time*, etc.

This structure is confusing for native speakers of German. The present tense is not used.

This is the first time I've had to write such a long assignment.

(The assignment is not completed. I'm writing it.)

Is this the only time you've travelled to Manchester?

(and you are here in Manchester)

For information related to using the present perfect with so-called state verbs, such as *know* and *believe*, as well as the verbs *live* and *work*, please click on More Info below.

Glossary

to read (Law): to study a subject at university (British English only)

to be knackered: (UK slang) to be extremely tired, exhausted

to slave away: to work very hard

Sylvia Grade



More Info



More Exercises

Intercultural Communication

How to Hedge like an English Speaker

In analyzing different communication styles across cultures, two stereotypes are often heard: Germans are very direct, and Anglo-Saxons pad their statements with niceties, feigned or genuine hesitation. As this story goes, to a simple question such as, Do you think this solution will work? Germans and Americans might respond as follows:

German: No, because it has not accounted for all possible scenarios.

American: Probably not, because it might not have accounted for all possible scenarios.

Both speakers believe that the solution will be unsuccessful, but the American hedges his answer – he uses words to soften his statement. This hedging has two possible functions: first, it leaves room for the interlocutor to contest the answer without risking an argument. Second, it makes the American sound more modest, less certain that he is right. In the context of intercultural communication, the German could come across as arrogant to the English speaker, and the American might appear uncertain in the eyes of the German.

The word “hedge” is most well-known for its use in the context of financial markets. Hedge funds are virtually unregulated groups of investors who often make high-risk investments that, when successful, also yield high payouts. The term “hedging”, however, was originally associated with a slightly different aspect of risk-taking in gambling – to hedge a bet refers to the practice of placing additional, conflicting bets on, for example, a horse race, in order to reduce the potential losses from a risky first bet.

Hedging thus describes a form of playing it safe, and it is as such that we discuss the term in the context of writing and speaking in English. Take the following example from an academic context:

*Do the results support your claims?
Yes, they confirmed virtually all of our hypotheses.*

What, then, is the real answer to the question? Yes, but with room for a possible exception. In defending a paper at a conference or submitting it to a peer-review journal, that “virtually” can help insulate the

answer from critique or attack. Take this other example from an historical context:

Historians agree that the use of the nuclear bomb shortened the duration of the Second World War.

As such, this is a risky statement. The writer could provide support for this claim, but many counterarguments could be cited (including the simple mention of one dissenting historian). If, however, the following simple hedges were added, the statement would become less controversial:

Historians mostly agree that the use of the nuclear bomb probably shortened the duration of the Second World War.

Now the statement has become less vulnerable to being disproven.

Hedging in writing is not just used as a tool to fend off possible critique. It can also function just as in our sample German-American conversation, establishing the sense that a claim is being made modestly or cautiously, and thus reducing the chance that a writer will seem over-confident or self-important.

These discoveries could further our understanding of a field that has until now remained largely unexplored.

This writer suggests, rather than asserting, that her work is essential to future studies. And rather than denying that anyone, anywhere, anytime had already worked in this field, she allows for the possibility that she is not the only person to have done so.

English speakers regularly cover their bases in this way in casual contexts as well:

*He will most likely arrive on time.
I am pretty sure the train leaves at 10.00.
That might not be the right answer.*

The hedge in each of these sentences could express genuine uncertainty, an unwillingness to say something that could prove false, or a desire to be polite and appear modest. Determining the exact purpose of the hedge, then, is part of the delicate art of conversation.

Kimberly Lewis, PhD

Glossary

pad: add sth. to soften sth.

feigned: pretended, not real

hedge: avoid being direct or avoid risk

hedge funds
hedge a bet

interlocutor: person you are speaking with

to contest: to question

come across as: appear, seem to others

virtually: almost true

dissent: disagree

fend off: to defend against attack/criticism

cover your bases: make sure you are not exposed to any risks (metaphor from baseball)

Vocabulary

Glossary

to idle: when an engine is running, but the car is not moving

idle (adjective) = not moving, not in operation, lazy (for people)

idle chatter: meaningless talk

idle threat: not a real threat

mother tongue: (not mother language or native language)

come up with: think of

arrive at: reach a result

Collocations

It is that time of year when professors and instructors are busily *preparing their exams* while students are *studying the material* from the semester *preparing for the exams* and hoping that they have learned enough in order to *pass them*. The instructors will *administer the exams* before *marking them* and heading off on a *well-deserved holiday*.

You might be wondering why students don't *prepare the exams* and instructors don't *prepare for the exams*. Or why students *study* rather than *learn* the material. And couldn't students just as easily *succeed at the exams*? A holiday can certainly be *well-earned* instead of *well-deserved*, can't it?

If you read the preceding paragraph and did not notice any mistakes, then you are among the majority of English learners. How do we know which word combinations are used in the above contexts, in this case exams and holidays? An unfortunate fact of learning a foreign language is that certain words are often paired with others in a way which may be unclear to the learner or uncomfortable because it sounds different from the equivalent in the learner's mother tongue.

These word combinations are called *collocations* and are essential to improving your English at an advanced level.

Collocations can take many forms:

- Adverb + Adjective: very successful (**not** mainly successful)
- Adjective + Noun: distinguished professor (**not** esteemed professor)
- Noun + Noun: laboratory assistant (**not** laboratory aide)
- Noun + Verb: engine idled. (**not** engine sat)
- Verb + Noun: carry out / conduct research (**not** make research)
- Verb + Expression with Preposition: to lecture on the Otto cycle (**not** to lecture about the Otto cycle)
- Verb + Adverb: explore further (**not** explore more)

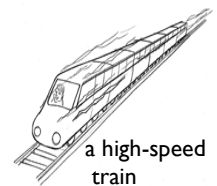
There are not only differences based on the form, but also on how strict the relationships are. For instance, *blonde* is used in the following examples: a *blonde woman*, *blonde hair* and possibly a *blonde beer*, but not a *blonde wall* or *shirt*. Red, however, can describe any number of things from *red hair*, *red boots* to a *red light*. Whether words are strictly related is not always clear. Yet, there are a number of ways to learn collocations.

As is the case in most situations, exposure to language is the best way to learn new phrases. When you read English language texts, mark or write down word combinations you see which are different than the combinations in your mother tongue. There are also a number of specialized collocation dictionaries which can be used to confirm the correct collocation of most words:

- oxforddictionary.so8848.com/
- prowritingaid.com/Free-Online-Collocations-Dictionary.aspx
- www.ozdic.com/

Hopefully you have been *taking notes* and are a *fast learner* so that the next time you need to come up with the correct word combination you will be a *quick thinker* and arrive at the correct collocation!

Gretchen Chojnacki-Herbers



a high-speed train



Exercises

Is fast always *schnell*?

The answers to our questions in our editorial are as follows:

<i>ein schnelles Essen</i>	a quick meal
<i>ein Schnellzug</i>	a high-speed train (or fast train)
<i>schnell duschen</i>	to take a quick shower

As you can see, quick is often used as much as fast. Likewise, you would translate *Ich hätte eine kurze Frage zu Nr. 3* as I have a **quick** question **about** No. 3.



a quick meal



a quick shower