This paper gives an overview of recent and ongoing research into non-canonical uses of the present perfect (PP) in Australian English. Such uses are common especially in oral narratives and in police media releases published on the web. The ‘standard’ English PP, like canonical present perfects more generally, (i) does not occur in sequences of clauses expressing temporal progression and (ii) does not combine with definite past adverbials (see e.g. Ritz, 2012, de Swart, 2007, Lindstedt, 2000).

Instances of (i) exemplified by (1) are frequently heard in oral narratives (Engel and Ritz, 2000, Ritz and Engel, 2008) while (ii), illustrated by (2), is frequently exemplified in a corpus of police media reports (Ritz, 2010).

(1) [Context: Dean feeds sharks in an aquarium and re-tells an early experience when he was almost bitten by one] And umm, I’ve ducked under and I’ve looked back and, and she’s gone past and I’ve gone, “Okay, that, that was all good.” Another one’s come down, I’ve thrown this fish out, and he’s started snapping on it, and I’m like, “Oh, Thank God for that.” (Ritz & Engel, 2008:153)

(2) At about 3.20 pm yesterday a man has entered the Eat-N-Run take away store on golden Four Drive, Bilinga, armed with a rifle. (Ritz, 2010:3406)

I will discuss how pragmatic manipulation of the ‘vivid narrative’ PP in discourse has led to a shift in its semantics in the two genres studied, and explore representations of its meaning, also using data from ongoing research into sociolinguistic factors involved in the uses of the Australian PP (Richard, PhD project). I will then present research in progress by Ritz and Richard focusing on the question of auxiliary ellipsis as illustrated below. In (3), we can make a reasonable assumption that the second VP, ‘held it’ is in its past participial form:

(3) “And then he’s taken him up into his arms, he’s rocked it and held it like it was his own child and then taken him off to the ambulance,” Mr. Fitzgerald said. [Quote from a police officer describing the rescue by a police constable of a baby from a house on fire.] (The West Australian, 12.4.2000)

However, we also find examples where the second VP in the two conjoined clauses has the form of a Simple Past (SP):

(4) A vehicle has pulled up behind him and a male person has walked over to the driver’s side […] The male driver has panicked and drove away. (Craig Bailey, WA Police Media, 26.7.2005) (Ritz, 2010:3405)

Such examples call for caution when coding the data: with verbs whose participle has the same form as a SP, we cannot be certain that the form of the VP is intended to be the same in each clause. The presence of an irregular past participle does not either guarantee that the form is indeed intended as a perfect, as at least for some speakers, the distinction between the two forms appears to have become blurred, as seen in (5):

(5) … I had a bright pink halter neck dress on. And um, he’s undid it just as they’ve taken the photo and both coconuts have fallen out. (Nova 93.7 FM radio, Perth, 7. 02. 2004)

I will explore an initial hypothesis that the auxiliary in its full or contracted forms may be becoming a marker in its own right, and will consider its discourse functions relating these to previous discussion in Ritz (2010).

References


