

# Past simple & present perfect: Distribution in the Standard Italian of Greater Rome

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The Past Simple (PS) and the Present Perfect (PP), two past tense forms in Italian, have disparate distribution in the spoken language of Italy. Use of the PS and PP, ('use' referring to both frequency and function), varies across northern, central, and southern regions (Pulgram, 1984; Bertinetto and Squartini, 1996; Esskali, 2002). In Central Italy, both forms are claimed to be in equal use (Esskali, 2002). Rome, geographically a part of Central Italy, is a social and cultural anomaly according to Pulgram (1984). I propose that Rome is a linguistic anomaly as well: while both the PP and PS appear in equal distribution in Central Italy, only the PP (of the two) is used in spoken language within Rome. Using the research of Bertinetto and Squartini (1996) as a basis, I elicit data from an L1 speaker of Roman Italian. My analysis shows that the PP has absorbed the aoristic aspect of the PS: the collected data shows that the consultant has a strong preference for the PP, confirming my hypothesis. Using the Stages of Development as proposed by Harris (1982) in Bertinetto and Squartini (forthcoming), I claim that in Rome, the PP has reached Stage IV; the final stage of development in which the PP has replaced the PS. This research has implications about the trend of many Romance languages towards disuse of PS forms.

## 1 Introduction

My research question is: given that the distribution and use of the two past tense forms, the past simple and the present perfect, vary across regions of Italy, is there a preference for one form over the other in spoken Italian in Rome? Italian has three principle past tenses (Pulgram, 1984): the Past Simple (PS), the Present Perfect (PP), and the Imperfect. These three tenses are described by Lepschy & Lepschy (1977) in the following way: the PS describes a "complete action which is no longer related to the present (p.220-1)"; the PP denotes a "completed action which is still felt to be in some way linked to the present ... past events the effects of which still lasts ... (p. 220)"; the Imperfect is used to express an action which is either continuous or a "completed action if this is habitual (p. 220)". The focus of this paper is the PS and the PP. Variation in usage is seen between these two tenses across geographic areas of Italy. I claim that there is a preference in

spoken language in Rome, for the PP over the PS, to the extent that the PS is in disuse in spoken Italian; in Rome, it is used only as a literary tense. Using the Stages of Development proposed by Harris (1982) (as cited in Bertinetto & Squartini, forthcoming), I also claim that the PP in Rome is in Stage IV of development as an aorist past. The PP has gone through Stages I, II, and III, and has arrived at Stage IV, at which point it has subsumed the functions of the PS. I also tentatively posit, that the motivations for the aoristic drift of the PP has been due to the greater degree of morphological regularity that is found in composite verb forms in Italian than in the simple verb form.

By use, I intend both the frequency with which speakers use the form, as well as the functions that the forms are used by speakers to express. Given the above definitions, the PS can be described as an aorist past and the PP as past with perfect aspect. However, a one to one relationship between form and meaning is not found in spoken Italian. In certain regions of the country, one or the other of the two forms (PS and PP) is restricted in its functions (Pulgram, 1984; Bertinetto and Squartini, 1996; Esskali, 2002). I will address this disparity in distribution of the forms and their meanings in § 2.

Example 1 in the Data Appendix shows instances of the PS and PP. The pairs of examples, English and Italian, are translations of each other. The Italian and English equivalents in pairs a. and b. grammatical in their respective languages. The PS describes an aorist event in pair a., and the PP in pair b. describes an event with perfect aspect. Pair c. shows that while the PP in English is incompatible with an aorist context, in Italian, the PP can be used to describe an aorist event. In certain regions of Italy in particular, the PP is preferred in an aorist context over the PS.

## 2 Background

“Aoristic drift”, (Bertinetto & Squartini, forthcoming), describes the process by which the PP subsumes aorist past functions; this is a trend seen in many Romance languages. In languages like French and Italian, the function of the PS can be, depending on geographical location, restricted to that of a literary tense. Harris (1982), as cited by Bertinetto and Squartini, proposes four stages of development that the PP goes through while in the process of aoristic drift. In Stage I, the PP has a restricted function: it refers to present states resulting from past actions, but cannot refer to past actions themselves. In Stage II, the PP refers to experiential events that have a durative or repetitive quality. In Stage III, the PP can express prototypical perfect meaning describing past actions with present relevance. Finally, by Stage IV, the PP has acquired the aorist function of the PS and is used to describe aoristic events in place of the PS.

A synchronic snapshot of Italy reveals that in Northern Italy, the PP is the primary form used, and the PS is disused entirely in spoken language; its function

is restricted to that of a literary tense only. Northern Italy is cited by Harris as an example of a linguistic environment where the PP is in Stage IV of aoristic drift. The opposite is found in Southern Italy; here the PS is the primary form used, and parts of Southern Italy are cited as an example of a linguistic community with the PP is in Stage I of development.

Central Italy, where Rome is located, cannot be cleanly categorized into one of the stages development. Esskali (2002) and Bertinetto & Squartini (1996) claim that in Central Italy, the PP and the PS can be found in equal distribution. The meaning of 'equal distribution' however, is not clear. Whether this term refers to frequency or to distribution of functions is not explained. However, it has been established through the literature, that, unlike the cases of Northern and Southern Italy, there are two forms, each with a strong presence, in use in Central Italy.

Rome is located in the region of Lazio in Central Italy. The time I spent as a language learner in Rome indicated to me that the PS is not used in spoken language. The disparity between my own experience and the claims made in the literature led me to question whether Rome may or may not have a unique linguistic status within Central Italy. I have since discovered that, at least socially and culturally, Rome is unique within Italy. According to Pulgram (1984), Rome is an anomaly; it is viewed as a northern city by southerners, a southern city by northerners, and is considered a separate entity from the rest of Central Italy. This indicated to me that Rome may be a linguistic anomaly as well as, with respect to the distribution and use of PS and PP.

### **3 Methodology**

I collected data from a 36 year old Roman man, who was born in and has lived in the area of greater Rome for all of his life. I issued two questionnaires to my consultant via e-mail, Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2.

Bertinetto & Squartini (1996) researched the variation in use and distribution of the PS and PP in Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. Data was collected from a body of consultants drawn from three cities in each of the three above mentioned regions. The consultants were determined by the researchers to be of 'local pedigree' meaning that their primary linguistic influence was the language community in which they lived, making them ideal representatives of their respective regions' language use. Each consultant was issued a questionnaire (referred to as Questionnaire 1). Questionnaire 1 consists of a series of sentences which each had one or more instances of fill in the blank. A verb given in its infinitive form, and the consultants were asked to supply the verb form which best fit the context of the sentence (consultants were not directed toward any particular verb form(s)). I borrow Questionnaire 1 from Bertinetto & Squartini (1996), and issue it to my consultant with a few added

examples of my own. Example 2 shows sentence 1 of Questionnaire 1 as seen by my consultant; the given verb is in its infinitive form in bolded capital letters preceding the blank.

A benefit of Questionnaire 1 is that the responses elicited were the consultants' first and most immediate responses. One limitation, however, was that the consultants may have responded to the fill in the blank prompts in a prescriptive, rather than descriptive way, reflecting their knowledge of grammar rules rather than their actual usage of the forms. A second limitation is that while Questionnaire 1 elicited the consultants' most immediate responses, it did not account for what other possible, and equally correct, answers may exist for each prompt.

To address the first limitation, I asked my consultant to respond in a way that reflected his use of the language, not his knowledge of grammar. To address the second limitation, I created and issued Questionnaire 2. Questionnaire 2, a grammatical judgment task, is identical to the first, in place of fill in the blank, the corresponding same as provided in Questionnaire 1, was provided in Questionnaire 2 in the PS form. The consultant's task was to give grammaticality judgments of each instance of the PS occurrence, based on the schema provided as seen in example 3: ☺ indicates that the PS can be used; ? indicates that it can be used only provided that the larger context is appropriate ; and, ! indicates that the PS cannot be used in the context of the sentence. Example 4 shows the first sentence of Questionnaire 2 as seen by my consultant; the verb in its PS form is in lowercase bolded letters.

In each of the questionnaires, there were 27 sentences with a total of 36 instances of the corresponding verb form. Next, I examine the results collected from each questionnaire individually. When referring to examples, I use the example numbers as they appear in the Data Appendix.

## 4 Questionnaire 1

In this section, I examine the results from Questionnaire 1. Example 5 shows the format of the consultant's responses to Questionnaire 1, and all examples of responses from this questionnaire follow the same format: the consultant's response is shown in capital bolded letters.

### 4.1 Data & Analysis

In 34 out of 36 instances of fill in the blank prompts, my consultant responded the PP form. Additionally, there was one instance in which the consultant used the PS, and one instance in which he used neither the PS nor PP. The 34 instances of PP use include examples in which the context is clearly aoristic, as well as examples in which the context was perfect. For the purposes of this

paper, I focus on those examples of PP use in aoristic contexts. First, I discuss the two examples for which the consultant chose a form other than the PP. Then, I show examples of PP use as an aoristic past.

Example 6 shows the only instance in which my consultant used the PS. The time reference (underlined) in this example is ‘in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century’, establishing an aoristic context: the event is not progressive or habitual, and takes place in the past without reference or relevance to the moment of speech. Significantly, I analyze the tone of this example as academic: that is, this sentence is more literary than conversational. This analysis is supported by Bertinetto & Squartini (1996) who analyze this sentence as an example of an historical narrative. Analysis of this example 6 as an historical narrative supports the claim that PS is preferred as a literary tense, rather than as a form used in conversation or speech.

Example 7 contains three instances of fill in the blank. The last instance, underlined, is the instance referred to earlier in which neither the PP nor the PS were the choice of the consultant. The verb form used is the Present Simple. In Italian, the present simple can function as an historic past. However, in this example, the structure *sono vent'anni*, literally translated as ‘(they) are 20 years’, is in the present simple, which in Italian, requires the present simple in the verb which follows. This form and structure are not relevant to the scope of this paper; therefore, I will limit my analysis of this instance to the explanation just provided.

Example 8 shows 3 sentences in which the PP functions as an aorist past. In each example, the portion of the sentence expressing the time frame is underlined: In sentence 8, ‘at exactly 5 on February 7, 1991’ ; in sentence 15, ‘two years ago’ ; and in sentence 22, ‘yesterday’. In each example, the time reference describes an aoristic time reference; the past action is neither habitual nor progressive, nor does it express perfect aspect. Instead, these time phrases establish a past action that is begun and completed in the past without relevance to the present.

The results of Questionnaire 1 show the PP to be the preferred choice of my consultant. The PP in was the elicited form in 34 out of 36 instances. Additionally, in 25 of those 34 instances in which the PP was the preferred choice of my consultant, the context was aoristic, as seen in examples 8 a. b. and c. This indicates that in the Italian spoken in Rome, the PP can be used to describe aoristic events, and that it has acquired the functions of the PS. However, while I have established that the PP is the form preferred by my consultant in Questionnaire 1, it is nonetheless possible, that the PS was not the first choice of my consultant, that it is as acceptable in the same contexts. I address this question with Questionnaire 2.

## 5 Questionnaire 2

An example of the data collected from Questionnaire 2 is shown in example 9 sentence a. in which the verb form provided is in bolded lowercase letters and the grammaticality judgment offered by my consultant is marked, according to the schema explained in § 3, at the end of the sentence. In cases of more than one instance of the verb form within one sentence, all instances were analyzed to have received the same grammaticality judgment indicated at the end of the sentence. An example of this is shown in example 9 sentence b.

### 5.1 Data & Analysis

Out of a total of 36 instances of grammaticality judgment in Questionnaire 2, the consultant marked: 26 with a ☺, (acceptable use of the PS); 3 with a ?, (acceptability is dependent on the larger context); and, 7 with an ! (use of the PS was not acceptable). The contexts of the 26 instances marked ☺ were the aorist past. These examples confirm use of the PS as an aoristic past, and also indicate that the consultant's grammar has a high degree of acceptability of the PS, in spite of the strong preference for the PP that was seen in Questionnaire 1.

The 3 sentences marked as ? are seen in example 10. All three sentences, a.-c., describe events with perfect aspect established by the corresponding time phrases (underlined): in sentences a. and b, the context is experiential, marked by the adverb *mai* '(n)ever'. In sentence c., although the action in the past, it is made relevant to the moment of utterance within the context by the question 'Do you know the latest?'. What cannot be explained by the data here is why use of the PS has any degree of acceptability in a sentence which establishes a past context with perfect aspect.

The 7 instances which received an exclamation mark are shown in example 11. They are particularly relevant to my research question in that their judged unacceptability is not predictable given the acceptability of the sentences in example 10. The sentences in example 11 weigh substantially to support the claim made in this paper that the PP is the preferred form in spoken language in Roman Italian.

The context of the three instances of PS use in example 11 sentences a., b., and c., is perfect. Perfect aspect is established with the time phrases (underlined) 'yet', in sentence a., 'until now', and 'always' in sentence b., and 'still' in sentence c. The examples shown earlier in example 10 show that the PS can be used with a degree of acceptability in contexts of the perfect aspect. However, in example 11, sentences a.-c., the PS cannot describe an event with perfect aspect. What appears to separate the acceptable sentences in example 10 with the unacceptable sentences in example 11 is tone. While it is possible to place the sentences in example 10 in a dialogue, it is also possible to place them in a

written context as well. The sentences in example 11 however, are difficult to contextualize outside of the setting of a conversation or dialogue. I posit that the sentences in example 11 are less acceptable due to the tone, which is more obligatorily conversational in nature. This claim is supported by examining sentence d. of example 11. Sentence d. Shows that in spite of the aoristic context of the sentence, established with the time phrases (underlined) ‘two years ago’ and ‘in 1988’, the PS is unacceptable. This sentence has a strong conversational tone, and I analyze that it is the tone of the sentence that is the cause of the unacceptability of this sentence.

Questionnaire 2 shows that the PS is considered acceptable by my consultant in 26 out of 36 instances (with aoristic contexts), questionable in 3 out of 36 instances (with perfect contexts), and unacceptable in 7 out of 36 instances (contexts were both aoristic and perfect). I have shown that although use of the PS is acceptable in aoristic contexts and questionable in perfect contexts, use of the PS was unacceptable to my consultant when the tone of the sentence was strongly conversational, regardless of whether the context was aorist or perfect. Although it is shown in the data from Questionnaire 2 that the PS is widely acceptable to my consultant, the results lend support to the claim that the PP is preferred in spoken language. I questioned my consultant about the reasons for his grammaticality judgments, attempting to understand his intuitions as a native speaker. He responded to me with the following statement (translated from the Italian): “even if it is correct, we don’t use the past in that tense (PS) ... it isn’t wrong as you have written, but it isn’t used much in spoken language”.

## 6 Summary of Results & Further Research

The results from both questionnaires support my claims. In Roman Italian, the PP, through the process of aoristic drift, appears to have subsumed the functions of the PS in spoken language, to the extent that the PS is dis-preferred in speech and is used only in literature. The PP has passed through Stages I, II, and III of the stages of development proposed by Harris (1982); it has arrived at Stage IV where it is used to describe past events with both aorist and perfect aspects, in place of the PS.

Bertinetto & Squartini (1996) discuss aoristic drift as a general trend seen in many Romance languages including Italian. One possible explanation for this effect, touched on by Bertinetto & Squartini, is that the PP, although morphologically more complex, is more regular than the PS in terms of conjugations. However, although I propose this as a possible explanation, to make this claim is outside the scope of this research paper.

An area for further research is the categorization of Central Italy within the stages of development. The term ‘equal distribution’ needs clarification as more than one interpretation of this term is available. One interpretation is that there

are two forms present that serve independent functions: for example, the PS might be restricted to function as the aorist past, while the function of the PP is restricted to that of a perfect/experiential past. A second interpretation is that the two forms appear in equal frequency with overlapping functions.

An additional area for continued research is the role sociolinguistics in this discussion: North, Central and South Italy have marked social statuses within Italy. Additionally, the PS is a marked tense: academic and educated, while the PP remains unmarked or neutral. The point to be investigated would be what effects does the interaction between the social status of the regions and of the forms themselves have in determining distribution and use.

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### Data Appendix

(1) Examples:	English	Italian
Past Simple:	a. Yesterday, I <b>ate</b> a pizza.	<b>Mangiai</b> una pizza ieri.
Present perfect:	b. I <b>have eaten</b> 3 pizzas.	Tre pizze <b>ho mangiato</b> .
	c. *I <b>have eaten</b> a pizza <i>yesterday</i>	<i>Ieri</i> <b>ho mangiato</b> una pizza.

- (2) Mia sorella **LEGGERE** \_\_\_\_\_ già questo libro l'anno scorso
- (3) ☺ Si può dire tranquillamente ? Si può dire, nel contesto giusto ! Non si può dire
- (4) Mia sorella **lesse** già questo libro l'anno scorso
- (5) Mia sorella **HA LETTO** già questo libro l'anno scorso
- (6) Nel corso del xvi SEC GLI Spagnoli FONDARONO numerose città nel Nuovo Mondo  
'in the course of the 16th century the Spanish **FOUNDED** numerous cities in New World'
- (7) Vedi quella macchina rossa! **L'HO VENDUTA** due anni fa, però **L'HO COMPRATA** nel 1988. Ci credi? Sono vent'anni che la POSSIEDO.  
'Look at that red car! (I) **HAVE SOLD** it 2 years ago, but (I) **HAVE BOUGHT** it in 1988. Can you believe it? (They are) 20 years that I **OWN** it.
- (8) a. Marco **E' PARTITO** alle 5 in punto del 7 Febbraio 1991  
'Mark **HAS LEFT** at exactly 5 on February 7 1991'
- b. Questi sci LI HO COMPRATI due anni fa  
'**I HAVE BOUGHT** these skis two years ago'
- c. Questo è il libro che ieri HO TROVATO  
'This is the book I **HAVE FOUND** yesterday'
- (9) a. Mia sorella **lesse** già questo libro l'anno scorso ☺
- b. Mi ricordo che nel 1985 **nevicò** molto e per Pasqua io **andai** a sciare ☺  
'I remember that in 1985 it **snowed** a lot and at Easter I **went** skiing'
- (10) a. Tu, nella tua vita, **andasti mai** a Londra? ?  
'You, did you ever go to London?'
- b. Nel periodo in cui abitavi in Francia, tu **andasti mai** a Parigi? ?  
'In the period when you used to live in France, **did** you ever go to Paris?'

- c. *La sai l'ultima? **Arrivò** Marco ?*  
 ‘Do you know the latest? Mark **arrived**’
- (11) a. *Non so, non lo **ascoltò ancora** !*  
 ‘I don’t know, I **didn’t listen** to it yet’
- b. *Finora io **vissi sempre** in questa casa !*  
 ‘until now I **always lived** in this house’
- c. *Tua sorella è ancora all’estero? No, **tornai** e adesso è con noi!*  
 ‘Is your sister still abroad? No, she **returned** and is with now us’
- d. *Vedi quella macchina rossa! La **vendei due anni fa**, però la **comprai nel 1988**. Ci credi? Sono vent’anni che la possedetti !*  
 ‘Look at that red car! I **sold** it 2 years ago, but I **bought** it in 1988. Can you believe it? I **owned** that car for 20 years.’