The Meaning of the Present Perfect

General Meaning

The present perfect expresses the *unspecified* past related to the present. It includes two times (present and past) in one sentence, and they are related in a way. The ways the present perfect includes the present and the past are shown below.

Since the present perfect expresses the meaning of *unspecified past*, you CAN’T use it with a specific time expressions such as “in 2004”, “last summer”, “on Wednesday”, or “at 3:00 a.m.”

Meaning 1

An activity or a situation that occurred at an unspecified time in the past (before “now”). This past is related to the present.

[Experience or the result of an action / situation in the past.]

(You don’t specify when it happened.)

Past

Present

Future

(1) Experience or something that happened before, at an unspecified time.

I *have studied* German before.

(Therefore, I have an experience of studying German now. I know something about German.)

She *has* never *met* him before.

(Therefore, she doesn’t know him.)

(2) The result of an action or a situation in the past. You see the result now.

Bob *has* already *finished* his homework.

(Therefore, as a result, he doesn’t have to do his homework any more, and he can go to the party now.)

Meaning 2

An activity that was repeated several or many times in the past.

It might be repeated now and in the future too. (Any specific time is NOT given.)

[An repeated action in the past]

(You don’t specify when it happened.)

Past

Present

Future

(???)

(???)

They *have taken* the TOEFL 6 times so far. (They might take it again later.)

(This event happened six times in the past up to now.)

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The Meaning of the Present Perfect (continued)

Meaning 3
An activity or a situation that began in the past and continues to the present. *Since* or *for* is usually used in the sentences with this meaning.

Katy *has lived* in Provo *for* twenty-five years.
(She started living there twenty-five years ago, and she is still living there.)

cf. Kim lived in Provo *for* twenty-five years.  (simple past)
(He started living there more than twenty-five years ago and moved to another place sometime in the past.)

Katy *has lived* in Provo *since* 1980.

I’ve *studied* Chinese for years.
Tom *has been* the president of the company *for* 7 years.
They *have known* each other *since* 1985.
I *have wanted* to go to Africa *since* I was a little boy.