



# IIT Madras

## BSc Degree

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## English – 1 (Basic English)

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### **Verb 'be' in English**

Welcome to the class. Today we will talk about the verb 'be' in English. Verb 'be' is important to understand because it has many different forms and for accuracy, for the correctness and the implications of these for our learning of the language it is important to understand various different forms and their function in the language. I would like you to pay attention to this discussion and the exercises related to this discussion for a better understanding of this discussion on the verb 'be'.

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Things to remember ...

- All sentences will have subjects and predicates.
- Order of words in a sentence
  - [[Subject]      [verb      object      adverbs]]
- **Subject and verb in predicate agree with each other.**



So, before we look at that some generic preliminary stuff, we know that all sentences, all English sentences must have the subject, and all sentences must have a predicate. What we mean is all sentences must have a verb also. And words in English sentences come in the order of subject, verb and object. So, the subject becomes sort of the first thing in the sentence, then verbs come at the middle position and then you have an object. And there is something in every sentence in English that indicates some sort of agreement in these seemingly two different parts of a

sentence in English, namely subject and predicate. This is something to remember about a sentence in general.

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### Agreement in English

- Something between the subject and the verb in predicate is obvious.
- This is called agreement.
- How does this work.

• Number	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
• Person	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD



The way agreement works is that we know as I mentioned we know there is something between subject and the predicate, that is when we have a subject which is singular we see some sort of singular marking on the verb also, this is what we call an agreement. We have discussed how it works, but we will have the implications of that for this class as well.

There are specifically two parts; one is number that is singular and plural, 2 types, two forms of number, singularity indicating plurality and three forms of person that is first person, second person and third person. So, these are the two things, namely number and person which indicate agreement in English, not so much gender; however, gender is important with regard to agreement in other languages.

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### Number and Person

Number	→	Singular	Plural
Person	↓		
• I		<u>I</u>	<u>We</u>
• II		<u>You</u>	<u>You</u>
• III		<u>He, She, It</u>	<u>They</u>



So, we know, now we need to understand these forms to see how verb 'be' works. So, refresh your memory about singular and plural forms of the first-person, second person and third person pronouns at least. So, 'I' is known as singular and 'we' is the plural of first-person. So, the moment we say 'we' is the plural marker plural form of the first-person pronoun, we know that 'I' is the singular form.

Similarly, in second person we have 'you' as the pronoun, and in both singular and plural we have the same form, the other way to understand is 'you' means one person or 'you' can be used as a pronoun to refer to more than one person as well in our address. Similarly, 'he, she and it' are third-person singular pronouns in English and 'they' is the plural form of the third-person pronoun. So, we are going to look at how this works vis-a-vis the verb 'be'.

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## Be in English – Auxiliary verbs?

- Be has different forms in modern English.

• IS – sg ] – Present

• ARE – Pl

• AM ← I

This [is a pen.]

• WAS – sg ] Past

• WERE – Pl

I am a student.

I was in Delhi last year.



So, now let us look at the different forms of the verb 'be' in English. We have 'is' singular, 'are' plural. Similarly, we have 'was' singular and 'were' plural. So, these are the different forms of the verb 'be', 'is, are', 'was, were' and 'am'. I am coming back to 'am' in one minute. So, when we say 'is and are' and 'was and were' what we are basically talking about is these two are the forms of singular and plural forms of the verb 'be' in English in the present tense, in present tense and these two are the forms of singular and plural forms of the verb 'be' in the past tense, namely, 'was and were'.

Please pay attention to this very carefully, this looks very simple, and simple and careful attention to this part will help you work on your grammatical accuracy in written, spoken, varieties of English forever. The chances of you making mistakes in selecting one or the other and putting them through agreement, going through exercises, understand the written form of the language will drastically improve, and that will have a qualitative, quantitative and exponential impact on how you use the language in written and spoken form. Therefore, I solicit your attention here very carefully.

See, we see number playing a role here we have in the singular form we have one specific form of the verb 'be', and in the plural form we have one specific form of the verb 'be'. And in the present tense, we have both singular and plural, and then we have singular and plural two different forms in the past tense as well. That is a crucial thing for us to see.

So, from the verb 'be' we see tense, so 'are they verbs' this is an important question for us to understand. Because a lot of times people refer to these things as auxiliary verbs, I want to conclude this by the same thing discussing at the end of this class as well, and I hope I would end up convincing you that these are, these things what we know as 'be', different forms of 'be' they are basically markers of tense and not really verbs, the reason why they are called verbs because they are part of the predicate and they are along with the real action verbs at times, and as we know there is a requirement of a verb in every sentence, so in the absence of a verb in a sentence like when we say a sentence like 'this is a pen'.

If we want to understand this sentence, what is the subject? Probably this one. What is the predicate? Probably this one, not probably, this is the predicate. So, we when we start looking for a verb in the predicate we do not find any, we find this one and then we say probably this is a verb, may be true. But this is not a real form of a verb; there is not much to contest about it at this point. Well, which is whether or not this is a verb.

What is important for us to notice that these elements in English are markers of tense, there are more markers of tense that I will detail out for you to see, but wherever these verb markers of 'be' come, they indicate tense. Therefore, we see these many forms of 'be', and I am going to show you these things with examples as well.

So, now before we move to look at examples of singular and plural forms of present and past tense markers, I want to bring your attention to this part 'am'. This is a special form of the verb 'be' which comes with 'I' and which also makes us see two things that 'I' as a first-person pronoun has a special status in the language in the sense that it has a special marker, at least in the present tense. But in the past tense, there is no special marker.

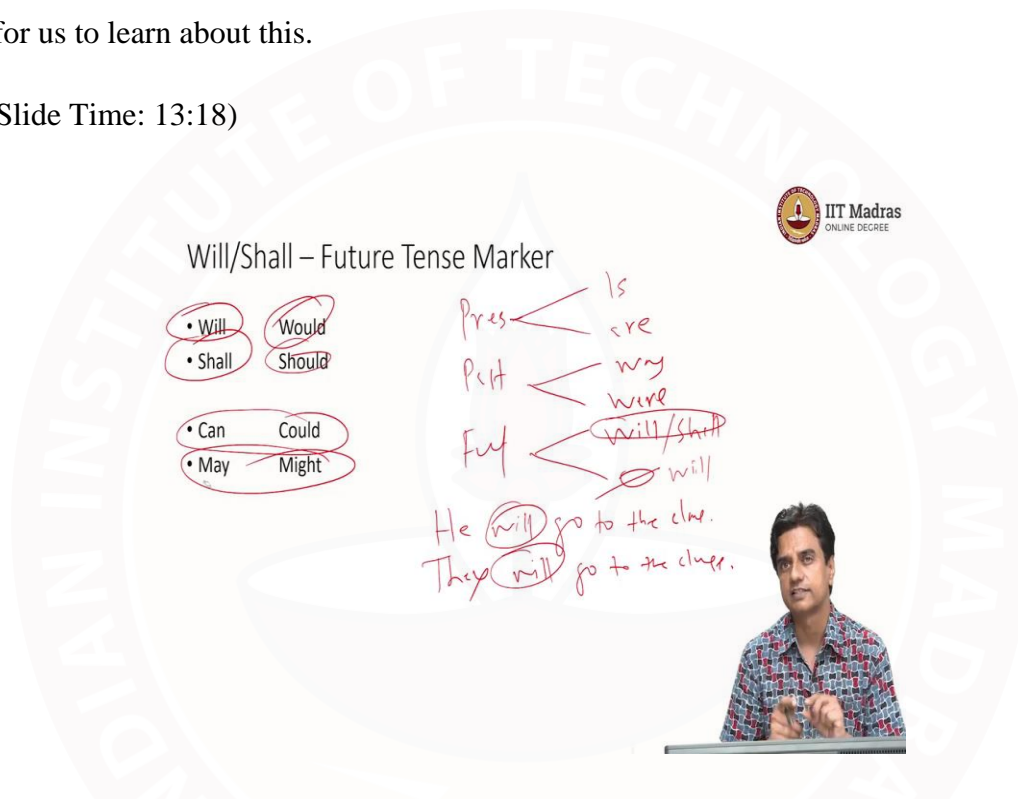
So, in a sentence in the present tense, we can say 'I am a student' but, so this is the present tense marker here but in the past tense when we say we do not have a marker, special marker for I in the past tense we have to say 'I was in Delhi last night'. So, there is no special marker for 'I' as a first-person pronoun in the past tense, but there is a special marker for 'I' in the present tense. Why? We do not know the answer to this question.

The marker 'was' tells you that 'I' is really singular, then the question is how come in the present tense we do not use 'is for I', if 'I' is a form of present, if 'I' is a form of the singular pronoun, then

how come we do not say 'I is a student', 'I is student'. What goes wrong if we say that? We do not know the answer to this question, the all we know, and all we need to pay attention for learning accuracy in English is in the present tense we have a special form we use 'am', in past tense we do not have a special form; therefore, we use one of the two mostly singular one.

This is a short discussion about different forms of 'be' in English which are also known as an auxiliary verb, but keep in mind that a discussion on whether or not these are verbs or not is not crucial for us to learn about this.

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**Will/Shall - Future Tense Marker**

• Will	Would
• Shall	Should
• Can	Could
• May	Might

Pres → is, are  
 Past → was, were  
 Fut → will/shall, will

He will go to the class.  
 They will go to the class.

Let us look at a small discussion on the future tense, and then we look at the examples of this. In future tense we have a, we use 'will' or 'shall'. However, you see there is a striking difference between present tense and past tense, in the present tense, we have singular and plural forms, in past tense also we have singular and plural forms. But in the future tense, we do not have this distinction.

So, for example, as we were looking at the present tense you have 'is and are', in the past you have 'was and were'. How about the future? We have 'will or shall', but there is no plural marker; this is one way to look at it. The other way to look at it is this is just a future tense marker, is it the form of 'be', we do not know much about it. But as a future tense marker, we use 'will and shall' for both singular and plural.



So, in singular we use 'will', in the plural as well we will use the same thing. So, I can say, I or let us say a clear distinction between 'he will go to the class' when we use a plural form of a third person pronoun 'they' we will use the same form 'they will go to the class'. So, in the future tense, we do not make a distinction in terms of numbers.

So, there are three specific distinctions that we need to make in our discussion with tense marker, these elements marking tense, when they mark tense in the present tense we have two distinct forms singular and plural, in the past tense, we have two distinct form singular and plural, in future we do not have two distinct forms we have just one form which is used for both, and in the present tense we have special marker for this thing first person singular pronoun 'I'.

If we remember just this much, we are done with this thing, and then we can look at several examples without making any mistakes in the use of this and when they are used in the understanding of this. These forms like 'should and would', 'can and could', 'may and might', when it comes to a discussion an auxiliary verb all these things are put together, I want to make a distinction that we need to separate these items, and we will need to talk about the uses of these things separately and not mix them here with the discussion on 'be', I only want you to remember some forms of 'be' which are basically tense markers.

So, there is a direct correspondence between these forms of the verb 'be' and tense marking. So, whether or not they are, they have the status of a verb one can contest this, but these things have specific marking for tense, these elements are used in language to indicate tense, there is no doubt about that. And we should pay attention to the clearer part of any discussion for making it helpful for us in learning the target language.



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### Examples of verbs 'be'



- I [ • I am/was a doctor.
- We are/were students.
- II [ • You are/were a teacher. *Pl \* you is*  
*\* you was*
- III [ • He/She is/was a teacher.
- They are/were teachers.



So, look at these discussions. So, when we say 'I am a doctor' we use the special form of the verb 'be', here 'am' because we are talking about 'I' as a pronoun, but when we want to say the same thing in the past tense we do not have any special form, and we need to say 'I was a doctor'. When we say 'we are students', but in the past tense we have to say 'were', 'we were students'. 'You are a teacher' you say 'you were a teacher', here we are using you in the plural form.

Mind it even when 'you' indicates and refers to just one person we do not use a singular form of 'be' for 'you', we always use plural form for 'be', we will never say 'you is' or 'you was', these things are ruled out as a possibility in English. So, one can always say 'you' is not grammatically speaking, grammarly speaking 'you' is not a singular form at all, we just use 'you' to indicate singularity as well, and in the use, it is left to the interpretation of the listener whether we are talking about one person or multiple persons, whether we are talking about, whether we are referring to singular or plural.

But in use for the purpose of grammaticality 'you' never use singular form either in the present tense or in the past tense of the verb 'be'. So, therefore we say 'you are a teacher' or 'you were a teacher' as a sentence. However, in the third person look at this 'he and she' this is singular so in the present tense we use 'is' and in the past tense, we use 'was', 'they' as plural so in the present tense we use the plural marker, and in the past tense also we are using plural markers.

So, we are talking about this is the first person singular and plural, this is the second person as I discussed both singular and plural because 'you' as a form is always plural and here we are looking at the third person, so this is the first person, this is the second person, and here we are looking at third-person singular and plural. The question of plurality and when they are singular is very clear in the third person; there is no overlap of anything. When we look at the second person, we have just one form, which is plural. When we are looking at the first person, we do have two different forms as singular and plural, in plural there is clarity but in the singular only for 'I' we have a special marker in the present tense that we need to remember.

And all that you see here is also known as agreement. So, we are looking at two things together; we are looking at the use of agreement and what indicates tense in a sentence. So, we are now putting two specific things together that is tense and agreement for us to understand grammaticality, the notion of grammaticality in English sentences. Now, once you are done with this simple chart of understanding, it stays with you forever, and we do not make any mistakes about it in written form or in a spoken form, and also it helps us understand how, when others use these things, we ought to be grammatical when we are using them in spoken and written form.

Remember, it is always crucial to keep in mind that a language is a tool which helps us tell people things, language is a tool which helps us communicate to others, we use language to convince people, we use language for people to see what we are saying, what becomes even more crucial in the process is our accuracy, fluency is cosmetic, fluency has different requirements, but accuracy is your necessity.

And for accuracy, I underline this thing several times, for accuracy, which has such a huge impact that through accuracy, you not only sound impressive but through accuracy, you sound convincing. When we have such a load on this, then we need to focus on what helps us obtain accuracy, this is one significant part which helps us understand accuracy and practice accuracy for us in the language.

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## Verb be and agreement in English ...

- 1. Rekha and her brothers (is, **are**) in Delhi.
- 2. Either my mother or my father (**is**, are) coming to the meeting.
- 3. The dog or the cats (is, **are**) outside.
- 4. Either my shoes or my coat (**is**, are) always on the floor.
- 5. One of my sisters (**is**, are) going on a trip to France.



So, according to this description, please do the exercise and see how this works for you, how it develops your understanding of 'be' and its forms. So, the way I want you to do the exercise I am going to describe a few things for you through some of these sentences. So, now look at this how this combination of tense and agreement works together.

So, we are saying, 'Rekha and her brothers' and we want to pick whether it is 'is or are' in Delhi. So, because 'Rekha and her brothers', this is a plural, so we are picking up a plural marking present tense form of the verb 'be' in this sentence. So, the moment we make sure that the part of the sentence that agrees with this is also plural, so we just pick a plural one, if we ascertain, when we ascertain that the previous part is singular, we go for a singular form.

So, either 'my brother or my father' look at this, we are talking about both brother and father seems like we are talking about two people but if you read it carefully or if you hear it carefully it is saying either my brother, 'mother or my father', so either one of them. Therefore, the agreement form is 'is' coming to the meeting.

'The dog or the cats', 'the dog or the cats are outside'. So, here the closest one is cats which is plural, hence this is plural, picking up plural. 'Either my shoes or my coat', so here look at the closest one is singular, so we are picking up a singular marking. 'One of my sisters', so out of many, we are talking about one again 'is' going to 'going on a trip to France'.

So, the principle of agreement is pretty simple, singular subject singular marking on the form of 'be', and therefore we pick the singular form and that is what you see in all these things. So, when you do this exercise, all you need to do is to find out these patterns in the ten sentences that you have got for your practice from one piece of news from a newspaper, this will be very helpful.

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#### Use of Will/Shall

- 1. John will be a doctor.
- 9. I shall go home now.
- 10. The players, as well as the captain, will win the match.



Similarly, we see here 'John will be a doctor', so singular, singular, and we know that it will not work here that way because future tense marker has only one form in both singular and plural. So, 'T' whether it is a third-person or first-person or 'the players as well as the captain' plurality in all the forms we have 'shall and will'.

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## Auxiliary Verb and Be

- I am coming from Madurai.

*T V-ing*

- I am doing well.

*T V-ing*

- I was going to tell you.

*T V-ing*



So, again it is not exactly the verb, it is marking for tense, and it does carry agreement which it agrees with which shows with the subject of the sentence, so I am coming from Madurai. So, look at this, when we have this verb 'come' then in the presence of this verb there is an availability of such marking, therefore at times, people call it an auxiliary verb. But if you look at the purpose, the purpose is completely separate, this talks about tense, and this is the verb plus aspect, this is tense, and again this is the verb, this is tense, and again this is a verb plus 'ing'.

So, in each one of these forms, you see forms of 'be' coming along with verb as well, and this is the reason why at times people call it an auxiliary verb, not a big debate on that but what I would recommend you to take them as markers of tense and how they carry agreement if you put this much together and you look at the uses of these things in your practice it will become clearer which will add to your accuracy and therefore to your fluency for making your language impactful and impressive. Thank you.