

LIN241, Winter 2021

Lecture 11 Summary

1. Basics of Tense and Aspect in English

(1) Finite clauses in English have both tense and aspect features. We distinguish three tenses:

- present tense
- past tense
- future tense

And

- progressive aspect,
- unmarked aspect (interpreted as perfective, and sometimes as habitual or iterative)

(2) The following examples illustrate the different tenses in the progressive aspect:

a. **It is raining.** *Present progressive*

b. **It was raining.** *Past progressive*

c. **It will be raining.** *Future progressive*

(3) The following examples illustrate the different aspectual forms in the past tense:

a. **It rained.** *Past unmarked aspect*

b. **It was raining.** *Past progressive*

(4) In order to express tense and aspect in English, we use the following sequence of auxiliaries and verbs (in the active voice):

future auxiliary WILL > progressive auxiliary BE > Verb

(5) Present and past tense are marked by using present or past inflection on the highest auxiliary or verb in this sequence:

a. **Chris was/is smoking.** *Past/present progressive*

b. **Chris arrived.** *Simple past.*

c. **Chris knows Jesse.** *Simple present.*

(6) In addition, auxiliaries constrain the form of the auxiliary/verb that follows them in the sequence.

In particular, the progressive aspect requires that the next auxiliary/verb bear the *-ing* suffix:

Chris is eating. *Suffixation of eat with -ing: eating*

- (7) Here is a partial inventory of tense/aspect combinations:

It is raining.	Present progressive
It was raining.	Past progressive
It rained.	Simple past
It will rain.	Simple future
It will be raining.	Future progressive

2. Tense and Topic Time

- (8) Finite clauses make comments about what goes on at a time. We call this the topic time. For instance, in the following dialogue, B's answer makes a comment about the situation that was unfolding at the time when B entered the room:

A: What did you see when you entered the room?

B: There was a book on the table.

The time about which a finite clause makes a comment is known as the Topic Time of this clause.

- (9) The function of tense is to locate the Topic Time (TT) of a clause with respect to the Time of Utterance (TU), which is the time at which the sentence is uttered.
- (10) In English, there are three tenses that we can use:

Past tense:	$TT < TU$	(TT is before TU)
Present tense:	$TT = TU$	(TT is at TU)
Future tense:	$TT > TU$	(TT is after TU)

3. Grammatical aspect: perfective and progressive

- (11) We said that tense locates TT with respect to TU. However, intuitively, finite clauses describe situations like events or states, and locate them in time.

To illustrate, the following sentences describe an event of Chris writing a letter. Both examples convey that this event is located in the past:

- a. **Chris wrote a letter.** (perfective interpretation of unmarked aspect)
b. **Chris was writing a letter.** (progressive aspect)

The difference between these sentences has to do with aspect.

Example (a) conveys that the event of writing a letter is included in TT, which is itself located before TU by tense. Consequently, the sentence entails that the whole event of writing a letter took place in the past.

By contrast, example (b) conveys that the event of writing a letter was going on at TT, but was not completely included in TT. That is to say, the sentence conveys that TT is included in the time at which the event took place. Consequently, the sentence does not entail that the whole event of writing a letter took place in the past: maybe it did, but maybe the event was interrupted before it

was completed, or maybe the event is still taking place.

- (12) We can capture these intuitions by saying that grammatical aspect (perfective or progressive) locates the Time of the Situation (TSit) described by the predicate with respect to TT.

Perfective conveys that TSit is included in TT, while progressive conveys that TT is included in TSit.

Schematically:

- a. **Chris wrote a letter:** $TSit \subseteq TT \ \& \ TT < TU$
b. **Chris was writing a letter:** $TT \subseteq TSit \ \& \ TT < TU$

- (13) Contribution of the progressive aspect and of the perfective interpretation of unmarked aspect:

Perfective: $TSit \subseteq TT$
Progressive: $TT \subseteq TSit$

2. Embedded tense in English

- (14) Tense can occur in embedded clauses. In the following example, the clause **that she will leave** is used as a complement of the verb **said**. We say that the clause **that she will leave** is embedded under **said**. **Said** is the matrix verb of the sentence (i.e., the verb of the main clause).

Jess said that she will leave.

- (15) The interpretation of tense is more complex in embedded clauses than in simple sentences. We will first illustrate this with past tense clauses embedded a future verb:

- a. **Jess will say that Alex left.**

This sentence means that at some time in the future, Jess will say “Alex left.” Crucially, the past tense here is interpreted not with respect to the time of utterance of the sentence **Jess will say that Alex left**, but rather with respect to the time at which the event of saying will take place.

Consequently, the sentence is true in the following scenario:



We can account for this interpretation if we assume that the embedded past tense in (15a) conveys that the embedded TT precedes the TSit of the matrix verb.

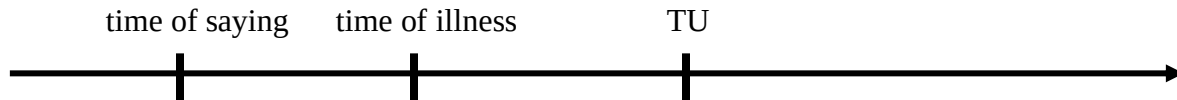
In other words, in the complement of certain verbs like **say**, tenses locate TT with respect to the matrix TSit rather than with respect to TU.

(16) Things get more complex with past tenses embedded under a past matrix verb:

a. **Jess said that Alex was ill.**

If the embedded past tense was interpreted with respect to TU, we would expect a so-called *forward-shifted* interpretation to be available.

A forward-shifted interpretation of (16a) would be true in a scenario where the time of Alex's illness follows the time of Jess's saying:



(16a) cannot be interpreted in this way.

(16a) can receive a back-shifted interpretation, according to which the illness precedes the time of saying:



Both the availability of the back-shifted interpretation and the unavailability of the forward-shifted interpretation are accounted for by the hypothesis that the embedded past tense locates TT in the past of the matrix TSit, rather than in the past of TU.

However, there is yet another interpretation of (16a) that is not explained by this hypothesis, namely the *simultaneous* interpretation of the embedded tense. According to this interpretation, the time of the illness is the same as the time of the saying. That is to say, what Jess said is “Alex is ill”, and we are using (16a) to report this:



In the simultaneous interpretation, the embedded past tense is interpreted as a present relative to the matrix TSit. That is to say, the embedded TT is interpreted as simultaneous to the matrix TSit.

The simultaneous interpretation is due to a morphological phenomenon known as “sequence of tense.” The study of sequence of tense goes beyond the contents of this course. What you should remember is that the simultaneous interpretation of past-under-past in English is due to a special phenomenon, that is distinct from the more general principles that normally govern the interpretation of tense in the language.