

# The semantics of events

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January 29, 2020

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

## Tense

### Lexical Aspect

### Grammatical aspect

### Tense is not aspect

### Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

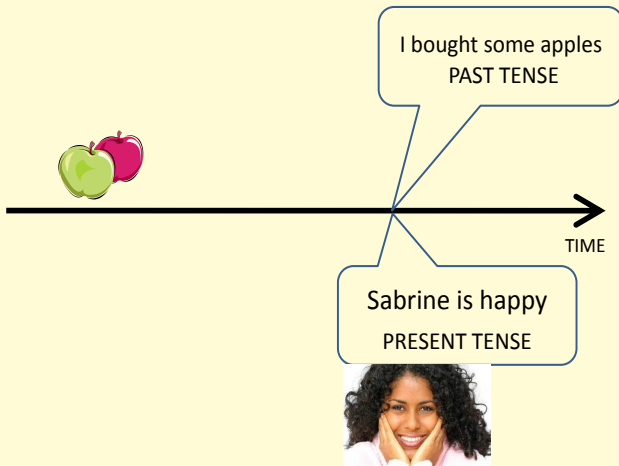
## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# What is tense?

“Tense” refers to when an action took place **in relation to the time of speaking**, e.g.



## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

- (a) States versus non-states
- (b) Activities versus events
- (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# A future tense?

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2. I think England { *are* <sup>*will*</sup> *going to* } win the match on Tuesday.
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4. The train { *is* *going to leave*  
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### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

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## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

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### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

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### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

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What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography



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## Future tense?

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### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

# A future tense?

## Future tense?

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**ARRANGEMENT**

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

# Inherent temporal properties of events

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

**Inherent temporal  
properties of events**

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

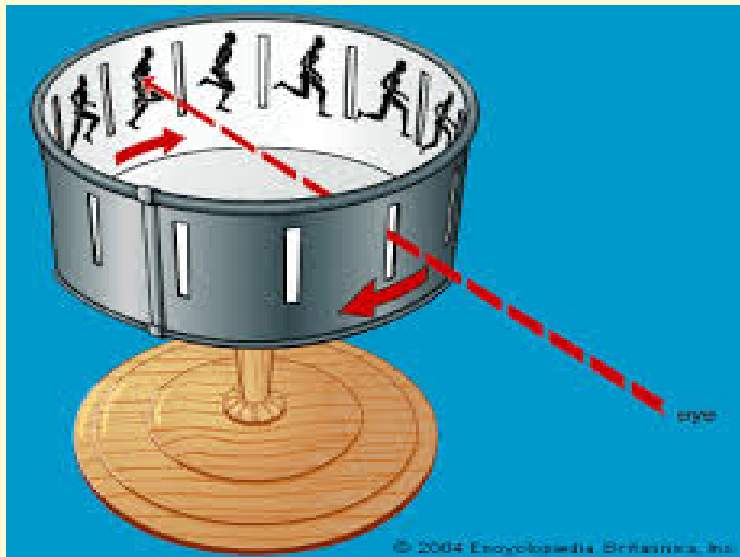
Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

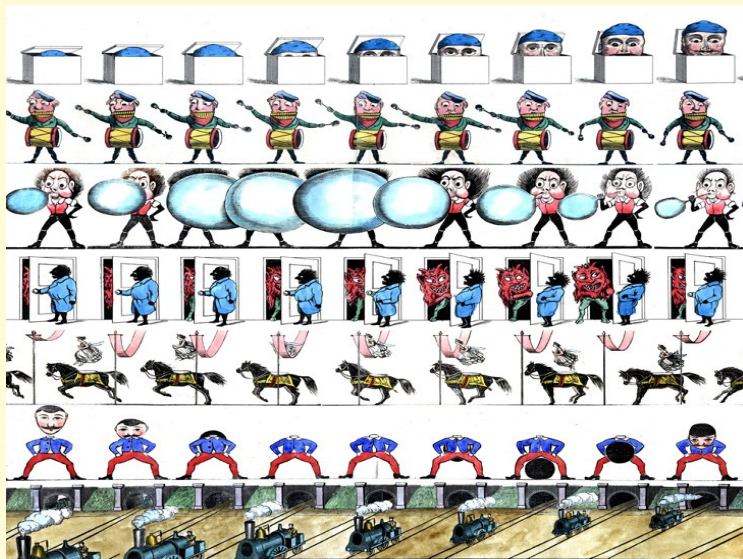
## Homework

## Bibliography



# Inherent temporal properties of events

## Youtube Clip



The semantics of events

Nick Riches

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

- (a) States versus non-states
- (b) Activities versus events
- (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

# Inherent temporal properties of events

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

**Inherent temporal  
properties of events**

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

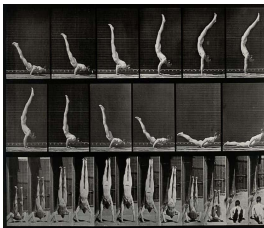
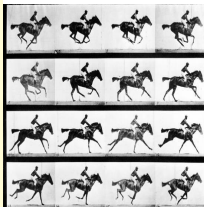
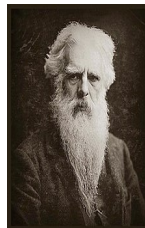
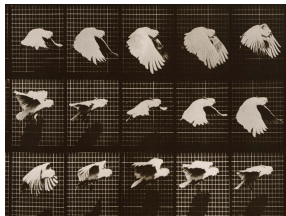
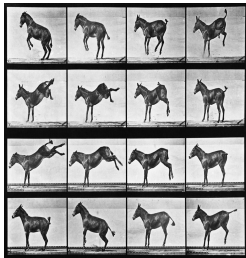
Bibliography

Which of the following verbs would make a good zoetrope?

1. swim
2. crash
3. laugh
4. dive
5. pop
6. dance
7. exist

# Inherent temporal properties of events

Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



The semantics of events

Nick Riches

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

**Inherent temporal properties of events**

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# Inherent temporal properties of events

The semantics of  
events

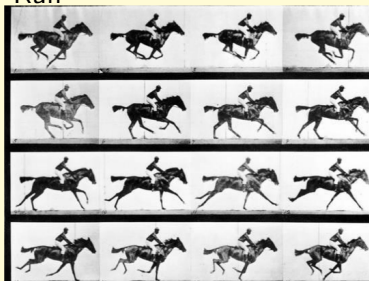
Nick Riches

‘Internal structure’

‘Exist’



‘Run’



Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

**Inherent temporal  
properties of events**

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography



# (a) States versus non-states

Existing verbs, *be, live, exist,*

Experiencer-theme verbs, e.g. *like, love, hate*

Mental State verbs, e.g. *believe, know, hope.*

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# (a) States versus non-states

Tests. . .

1. States are difficult to define
2. State verbs sound odd in the progressive (-ing form), e.g. ??*she is existing*, ??*she is liking the food*, ??*I am believing in fairies*. This is because the progressive is used with verbs with INTERNAL STRUCTURE.
3. State verbs sound odd as responses to the question *what happened?*, e.g. Q. *What happened?* ???A. *She liked the food*

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

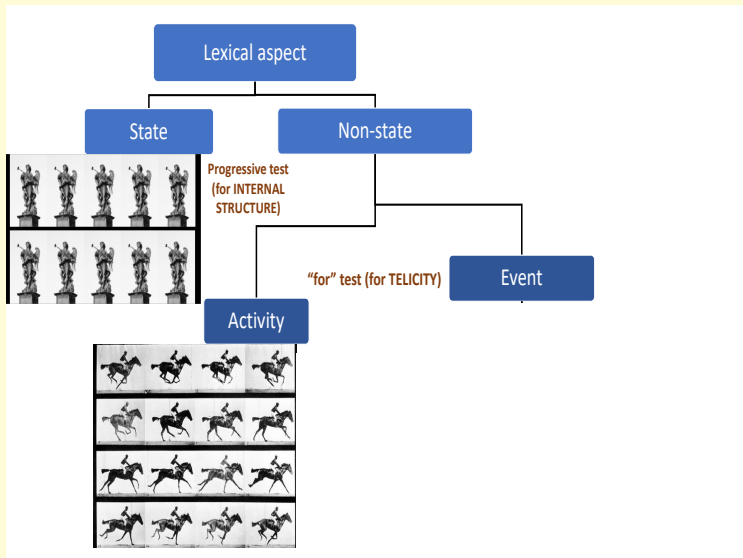
Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

## (b) Activities versus events



### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

**(b) Activities versus events**

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (b) Activities versus events

Activities do not have a natural end point (they are “atelic”).

Events have a natural end point (they are “telic”).

Examples of activities are *run, walk, wash, work*

Examples of events are *break, collapse, crash, fall*

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

**(b) Activities versus events**

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (b) Activities versus events

Tests. . .

Activities sound good when used with time expressions which imply an incomplete activity e.g. *I've been walking for an hour (and I may continue to walk for another hour).*

Events sound odd when used with such time expressions, e.g.  
\* *It collapsed for an hour.*

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

**(b) Activities versus events**

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

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Events sound good with time expressions which imply a complete activity, e.g. *The bridge collapsed in five seconds.*

Activities do not sound good with such time expressions, e.g.  
\* *He walked in five minutes*

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

**(b) Activities versus events**

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

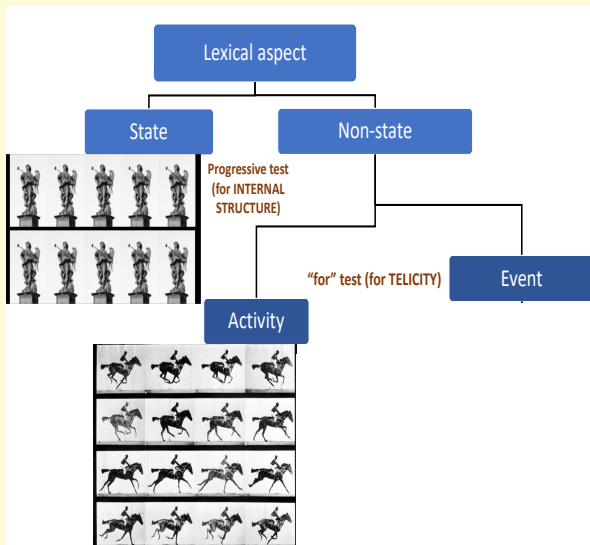
### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (b) Activities versus events

Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



The semantics of events

Nick Riches

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

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(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

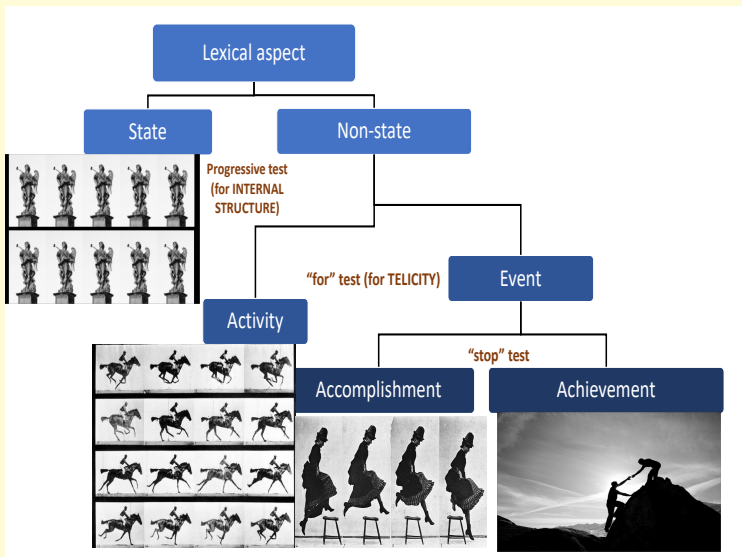
Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

# (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



The semantics of events

Nick Riches

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography



## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Achievements are instantaneous (they do not exist within an identifiable time period)

The technical expression is they are 'non-durative'

- ▶ She reached the top.
- ▶ The glass smashed

Therefore we cannot use them in the progressive, e.g.

- ▶ \*She is reaching the top
- ▶ \*She is smashing the glass

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

**(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements**

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

We cannot stop the event in the middle, e.g.

- ▶ \* She stopped reaching the top of the mountain
- ▶ \* The vase stopped smashing

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

**(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements**

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Accomplishments are durative.

Therefore, we can use them in the progressive;

- ▶ She is jumping
- ▶ They are building

And we can stop the action in the middle;

- ▶ She jumped over the chairs  $\Rightarrow$  She stopped jumping over the chairs
- ▶ He is building a house  $\Rightarrow$  He stopped building the house.

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

**(c) Accomplishments versus achievements**

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

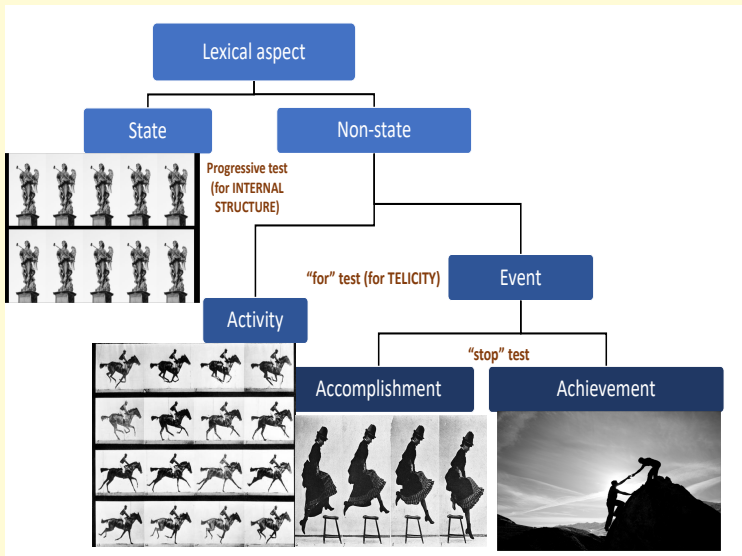
### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

# (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



The semantics of events

Nick Riches

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

# Lexical Aspect Table

Example verbs	<b>Durativity:</b> can the event last for a period of time?	<b>Dynamism:</b> does the event have 'internal structure'	<b>Telicity:</b> is there a clear end point?	<b>Label</b>
<b>exist</b> , want, believe	✓	✗	✗	State
<b>run</b> , dance, sing, work	✓	✓	✗	Activity
<b>jump</b> , pour, bake, write	✓	✓	✓	Accomplishment
<b>reach</b> , flash, drop, realise	✗	✗	✓	Achievement

# Lexical Aspect Table

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

Now what is the lexical aspect of the following verbs?

1. wash
2. cheat
3. flatten
4. paint
5. open
6. possess
7. deliver

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

### Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# Summary of tests

1. Definition test: States are relatively hard to define.
2. What happened test: Doesn't sound good with States
3. Present progressive (-ing form): States and Achievements do not sound good in the progressive
4. "for" test: Activities sound good with a "for" expression, but not events.
5. "in" test: Events sound good with "in" but not activities
6. "Stop" test: Achievements do not sound good with "stop", e.g. *she stopped reaching the top of the mountain*

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# Multiple lexical aspects

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese
2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed “like”)
3. I **have** a car
4. She’s **having** a good time
5. I **love** that dress
6. I’m **loving** this book
7. Be quiet. I’m **thinking**
8. I **think** you’re really rude

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

**Multiple lexical aspects**

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography



# Multiple lexical aspects

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed “like”) (ACHIEVEMENT)
3. I **have** a car
4. She’s **having** a good time
5. I **love** that dress
6. I’m **loving** this book
7. Be quiet. I’m **thinking**
8. I **think** you’re really rude

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

**Multiple lexical aspects**

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed “like”) (ACHIEVEMENT)
3. I **have** a car (STATE)
4. She’s **having** a good time (ACTIVITY)
5. I **love** that dress
6. I’m **loving** this book
7. Be quiet. I’m **thinking**
8. I **think** you’re really rude

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed “like”) (ACHIEVEMENT)
3. I **have** a car (STATE)
4. She’s **having** a good time (ACTIVITY)
5. I **love** that dress (STATE)
6. I’m **loving** this book (ACTIVITY???)
7. Be quiet. I’m **thinking**
8. I **think** you’re really rude

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
2. She **liked** my post on facebook (i.e. pressed “like”) (ACHIEVEMENT)
3. I **have** a car (STATE)
4. She’s **having** a good time (ACTIVITY)
5. I **love** that dress (STATE)
6. I’m **loving** this book (ACTIVITY???)
7. Be quiet. I’m **thinking** (ACTIVITY)
8. I **think** you’re really rude (STATE)

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# Multiple lexical aspects

1. Each verb has two meanings (or 'senses')
2. Each verb has a primary meaning and secondary meaning

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

**Multiple lexical aspects**

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# Multiple lexical aspects

Some verbs can 'shift' lexical aspect depending on sentence context;

- (1) She's **dancing** (ACTIVITY)
- (2) She **danced** the tango (ACHIEVEMENT)
- (3) The light **is flashing** (ACTIVITY, NB there is an 'iterative' interpretation)
- (4) The light **flashed** (ACHIEVEMENT)

However, it is often possible to identify a 'core', most frequently used lexical aspect.

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

**Grammatical  
aspect**

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

# What is grammatical aspect?

Grammatical aspect refers to grammatical devices to signal one's perspective on an event.



David Brent is **dancing**.

**Progressive aspect** shows we are still inside the event  
(it is not finished)



King Kong has **fallen**  
**Perfective aspect** shows we are  
outside the event  
(it is finished)

The semantics of  
events

Nick Riches

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography



Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

1. By this time next week, I **will have** **eaten** all of the  
tins of baked beans in my cupboard
2. She **was** **sleeping** when the earthquake happened

'tense'

Aspect

tense

Aspect

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

**Tense & Aspect  
combinations**

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Lexical and grammatical aspect are closely ‘aligned’

- ▶ Activity verbs + progressive grammatical aspect  
*The horse is running*
- ▶ Accomplishment/achievement verbs + perfective grammatical aspect  
*He has just jumped off the roof*  
*She has reached the top of the mountain*

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# (a) Present tense and Activity/Accomplishment/Achievement verbs

1. She sings every day.
2. He works in a call centre
3. He smashes things (he's clumsy or aggressive)

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

**Pres. tense combs.**

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

# (a) Present tense and Activity/Accomplishment/Achievement verbs

1. She sings every day.
2. He works in a call centre
3. He smashes things (he's clumsy or aggressive)

A habitual interpretation

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

## (b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

1. The light is flashing
2. He's flattening boxes

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

**Prog. asp. combs.**

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

1. The light is flashing
2. He's flattening boxes

An iterative interpretation (NB achievement becomes accomplishment)

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

**Prog. asp. combs.**

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography



Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

Children with SLI have difficulties marking tense, e.g.

1. He went there  $\Rightarrow$  Him go there

Morphological or conceptual difficulty?

Young children, when acquiring tense, **conflate tense and lexical aspect**.

They are more likely to mark past tense on Achievement and Accomplishment verbs, because these tend to describe COMPLETED events.

e.g. Van Horne et al. 2017; Johnson & Morris, 2007.

Can we manipulate lexical aspect when teaching tense endings?

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

## Johnson &amp; Morris design

**Table 3** Imitation sentence-pair stimuli categorized by lexical aspect and phonological composition

Phonological composition	Accomplishments	Activities
Non-obstruent coda	She chewed up a green grape. He rolled a ball into the box. She crawled into the box.	She chewed a piece of gum. He rolled a ball on the box. She crawled around in circles.
Obstruent coda	She skipped out the door. He walked out the door. He jumped into a box.	She skipped on the rug. She walked in circles. She jumped up and down.

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense &amp; Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

Van Horne et al. 2017 - found that children with DLD learnt to produce the past tense better when both aspectual and phonological properties of a verb rendered it more **difficult!!**

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

What is unusual about the following sentence?

“Here be dragons”

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography

Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

Grammatical  
aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

Tense is not aspect

Tense & Aspect  
combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

Tense/aspect and  
SLT practice

Homework

Bibliography



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Morris, S. R. (2007). Clinical implications of the effects of lexical aspect and phonology on children's production of the regular past tense. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 23(3), 287–306.)

## Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

## Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

## Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

## Tense is not aspect

## Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

## Bibliography

## Studies on aspect in language-impaired children

Fletcher, P., Leonard, L. B., Stokes, S. F., & Wong, A. M. Y. (2005). The expression of aspect in Cantonese-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment. *Journal of Speech Language and Hearing Research*, 48(3)

Leonard, L. B., Deevy, P., Kurtz, R., Krantz Chorev, L., Owen, A., Polite, E., Finneran, D. (2007). Lexical aspect and the use of verb morphology by children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 50(3), 759.)

### Tense

What is tense?

A future tense?

### Lexical Aspect

Inherent temporal  
properties of events

(a) States versus non-states

(b) Activities versus events

(c) Accomplishments versus  
achievements

Lexical Aspect Table

Summary of tests

Multiple lexical aspects

### Grammatical aspect

What is grammatical  
aspect?

### Tense is not aspect

### Tense & Aspect combinations

Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography