
The Semantics of Events

1.1 Manipulating propositions

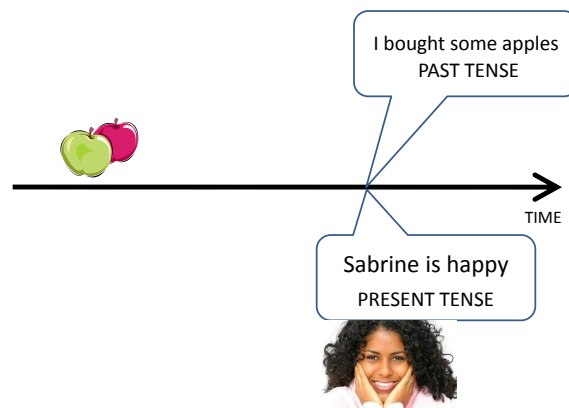
We can see that there are a number of different ways to manipulate the proposition catch(Jack, fish);

- (1) Jack **caught** the fish
- (2) Jack **is catching** fish (at the moment)
- (3) Jack **might** catch fish
- (4) Catch the fish Jack!

Although the proposition remains the same, the meaning is subtly altered / manipulated. This week and next week we're going to talk about the different ways to manipulate a proposition. We can manipulate **tense**, e.g. (1) and (2), **aspect**, e.g. (2), **modality**, e.g. (3), and mood, e.g. (4). This week we're going to be talking about these phenomena from a semantic perspective, while next week, we will analyse how they work syntactically.

1.2 The semantics of tense

Tense describes when an event took place **in relation to the time of speaking**;



So the past tense sentence *I **bought** some apples* refers to a time before the act of speaking, while the present tense sentence, *Sabine **is** happy* refers to the actual time of speaking (i.e. Sabine is happy as we speak).

Tense is typically (but not always) expressed on the main verb (*bought, is*). Whether English has a future tense is debatable. Firstly, future cannot be marked on the main verb, and can only be marked on an auxiliary or supporting verb;

future marked
on auxiliary verb

- (5) She **will be** at an interview tomorrow morning.

infinitive - does not show time
of event in relation to now

In addition, most future forms don't just refer to the future but have a range of additional meanings;

- (6) I'll help you (*will* future for an **offer**)
(7) Help we're going to crash (*going to* future for an **event we can see is going to happen**)
(8) The train leaves at 5 o'clock (*present simple* used to refer to a timetabled event in the future)
(9) I'm going to go somewhere hot this summer (*going to* for a **plan**, but not necessarily something we've arranged)
(10) I'm flying to Italy next week (*present progressive* for an **arrangement** - I've already bought the tickets)

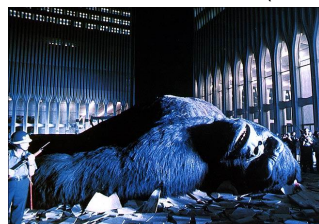
1.3 The semantics of aspect

Grammatical aspect refers to whether we adopt an **internal or external perspective** on an event. There are two grammatical aspects in English; **perfective** which is expressed using the **past participle** (e.g. *broken, eaten*) and **progressive** which is expressed using the **present participle** (e.g. *break-ing, eat-ing*). When we adopt perfective aspect we see the event from an **external** perspective, and the event is **completed**. When we adopt progressive aspect, we adopt an **internal** perspective and the event is **ongoing**. Events with progressive aspect are likely to contain **internal structure**. For example, *dancing* involves a variety of different movements. We can compare this with a verb such as *have* (=POSSESS) which sounds strange in the progressive, because it does not have internal structure, e.g. **I am having the latest iphone*.



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)

1.4 Tense / aspect combinations (sometimes called **compound tenses**)

We often do not mark aspect, e.g.

- (11) I **bought** some apples (**past simple**)
(12) Sabrina **is** happy (**present simple**)

These are called *simple* tenses. However, sometimes we mark both tense and aspect (see examples below). Some people say that such sentences have **compound tense**, but this is a misnomer, as there is only ever one tense (we can't mark a sentence as having both present and past tense).

Present tense: We perceive the event from a timepoint in the present

I **have** **eaten** the chocolates

Perfective aspect: We perceive the event as completed

This compound tense is called the **present perfect**, and describes a completed event from the perspective of the present. Because we choose a present perspective, the event must have some kind of relevance for the present moment. So the present perfect is often used for a completed event with a result in the present. For example, for the above sentence a possible result could be *I am full*, or *there are none left*. For the present perfect sentence *I have broken my arm* the end result would be *now my arm is broken*.

Past tense: We perceive the event from a timepoint in the past

When she got home she realised she **had** **left** the freezer open

Perfective aspect: We perceive the event as completed

This compound tense is the **past perfect** and is used to describe a completed event from a past perspective. Again the completed event has some kind of result. In this case the food was spoilt, or the icecream had melted.

Present tense: We perceive the event from a timepoint in the present

David Brent **is** **dancing**

Progressive aspect: We perceive the event as incomplete/ongoing

Present progressive to describe an ongoing event in the present. Our perspective is in the present, and because we use progressive aspect we are *inside* the event. Therefore the event begins before the time of speaking and continues after the time of speaking.

Past tense: We perceive the event from a timepoint in the past

When we got to the party, everyone **was** **dancing** like crazy

Progressive aspect: We perceive the event as incomplete/ongoing

Past progressive to describe an ongoing event in the past. We view the event from a perspective in the past (when we got to the party). Because we use progressive aspect, we are *inside* the event. The event starts before the timepoint when we perceive the event, and finishes after that timepoint. The past progressive is often used in narratives for "scene setting".

Future: We perceive event from future timepoint

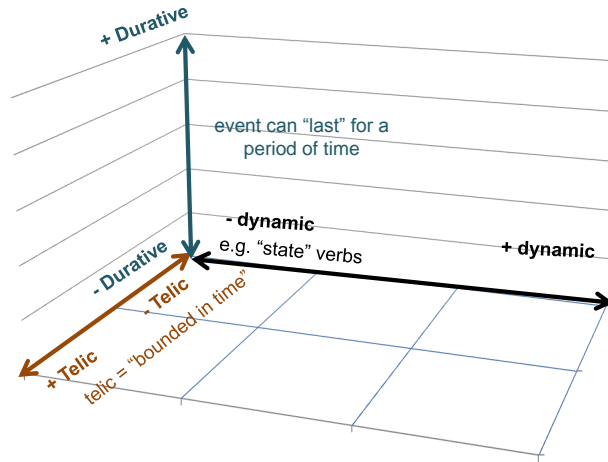
By the time we arrive the play **will have** **finished**

Perfective aspect: We perceive event as finished

Future perfect to describe an event completed by a particular time in the future.

1.5 Lexical aspect

Lexical aspect (sometimes called **aktionsarten** refers to the **inherent** temporal properties of the verb. It consists of three separate dimensions; durativity, telicity, and dynamicity;



The following table exemplifies the different types of lexical aspect;

Table 1.1: Summary of the differences between open and closed word classes

Example verbs	Durativity: can the event last for a period of time?	Dynamism: does the verb describe an action? (otherwise it's a state)	Telicity: when we imagine the event is there a clear temporal boundary?	Label
want, believe, exist	✓	✗	✗	State
Dance, sing, work	✓	✓	✗	Activity
pour, bake, write	✓	✓	✓	Accomplishment
flash, drop, realise	✗	✓	✓	Achievement

Grammatical aspect combines with lexical aspect in complex ways. Progressive aspect sounds okay with activity and accomplishment verbs, e.g. *She is dancing*, *He was baking a cake*, but often sound strange with state and achievement verbs, e.g. *I am believing in God*, *She is dropping the plate*. This may be because *believe* does not have an internal structure, and *drop* is non-durative, so it is hard to take an internal perspective on these events. However, sometimes we can combine progressive aspect with an achievement verb in order to create an *iterative* interpretation where the action happens again and again, e.g. *the light is flashing*, *the fire alarm is beeping*.

As accomplishment and achievement verbs have end states, they are often use with perfective aspect to describe a completed event, e.g. *I have dropped the plates* / *baked a cake*. However, we can use perfective

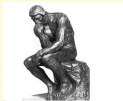
aspects with states and activities **as long as we specify a time period**, e.g. *I have been a teacher for five years, I have played football for five years.*

Some verbs have different senses, each with a different lexical aspect. *Think* can be a state, e.g. *I think that capital punishment is never justified* (*think* = have an opinion), or it can be an activity, e.g. *Be quiet, I'm thinking*). *Consider* behaves in a similar way, e.g. *I consider him my best friend* (opinion), *I'm considering all the options* (mental activity).



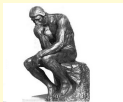
Links to therapy

Young children appear to conflate tense and aspect (Bloom, L., Lifter, K. and Hafitz, J. 1980 The semantics of verbs and the development of verb inflections in child language. *Language* 56, 386-412). They are more likely to mark past tense on achievement and accomplishment verbs. Therefore, if you are teaching a child to mark the past tense you may wish to select accomplishment and achievement verbs. This has been proposed by Johnson & Morris (2007) (Johnson, B. W., & 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)



Food for thought

You'll note that Table 1.5 there is another possibility; - durative, - dynamic, + telic. Such verbs are sometimes referred to as **semelfactives**. Examples of semelfactive verbs are *blink*, *sneeze* and *knock*.



Food for thought

Sometimes we find state verbs used in the progressive, e.g.

I'm loving it (MacDonald's advert)

One possible explanation is that the meaning of *love* in *I'm loving it*, and the meaning of *love* in *John loves Mary* are different (they are different **senses** of the verb). The *love* in *I'm loving it* describes an action (imagine someone eating a hamburger in MacDonald's), while the *love* in *John loves Mary* describes a state (a state of bliss!)

1.6 Mood

The term **mood** describes the speaker's "attitude" to the proposition.

(13) You might catch a fish

The speaker thinks that the proposition is **possible**.

(14) You should wrap up warm

The speaker thinks that the proposition is **desirable**.

(15) If you see John, say "hi"

The speaker thinks that the first proposition is **possible**, and the second proposition is **desirable**.

(16) If I were prime minister, I would spend more on transport

The speaker thinks that both propositions are **hypothetical**.

A large variety of moods have been identified across the world's languages. We tend to say that "language X has mood Y" if that mood is **syntactically expressed** in that language.

Realis mood

If a sentence has a realis mood then it has happened, or is happening. Realis verbs are sometimes called **indicatives**

(17) INDICATIVE: John likes fish

Irrealis mood

Irrealis moods denote events which have never or will never happen, i.e. **hypothetical** events. In English we often use **tense** to show irrealis mood;

(18) If I **were** the Prime Minister, I **would** increase funding for universities

(19) If I **hadn't drunk** so much, I **wouldn't** be feeling so bad right now

(20) I wish I **could** fly

So we use past simple to refer to a hypothetical situation in the present ((18), and (20)), and past perfect for a hypothetical situation in the past ((19)). We can also use *would* to talk about hypothetical events ((18) and (19)). Note that there is a special form of the verb *to be* to express irrealis mood; *were* is used instead of *was*, although this form is disappearing as many people now use *was*.

If you've learnt a romance language you'll know that these have a special form of the verb called the **subjunctive** which is used to express an irrealis mood.

Other moods

There are many other moods which do not fit neatly under the labels *realis* or *irrealis*;

(21) **Imperative**: ~~You~~ **Eat** your fish!

Mood expressed using the **infinitive** (*eat*), and the omission of the subject (*you*).

(22) **Interrogative**: Did he eat his fish?

Mood expressed in a variety of complex ways including the insertion of auxiliary *did*.

(23) **Exclamative**: Boy does he like fish!

Mood expressed using intonation, or in this case the addition of auxiliary *does*.

1.7 Modality

Modality is a type of mood which refers to whether an event is **desirable** or **possible**. We use **deontic** modality, to express **desirability**, and **epistemic** modality, to express **possibility**. Here are some examples;

(24) You **must** wear a life jacket: **very desirable event (deontic modality)**

(25) You **mustn't** smoke in petrol stations: **very undesirable event (deontic modality)**

(26) You **should** wash your hands before eating: **weakly desirable event (deontic modality)**

(27) You **shouldn't** speak with your mouth full: **weakly undesirable event (deontic modality)**

- (28) You **must** be joking: **very probable event (epistemic modality)**
- (29) The bus **should** be here at 4.00: **weakly probable event (epistemic modality)**
- (30) The butler **can't** have committed the murder. He has a perfect alibi!: **strongly improbable event (epistemic modality)**

Note that when *can*, and *can't* are used give permission, this is also an example of **deontic** modality, as

- (31) You can bring a calculator into the exam

Actually means *It's not the case that you mustn't bring a calculator into the exam*, so it is the equivalent of a *negated* sentence expressing deontic modality.

Note that the verbs used to expressed modality (called **modal verbs** or **modal auxiliary verbs** are all pluri-functional, and can be used to express both deontic and epistemic modality;

Table 1.2: Function of modal verbs

Deontic use	Epistemic use	Non-modal use
You must be quiet	That must be Amy at the door!	
You should give up smoking	The train should be here soon	
You ought to buy her a present	We ought to arrive in the next half hour	
You can bring a calculator into the exam	The journey can take half an hour	I can speak French (ABILITY)
We could use a calculator in the exam	Q: Where's Hillary A: She could be on her tea break	I could speak French when I was younger (ABILITY)
You might have been a bit quieter last night!	The train might arrive soon	
You will be quiet	That'll be Amy at the door	Tomorrow it will probably rain



Useful Terms

Grammatical aspect, perfective, progressive, past participle, present participle, past simple, present simple, compound tenses, present perfect, past perfect, present progressive, past progressive, lexical aspect / aktionsarten, state / activity / accomplishment / achievement verbs, mood, realis mood (expressed using the indicative), unrealis mood, imperative, interrogative, exclamative, modality, deontic modality, epistemic modality, modal (auxiliary) verbs



Homework

1. What is the lexical aspect of the following verbs?

- a) long for

This is a STATE

- b) glimpse

This is an ACHIEVEMENT. It lasts for a short period of time (e.g. we can't say *I am glimpsing it*), and there is no clear temporal boundary. It is not particularly dynamic, but ACHIEVEMENT is the only category it can fit under.

c) phone

This is an ACTIVITY. It is durative, dynamic, and atelic (we don't imagine an endpoint)

d) turn over

This is an ACCOMPLISHMENT. It is durative, dynamic, and telic. N.B. the verb *turn* (without over) would be more of an ACTIVITY as with a turning action there is no obvious end to the activity (imagine something turning round, and round and round....)

2. What is the mood of the following sentences?

a) You're such a good friend!

Exclamative mood

b) Where is my pencil?

Interrogative mood

c) Be quiet!

Imperative mood

d) If only this class would end sooner.

Irrealis mood. We are describing an imaginary situation, as the class will run until its scheduled finish

3. Label the modal verbs in the following sentences. Are they deontic or epistemic?

a) Each question should take about half an hour to answer

Each question **should** take about half an hour to answer = EPISTEMIC

b) You must be joking!

You **must** be joking! = EPISTEMIC

- c) You ought to have bought her a present

You **ought** to have bought her a present = DEONTIC

- d) The car should have started. It had just been serviced.

The car **should** have started. It had just been serviced. = EPISTEMIC

- e) It may rain tomorrow

It **may** rain tomorrow = EPISTEMIC

- f) I have to be there at nine.

I **have to** be there at nine = DEONTIC (NB *have to* is a semi-modal - see next week's lecture)