The semantics of events

Nick Riches

Newcastle University

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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

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense/aspect and SLT practice

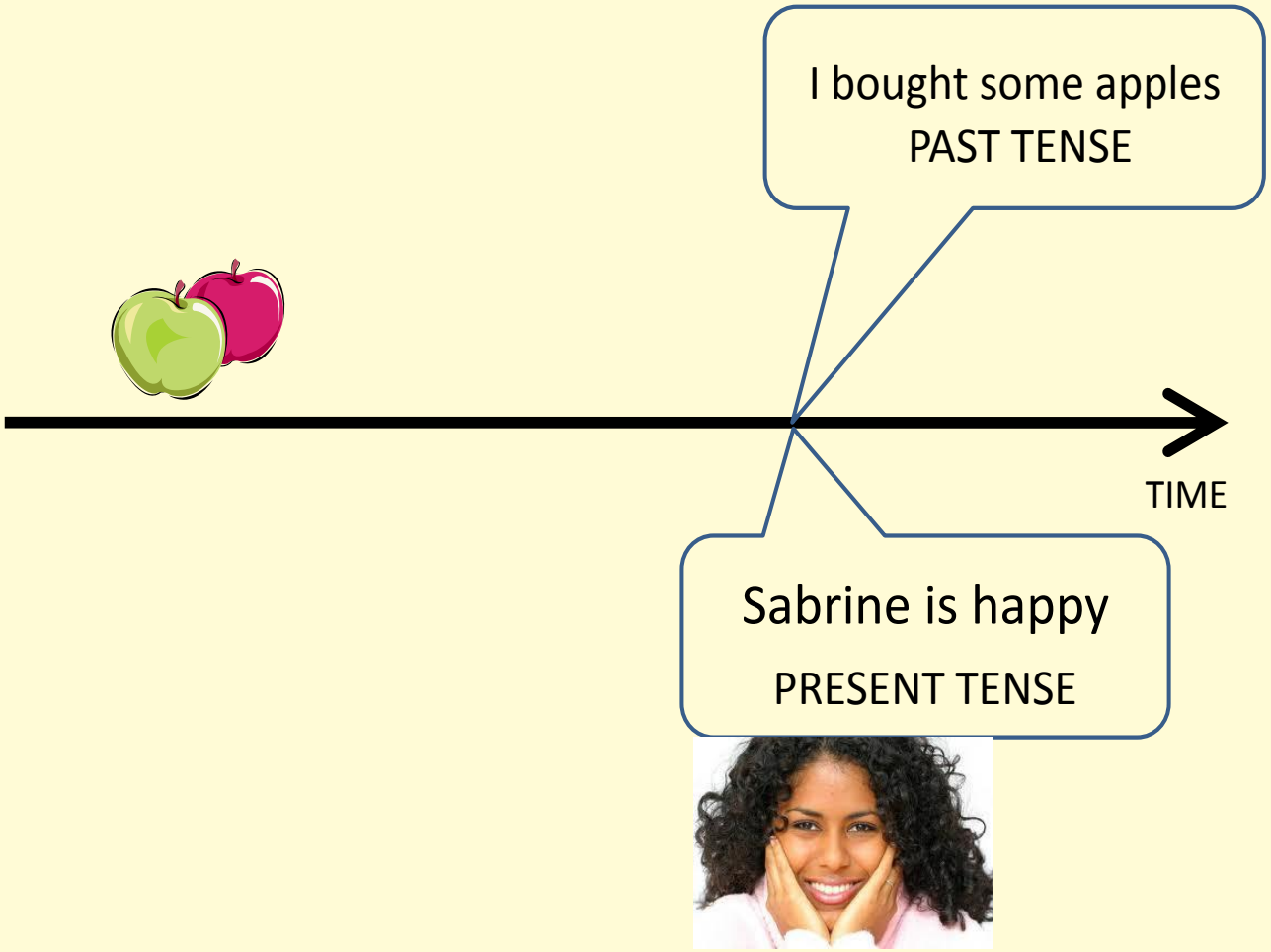
Homework

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?

Future tense?

1. I { *will* / *am going to* } help you to carry that shopping.
2. I think England { *will* / *are going to* } win the match on Tuesday.
3. England are winning 3-nil with only five minutes of extra time. They { *will* / *are going to* } win.
4. The train { *is going to leave* / *is leaving* / *leaves* } at 6.15.
5. Next year, { *'m going to go* / *'m going* / *will go* } on holiday somewhere hot.
6. Tonight I { *'m going to have* / *'m having* / *will have* } dinner with some friends.

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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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

A future tense?

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

Tense

Lexical Aspect

Grammatical aspect

Tense is not aspect

Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

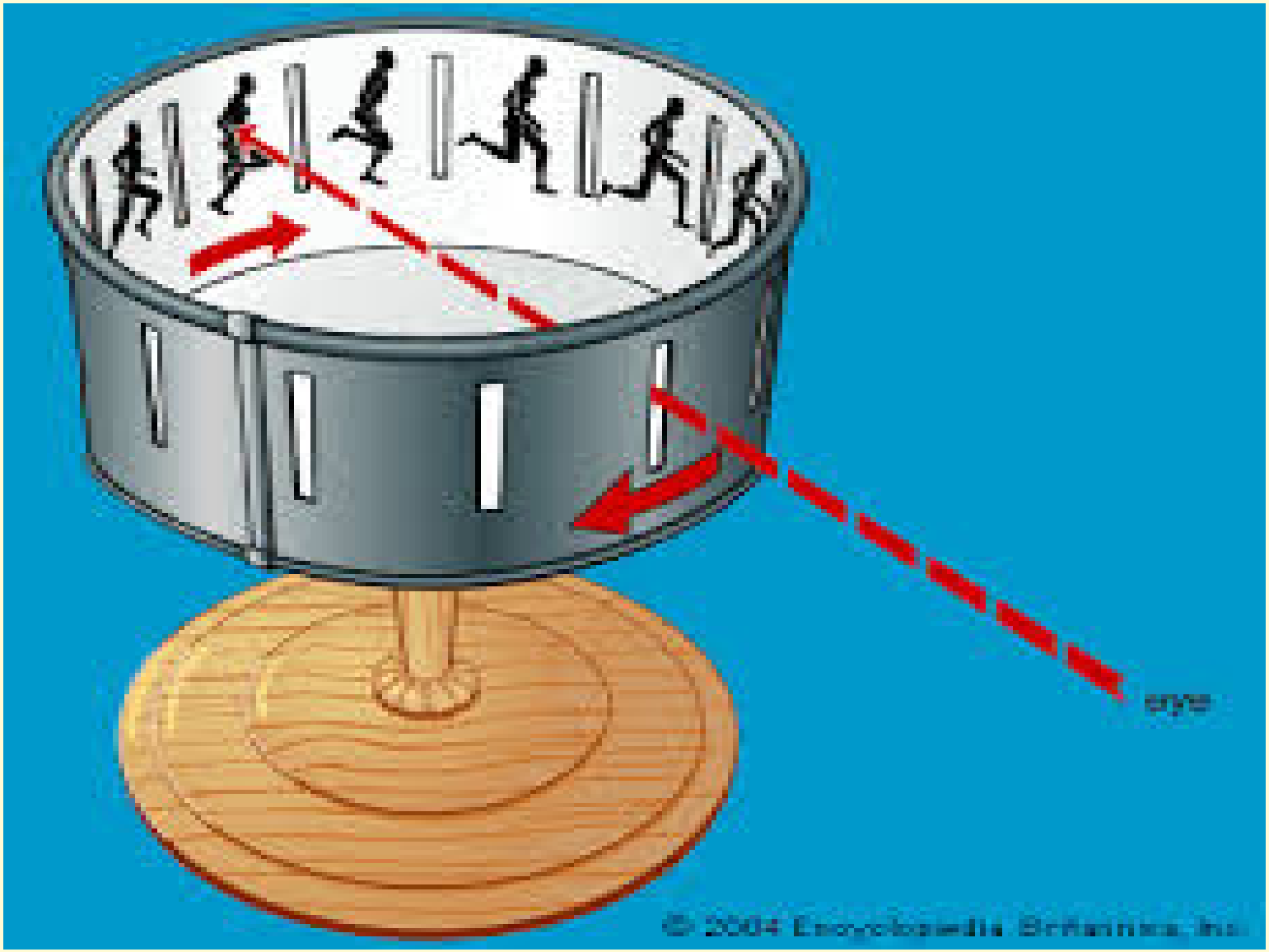
Tense/aspect and SLT practice

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

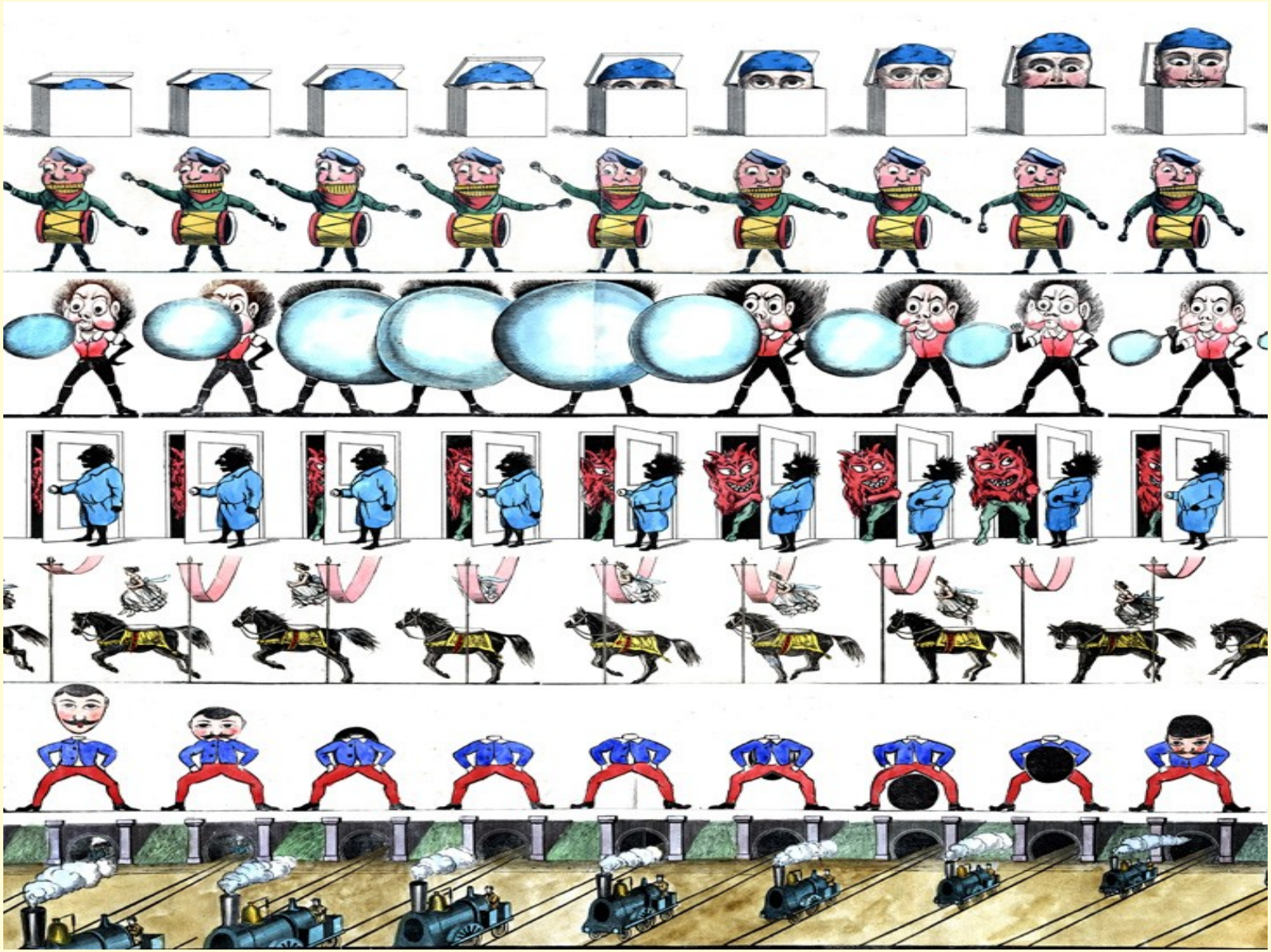
Inherent temporal properties of events



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



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

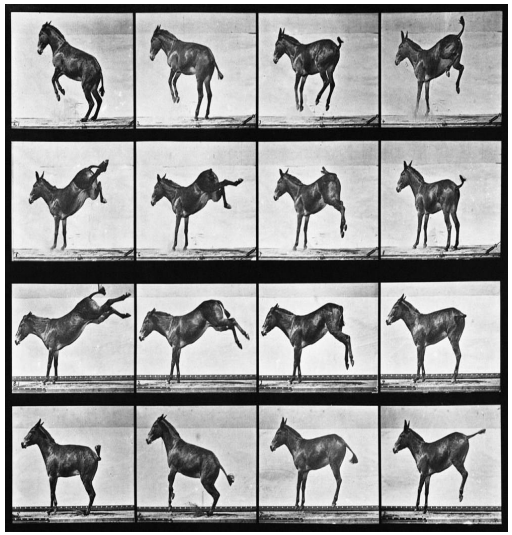
Which of the following verbs would make a good zoetrope?

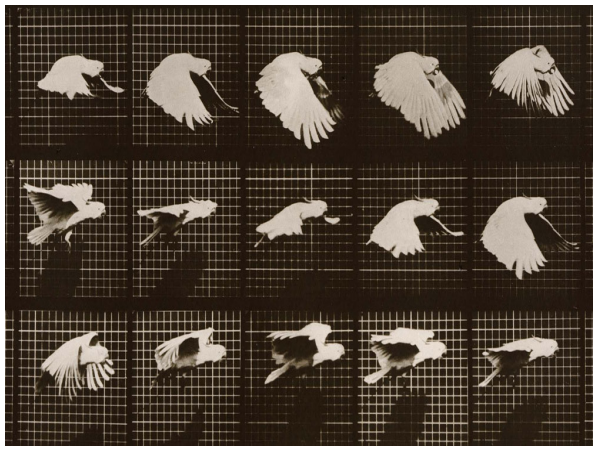
1. swim
2. crash
3. laugh
4. dive
5. pop
6. dance
7. exist

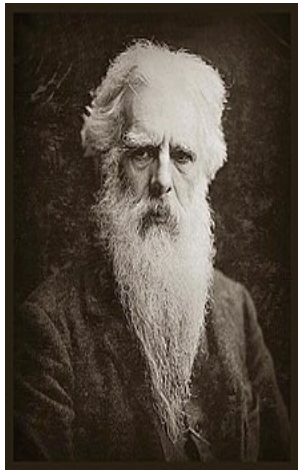
Tense
What is tense?
A future tense?
Lexical Aspect
Inherent temporal properties of events
(a) States versus non-states
(b) Activities versus events
(c) Accomplishments versus achievements
Lexical Aspect Table
Summary of tests
Multiple lexical aspects
Grammatical aspect
What is grammatical aspect?
Tense is not aspect
Tense & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

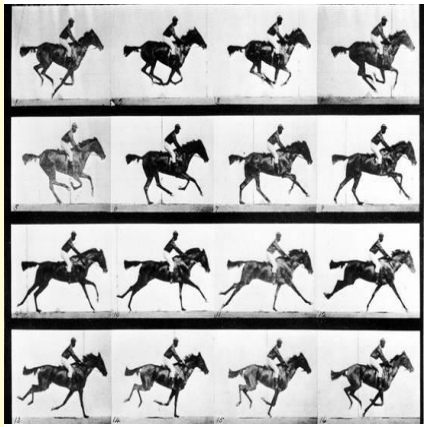
Inherent temporal properties of events

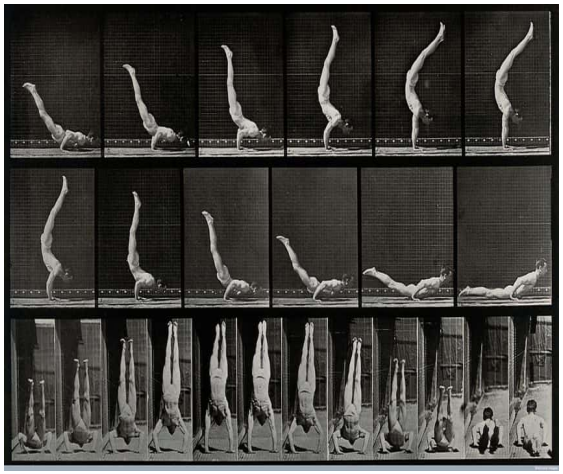
Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)











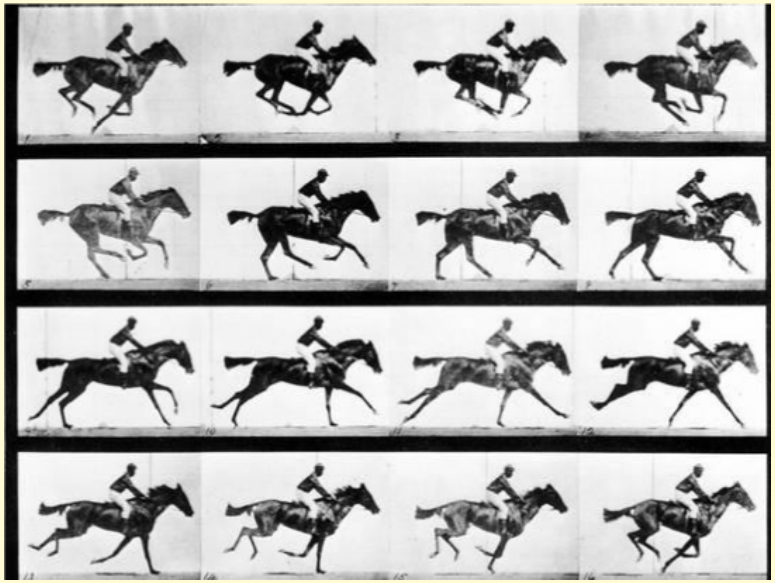
Tense
What is tense?
A future tense?
Lexical Aspect
Inherent temporal properties of events
(a) States versus non-states
(b) Activities versus events
(c) Accomplishments versus achievements
Lexical Aspect Table
Summary of tests
Multiple lexical aspects
Grammatical aspect
What is grammatical aspect?
Tense is not aspect
Tense & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

Inherent temporal properties of events

‘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 reponses 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

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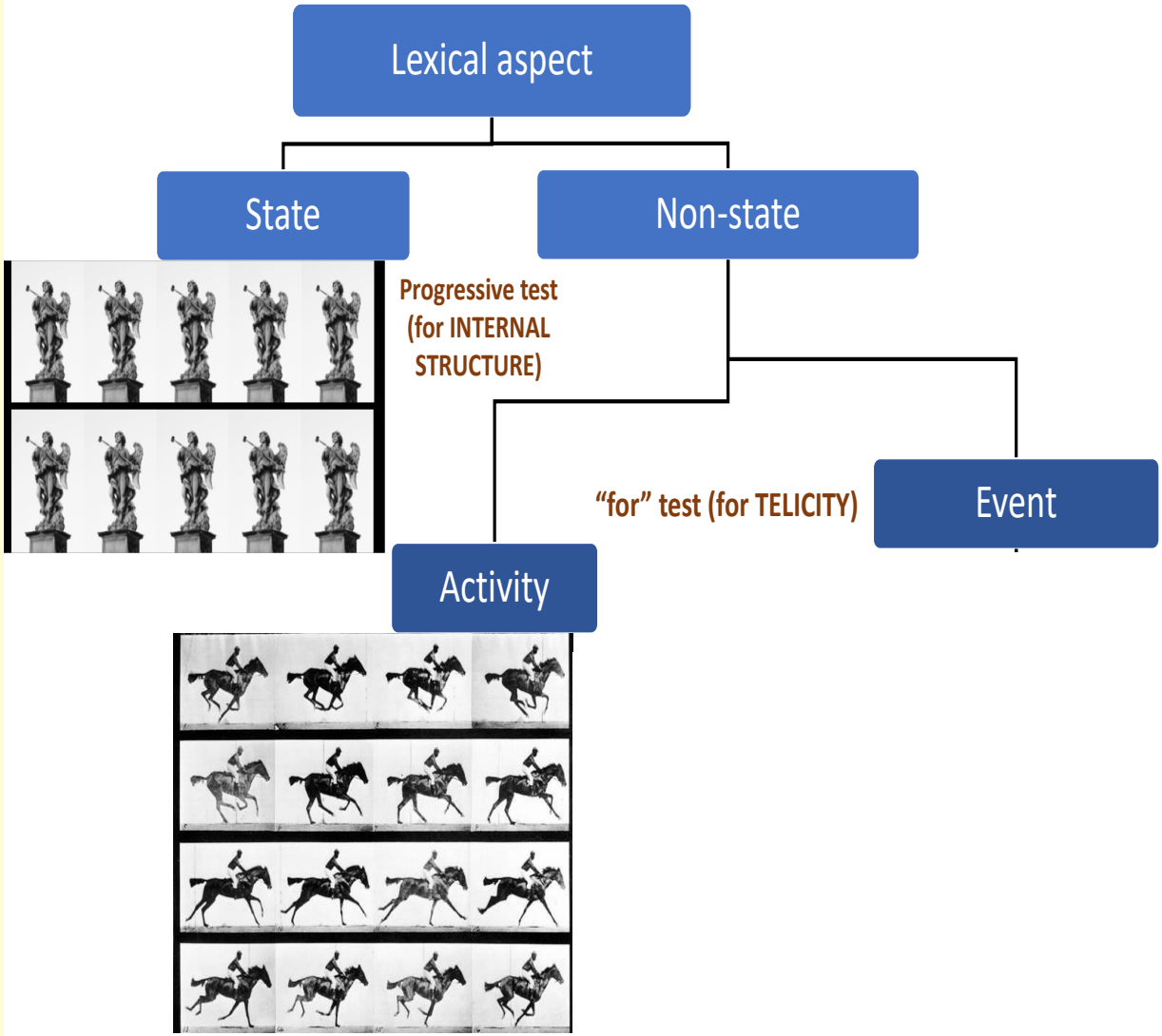

Tense
What is tense?
A future tense?
Lexical Aspect
Inherent temporal properties of events
(a) States versus non-states
(b) Activities versus events
(c) Accomplishments versus achievements
Lexical Aspect Table
Summary of tests
Multiple lexical aspects
Grammatical aspect
What is grammatical aspect?
Tense is not aspect
Tense & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

(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
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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

(b) Activities versus events

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

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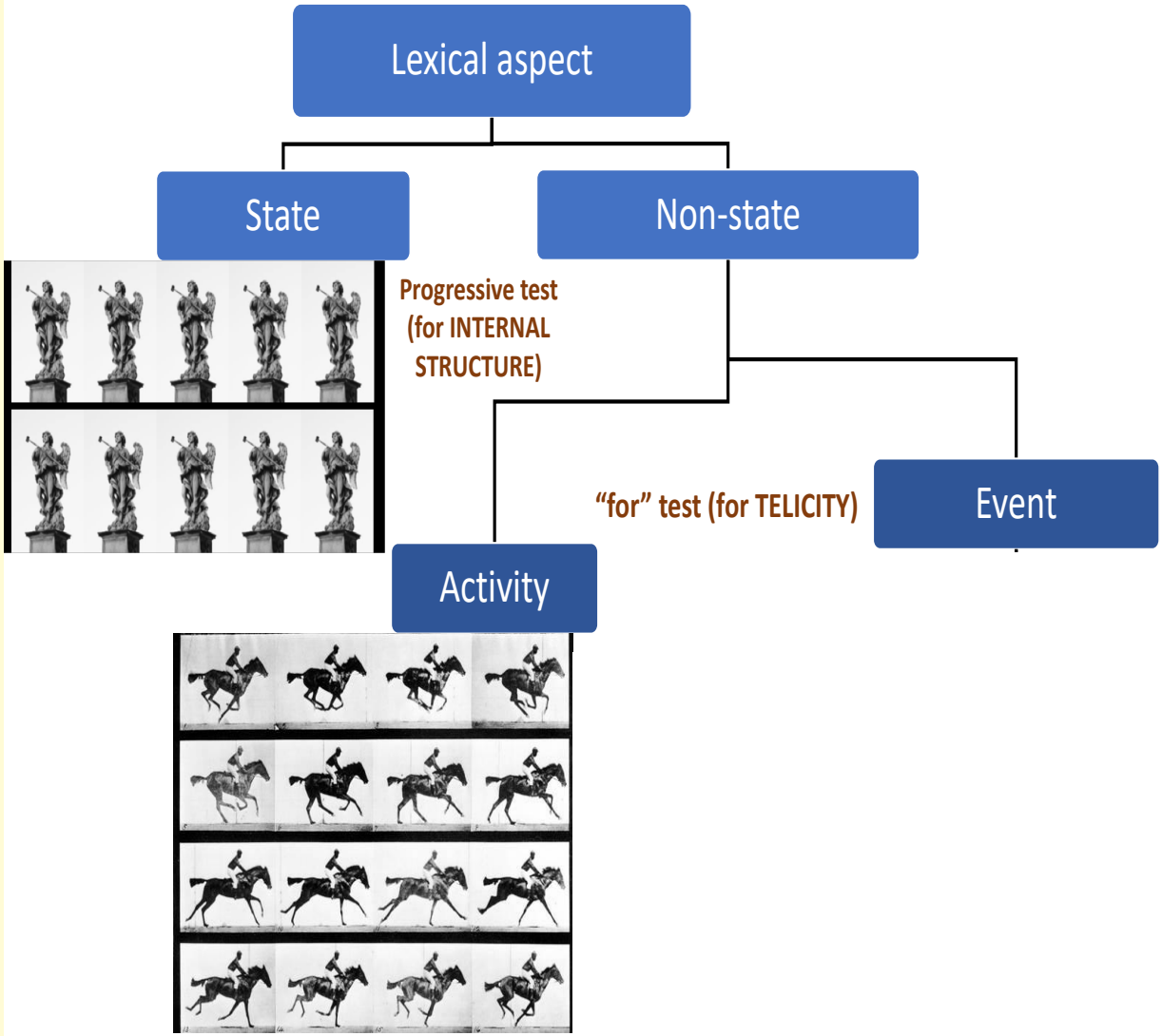

Tense
What is tense?
A future tense?
Lexical Aspect
Inherent temporal properties of events
(a) States versus non-states
(b) Activities versus events
(c) Accomplishments versus achievements
Lexical Aspect Table
Summary of tests
Multiple lexical aspects
Grammatical aspect
What is grammatical aspect?
Tense is not aspect
Tense & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

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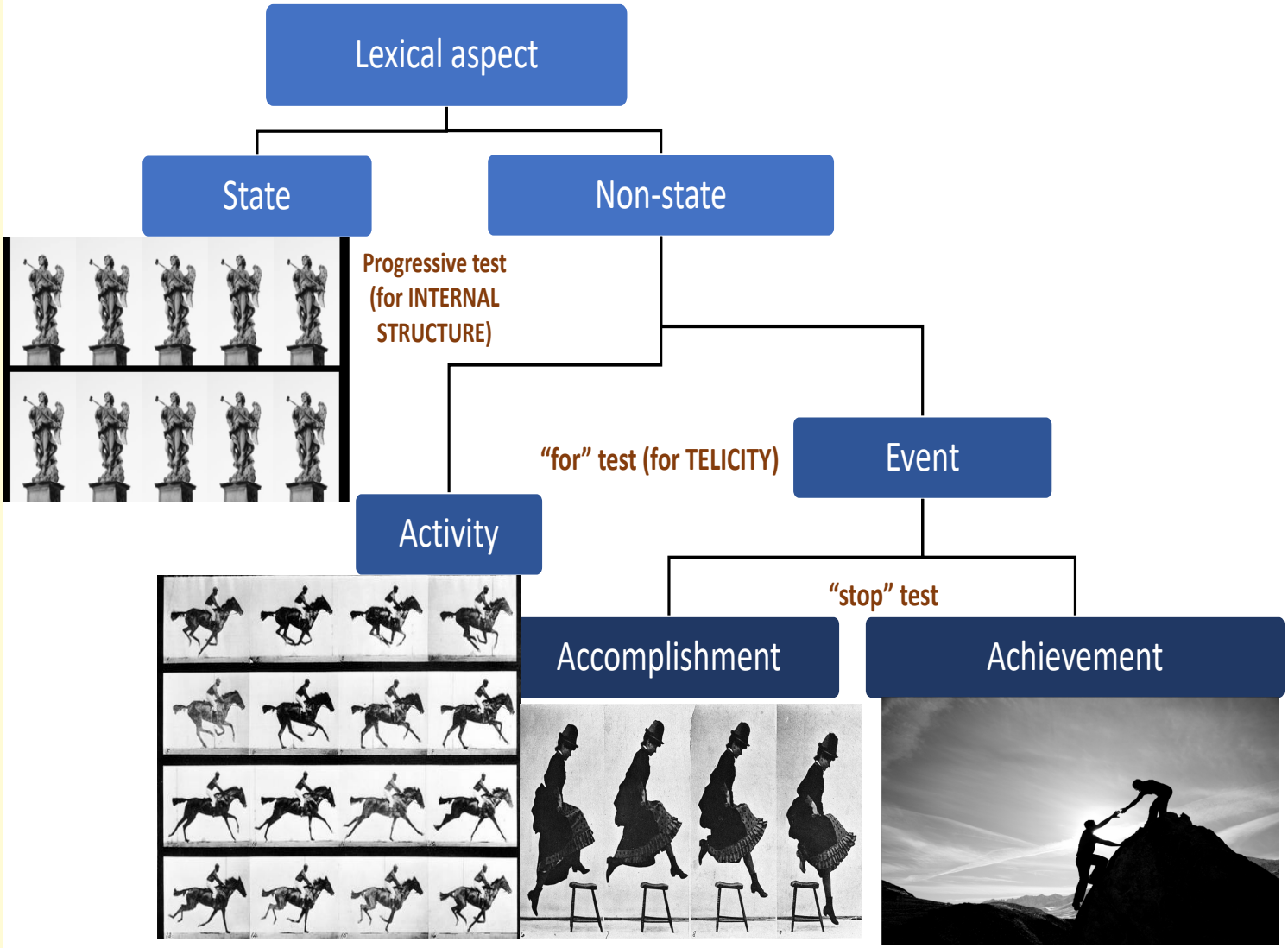

Tense
What is tense?
A future tense?
Lexical Aspect
Inherent temporal properties of events
(a) States versus non-states
(b) Activities versus events
(c) Accomplishments versus achievements
Lexical Aspect Table
Summary of tests
Multiple lexical aspects
Grammatical aspect
What is grammatical aspect?
Tense is not aspect
Tense & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

(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?
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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

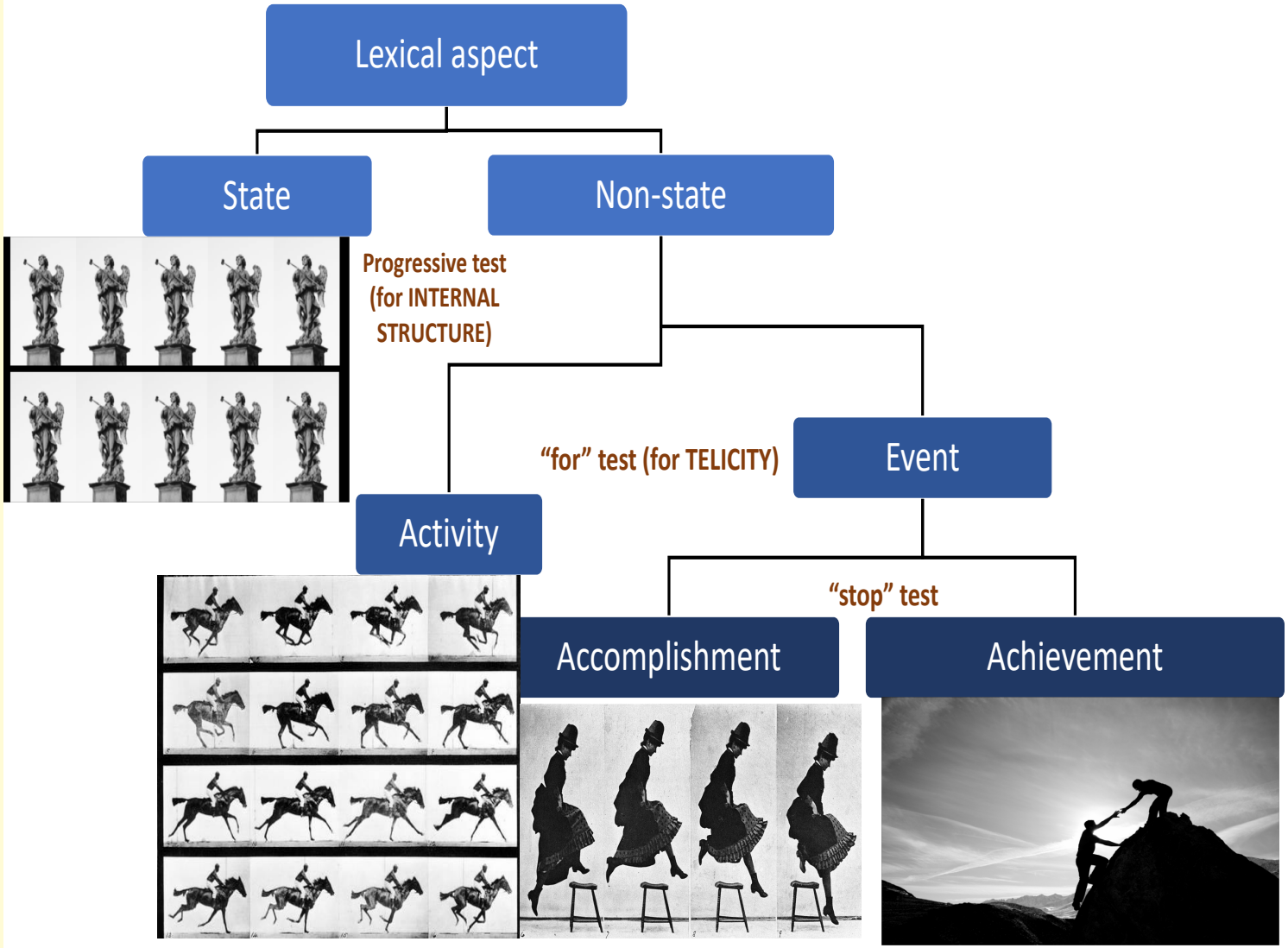
And we can stop the action in the middle;

- She jumped over the chairs ⇒ She stopped jumping over the chairs
- He is building a house ⇒ 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)



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

Lexical Aspect Table

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

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

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

Multiple lexical aspects

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

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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

Multiple lexical aspects

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

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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

Multiple lexical aspects

Some verbs seem to have more than one lexical aspect

1. I **like** cheese (STATE)
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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 (ACHIEVEMENT, NB there is an 'iterative' interpretation)

(4) The light flashed (ACCOMPLISHMENT)

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 perpsective on an event.

David Brent is **dancing**.
Progressive aspect shows we are still <u>inside</u> the event
(it is not finished)

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

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

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
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

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

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

1. He went there ⇒ Him go there

Morphological or conceptual difficulty?

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

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. 2007; 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 & 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.	She chewed a piece of gum.
	He rolled a ball into the box.	He rolled a ball on the box.
	She crawled into the box.	She crawled around in circles.
Obstruent coda	She skipped out the door.	She skipped on the rug.
	He walked out the door.	She walked in circles.
	He jumped into a box.	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 & Aspect combinations
Pres. tense combs.
Prog. asp. combs.
Tense/aspect and SLT practice
Homework
Bibliography

Van Horne et al. 2007 - 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
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 unusual about the following sentence?

"Here be dragons"

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

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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

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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