

# The semantics of events

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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.

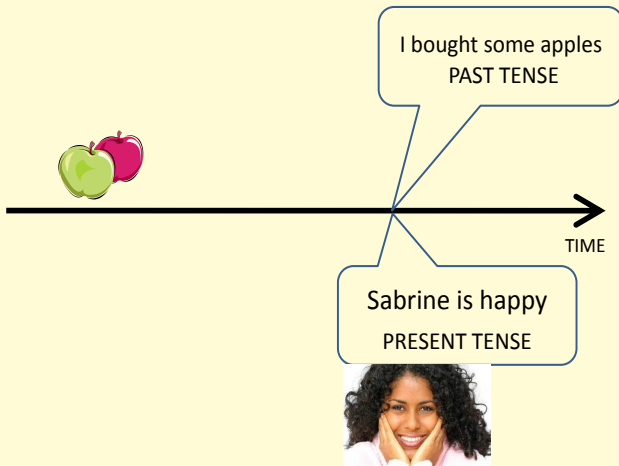
## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## 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?

## Future tense?

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2. I think England { *are* <sup>*will*</sup> *going to* } win the match on Tuesday.
3. England are winning 3-nil with only five minutes of extra time. They { *are* <sup>*will*</sup> *going to* } win.
4. The train { *is* *going to leave*  
*is* *leaving*  
*leaves* } at 6.15.
5. Next year, { *'m* *going to go*  
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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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### **PREDICTION BASED ON STRONG EVIDENCE**

4. The train { <sup>?</sup>?is <sup>?</sup>going to leave <sup>✓</sup>?is <sup>✓</sup>leaving <sup>✓</sup>leaves } at 6.15.

### **TIMETABLE FUTURE**

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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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### **PREDICTION BASED ON STRONG EVIDENCE**

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### **TIMETABLE FUTURE**

5. Next year, { <sup>✓</sup>'m <sup>✓</sup>going to <sup>✓</sup>go <sup>✓</sup>'m <sup>\*</sup>going <sup>will</sup>go } on holiday somewhere hot.

### **PLAN**

6. Tonight I { <sup>'</sup>m <sup>'</sup>going to <sup>'</sup>have <sup>'</sup>m <sup>will</sup>having <sup>will</sup>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

# A future tense?

## Future tense?

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### **TIMETABLE FUTURE**

5. Next year, { <sup>✓✓</sup>'m going to go <sup>✓</sup>'m going <sup>\*</sup>will go } on holiday somewhere hot.

### **PLAN**

6. Tonight I { <sup>✓</sup>'m going to have <sup>✓✓</sup>'m having <sup>?</sup>will have } dinner with some friends.

### **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

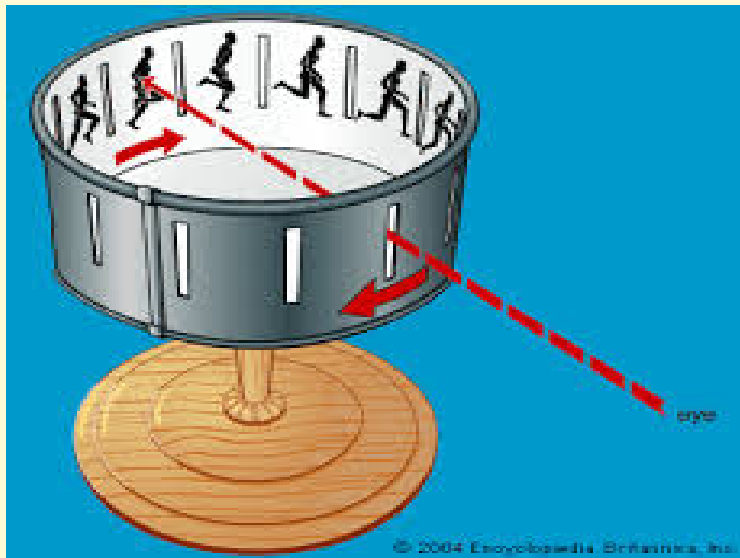
Pres. tense combs.

Prog. asp. combs.

## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## Homework

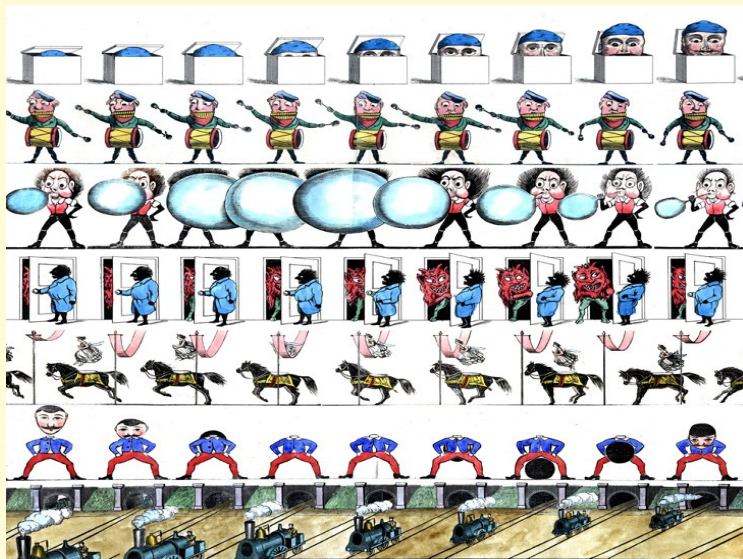
## Bibliography



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# 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

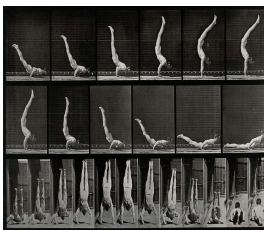
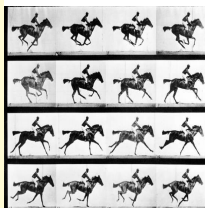
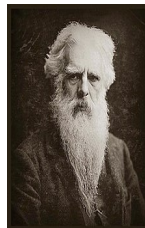
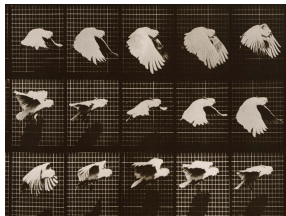
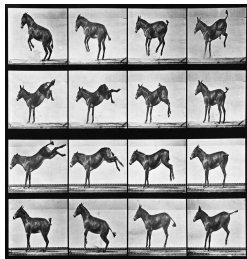
Bibliography

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

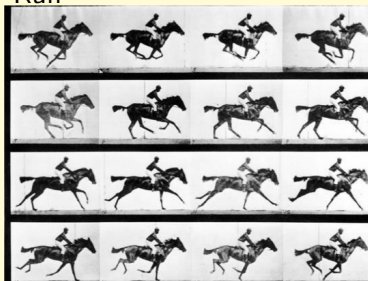
Nick Riches

‘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*.
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.

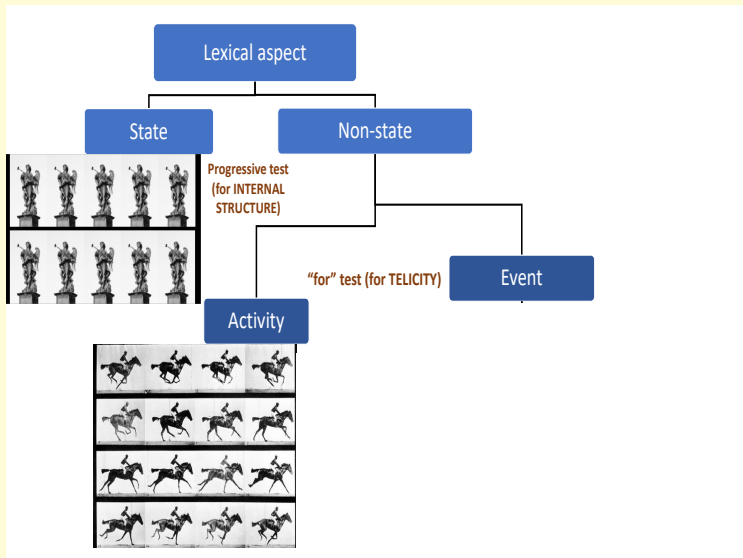
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## Tense/aspect and SLT practice

## 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

## (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.

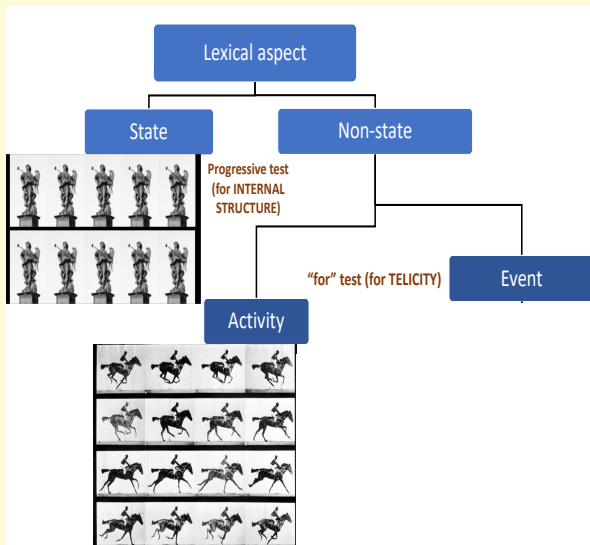
### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### Homework

### Bibliography

## (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

**(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.

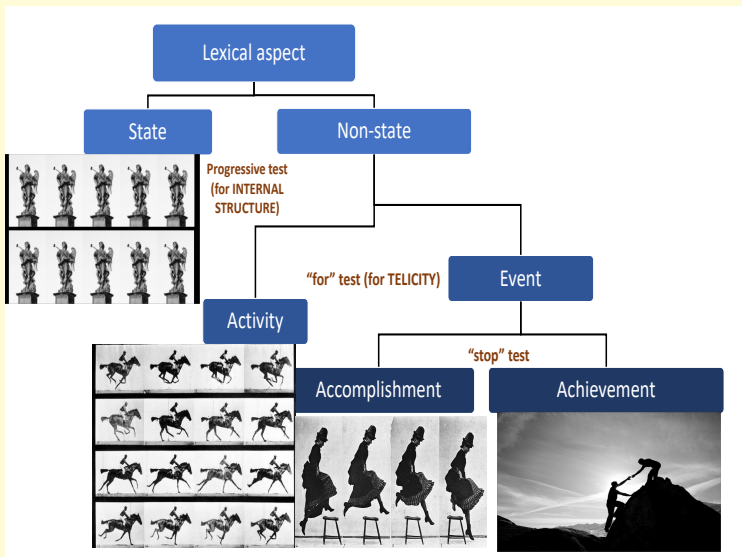
Tense/aspect and SLT practice

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



## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Achievements are defined in terms of an endpoint, e.g.

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

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

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

We cannot stop the event in the middle, 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

## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Accomplishments are not defined in terms of an endpoint.

Because they are not defined in terms of an endpoint, we can use them in the progressive

- ▶ 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.

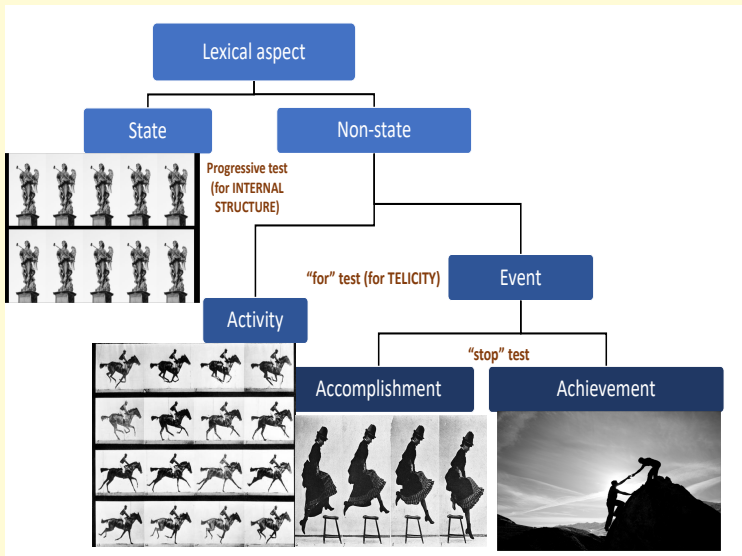
### Tense/aspect and SLT practice

### 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>
want, believe, exist	✓	✗	✗	State
Dance, sing, work	✓	✓	✗	Activity
pour, bake, write	✓	✓	✓	Accomplishment
flash, drop, realise	✗	✓	✓	Achievement

# Lexical Aspect Table

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

Now what is the lexical aspect of the following verbs?

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

# 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

# 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 (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

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 (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

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 (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

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

### 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. 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 &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

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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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

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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