

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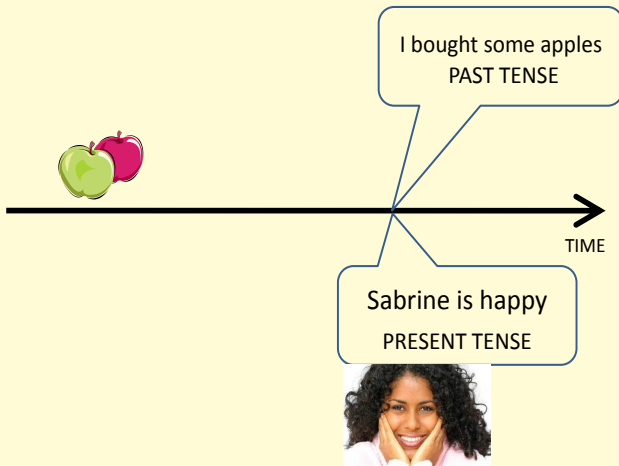
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“Tense” refers to when an action took place **in relation to the time of speaking**, e.g.



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Future tense?

1. I { *am* ^{*will*} *going to* } help you to carry that shopping.
2. I think England { *are* ^{*will*} *going to* } win the match on Tuesday.
3. England are winning 3-nil with only five minutes of extra time. They { *are* ^{*will*} *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*
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TIMETABLE FUTURE

5. Next year, { 'm ^{going to}go ^{'m}going ^{will}go } on holiday somewhere hot.
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PLAN

6. Tonight I { [']m [']going to [']have [']m ^{will}having ^{will}have } dinner with some friends.

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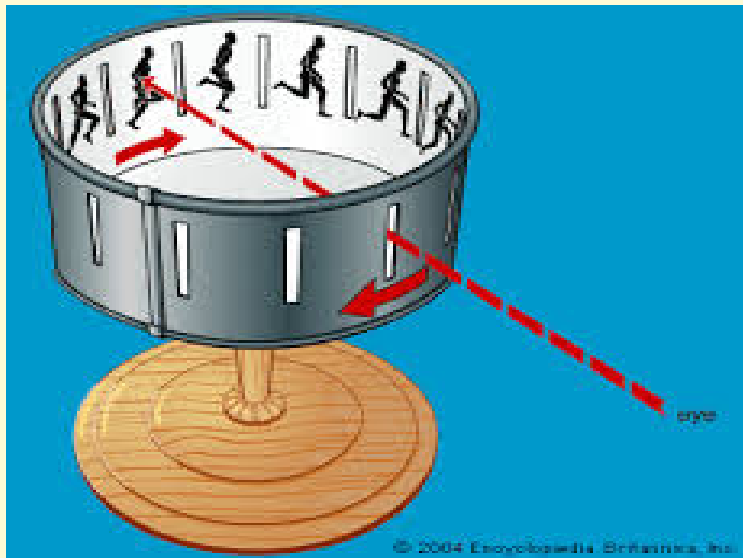
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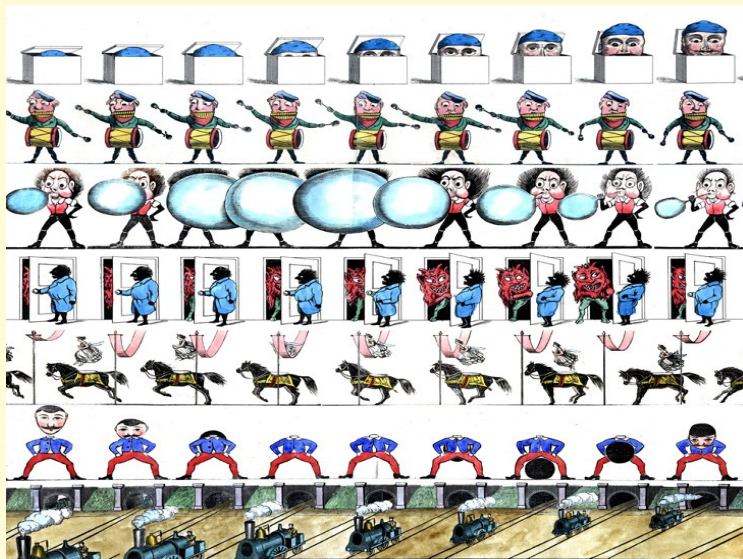
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Youtube Clip



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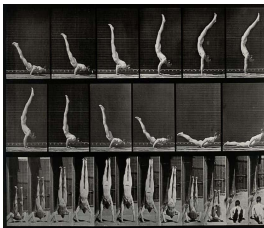
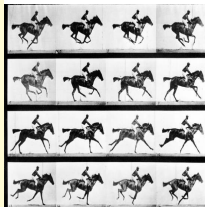
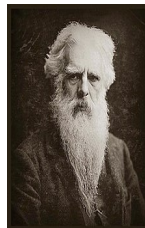
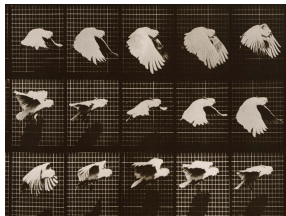
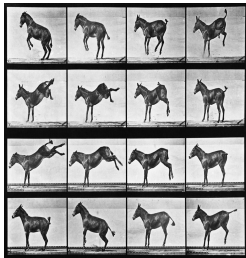
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Which of the following verbs would make a good zoetrope?

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

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Eadweard Muybridge (1830 - 1904)



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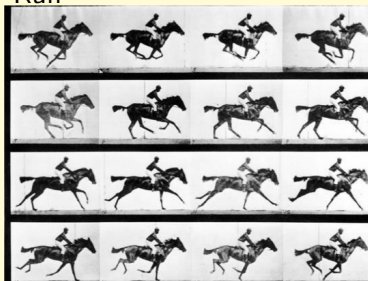
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‘Internal structure’

‘Exist’



‘Run’



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Existing verbs, *be, live, exist,*

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

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

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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*

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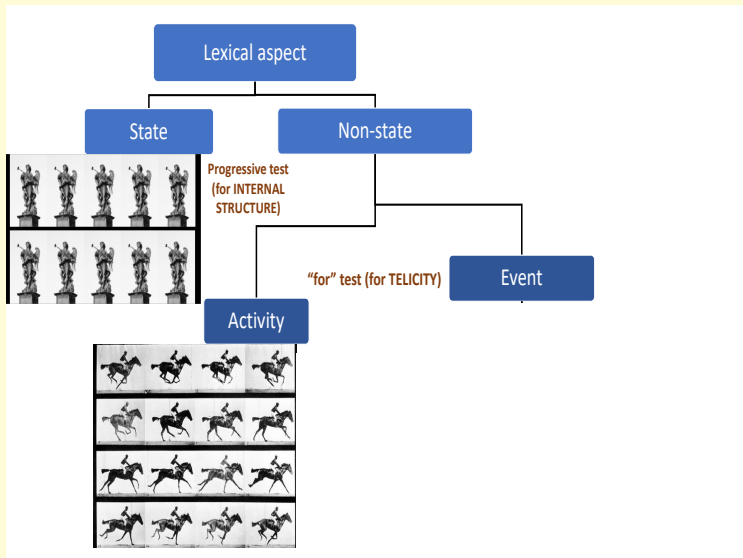
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Activities do not have a natural end point (they are “atelic”).

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*

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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.*

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

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

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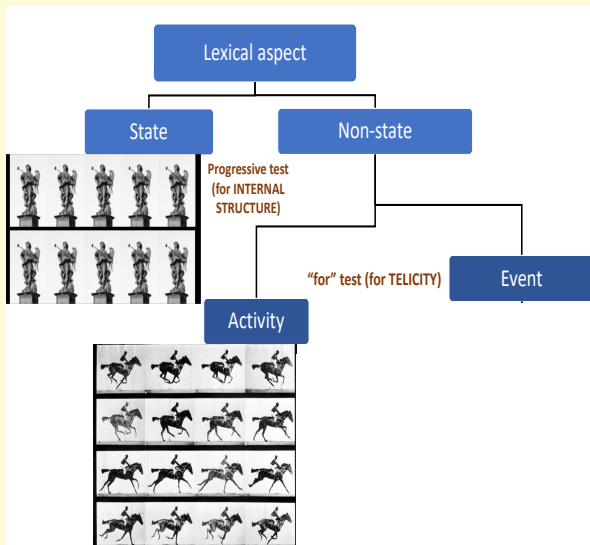
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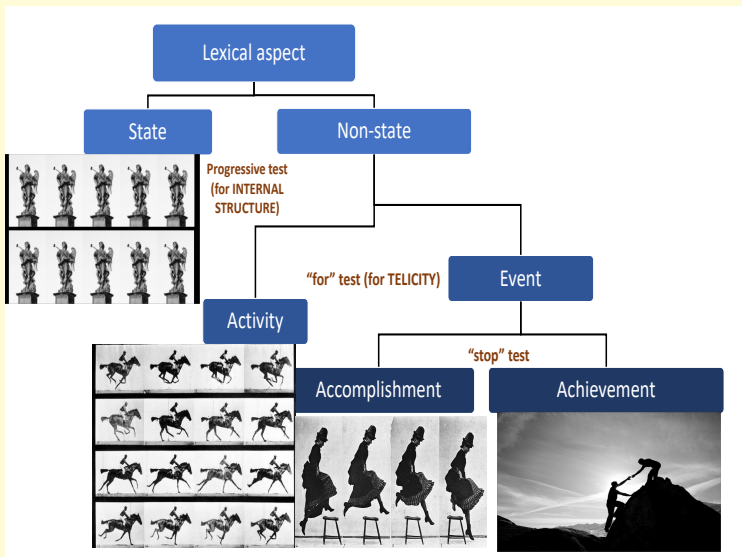
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Achievements are defined in terms of an endpoint, e.g.

- ▶ 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.

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

- ▶ * She stopped reaching the top of the mountain

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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.

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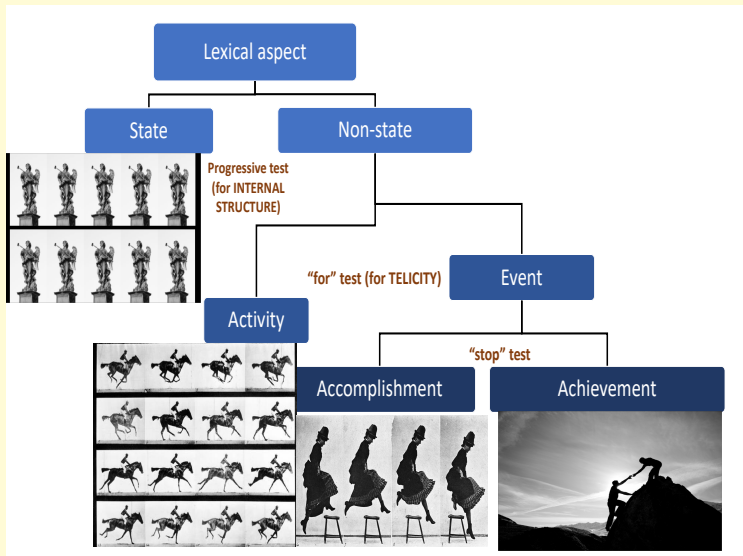
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Example verbs	Durativity: can the event last for a period of time?	Dynamism: does the event have 'internal structure'?	Telicity: is there a clear end point?	Label
want, believe, exist	✓	✗	✗	State
Dance, sing, work	✓	✓	✗	Activity
pour, bake, write	✓	✓	✓	Accomplishment
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

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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*

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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

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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

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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???)
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5. I **love** that dress (STATE)
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1. Each verb has two meanings (or 'senses')
2. Each verb has a primary meaning and secondary meaning

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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)

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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'

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tense

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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

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

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2. He works in a call centre
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(b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

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

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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?

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What is unusual about the following sentence?

“Here be dragons”

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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.)

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