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# Tense

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

1. I like cheese. PRESENT TENSE: At the moment of speaking, the speaker likes cheese.
2. She ate an apple. PAST TENSE: The eating event occurred BEFORE the moment of speaking.

English has two morphological tenses (i.e. marked by verb endings): the past and the present.

The future is not morphologically marked, but is expressed in a variety of different ways.

1. “will” future: I’ll help you to carry that shopping.
2. “going to” future: I think I’m going to be sick.
3. “about to” future: I am about to be sick
4. PRESENT TENSE as future: The train leaves at 6.15
5. PRESENT PROGRESSIVE as future: We’re leaving at 10am.

These forms for expressing the future are generally not described as tenses because

1. They are not morphological forms (i.e. they involve more than verb endings)
2. They express meanings above and beyond the future.

For example….

1. “will” is used for OFFERS and PREDICTIONS
   1. I’ll help you with that bag
   2. I think it will rain tomorrow
2. “going to” is used to talk about the FUTURE BASED ON CURRENT EVIDENCE, or PLANS
   1. I think I’m going to be sick (because I feel nauseous)
   2. I’m going to apply for a Speech and Language Therapy course
3. PRESENT TENSE is used for a TIMETABLED FUTURE
   1. The train leaves at 6.15
4. PRESENT PROGRESSIVE is used for a FUTURE ARRANGEMENT
   1. I’m studying Speech and Language Therapy next year (I already have a place on a course)
5. “be about to” is for the NEAR FUTURE
   1. The players are warming up. The match is about to begin.

Because future forms in English are not strictly tenses, we are going to refer to the “future tense” in inverted commas.

Next week, we’re going to be looking at the syntax/morphology of tense in more detail.

## Inherent temporal properties of events

Zoetrope - a victorian parlour toy designed to create a moving image (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hE_fA9M580&t=1m18s>)

Which of the following verbs would make a good zoetrope?

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

For a verb to work in zoetrope it needs (a) ‘internal structure’ (b) no definite end point, e.g. running, walking, swimming.

We can see that certain verbs have particular temporal properties. These properties are referred to as “lexical aspect” (sometimes called “aktionsarten”)

## (a) States versus non-states

States are abstract, and do not have “internal structure” (e.g. “existing” doesnt’ vary in any way across time, while when you are running, different snapshots will show your arms and legs in completely different positions). Non-states have internal structure.

Examples of states are “existing verbs”, *be, live, exist,* “experiencer-theme verbs”, e.g. *like, love, hate*, and mental state verbs, e.g. *believe, know, hope*.

Tests…

1. Because they are abstract they are difficult to define. E.g. you can give a good definition of *run*, but try to give a definition of *exist*, or *like*
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 becuase the progressive places us inside the event, and this is difficult to do when an event does not have a rich internal structure.
3. They sound odd as reponses to the question *what happened?*, e.g. *Q. What happened? ???A. She liked the food*

## (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*

Because activities do not have a natural endpoint, they 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).* By contrast events sound odd when used with such time expressions, e.g *It collapsed for an hour.*

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*

## (c) Accomplishments versus achievements

Achievements are instantaneous events, taking place in a very brief instant, while accomplishments can take place over an extended period of time. The linguistic term to descibe this phenomenon is “durative” (see table below). A durative event is one which is extended in time.

Because Achievements are instantaneous / non-durative, they cannot be stopped in the middle, e.g.

1. ? They stopped reaching the summit
2. ? The balloon stopped popping

This contrasts with Accomplishments which *can* be stopped in the middle, eg.

1. She stopped jumping over the stairs
2. They stopped building the house

In addition, because Accomplishments are extended in time, we can use them with progressive grammatical aspect, while we cannot do this with Acheivements, e.g.

1. They are building the house
2. ? They are reaching the summit

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Telic(Bounded) | Dynamic(Rich internal structure) | Durative(Occurs during prolonged period) |
| State | - | - | + |
| Activity | - | + | + |
| Accomplishment | + | + | + |
| Achievement | + | + | - |

## 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*

## 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 (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)

So what’s going on here? One possibility is that each verb has two different meanings corresponding to different lexical aspects. This is certainly the case for *think* (*thinking* as an activity versus *think*=believe). With other verbs it’s possibly to identify a primary meaning, and a secondary meaning which is an extension of the primary meaning, e.g. *love = STATE* -> *loving = ACTIVITY.*

Some verbs can `shift’ lexical aspect depending on sentence context;

1. She’s is dancing (ACTIVITY)
2. She finally 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.

## Exercise

What is the lexical aspect of the following verbs?

1. fly
2. sing
3. flatten
4. paint
5. cover
6. suck
7. flash

# Grammatical aspect

Grammatical aspect refers to grammatical devices to signal one’s perpsective on an event. In English there are two grammatical aspects: PROGRESSIVE and PERFECTIVE. The progressive (-ing form), signals an INTERNAL perspective on the event, while the perfective (-en form) signals an EXTERNAL perspective on the event,

1. He is danc**ing** (PROGRESSIVE aspect)
2. She is sing**ing** (PROGRESSIVE aspect)

We are “inside” the event in the sense that the event continues up till the time of speaking, and will continue after the time of speaking.

1. King Kong has fall**en** (PERFECTIVE aspect)
2. I have brok**en** the chair (PERFECTIVE aspect)

We are “outside” the event in the sense that the event is complete.

Other languages have richer systems, e.g Spanish differentiates between the Imperfective and the Progressive.

# Tense is not aspect

Students often confuse tense and aspect. Don’t worry, this is normal, as these concepts are very closely related. Here are two sentences which demostrate the difference:

1. By this time next week, I will have eaten all of the tins of baked beans in my cupboard

This sentence uses the “WILL” FUTURE, but perfective aspect to express COMPLETION

1. She was sleeping when the earthquake happened

This sentence is in the PAST TENSE but uses progressive aspect to describe an ONGOING event.

# Combinations of tense, grammatical and lexical aspect

Tense, grammatical and lexical aspect combine in weird and wonderful ways. This is a very complex system and we can only begin to scrape the surface.

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

When present tense is used with Activities, Accomplishments and Achievements, we get a HABITUAL intepretation, e.g.

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

## (b) Progressive grammatical aspect and achievement verbs

This conveys an iterative interpretation (repeated events)

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

# Tense/aspect and SLT practice

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

1. He went there -> Him go there

However, this is a difficulty with the morphological expression of tense, rather than a difficulty understanding what tense means.

Young children, when acquiring tense, **conflate tense and aspect**. They are more likely to mark paste tense on Achievement and Accomplishment verbs, because these tend to describe COMPLETED events. Some studies have argued that by manipulating the lexical aspect of verbs you can help children acquire tense (Van Horne, A. J. O., Fey, M., & Curran, M. (2017). Do the Hard Things First: A Randomized Controlled Trial Testing the Effects of Exemplar Selection on Generalization Following Therapy for Grammatical Morphology. *Journal of Speech Language and Hearing Research*, *60*(9), 2569; Johnson, B. W., & Morris, S. R. (2007). Clinical implications of the effects of lexical aspect and phonology on children’s production of the regular past tense. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, *23*(3), 287–306.) In fact, Van Horne et al. found that children with DLD were better at producing the past tense forms when trained on more difficult items!

Some studies have found that language-impaired children have difficulties comprehending and producing grammatical aspect (Fletcher, P., Leonard, L. B., Stokes, S. F., & Wong, A. M. Y. (2005). The expression of aspect in Cantonese-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment. *Journal of Speech Language and Hearing Research*, *48*(3); Leonard, L. B., Deevy, P., Kurtz, R., Krantz Chorev, L., Owen, A., Polite, E., … Finneran, D. (2007). Lexical aspect and the use of verb morphology by children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, *50*(3), 759.)

# Homework

What is unusual about the following sentence?

“Here be dragons”