

## **Time, Tense and Aspect: An Introduction**

This overview, rather than aiming at completeness, tries to serve as a rough guideline to its threefold topic, introducing the concepts of Time, Tense and Aspect for beginners. In the act, it offers a brief overview of the most basic time forms of the English language.

### **Time:**

There are many ways of referring to time. Examples include: NOW, (BACK) THEN, SINCE, FOR, AFTER, X [units of time] AGO...

Spans of time may point in either direction; here, however, we quite simply distinguish between two basic concepts:

- Time of Speaking ( $t_s$ ): This is *always* 'now', i.e., the moment at which we actually say something.
- Time of Reference ( $t_R$ ): This is the time we are talking *about*, i.e., it can be any time at all.

Consider:

I got my first pair of glasses when I was eight years old.  $t_R = 21$  years ago

Now I am twenty-nine years old, and I have contact lenses.  $t_R = t_s$

Something that happened twenty-one years ago clearly belongs to the past, and the possession of a pair of contact lenses in the second sentence equally clearly belongs to an extended present. That is, at  $t_s$ , it is a habitual fact.

### **Tense:**

The English language possesses three basic Tenses, one of them a compound tense, the others inflectional. Thus, we may reduce the number to two, Tense being defined as an inflectional category. The (three) Tenses are:

- Past [V -ed] or irregular forms
- Present [V -s] in 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, else simply [V]
- ( Future [will] + [V] )

The basic gist of the relationship between  $t_s$  and  $t_R$  determines the basic Tense, in a

quite logical and straightforward way. The example above illustrates this. If we want to talk about the past, we choose a past tense. The same applies for present and future, *mutatis mutandis*. There are, however, interesting complexities –the main reason for our use of the indeterminate article above. We shall not dwell on this, however, and move on to the basics of Aspect now.

### **Aspect:**

There are three basic Aspects in the English language; each can be combined with a Tense. Also, various Tense-Aspect-Aspect combinations are possible, which means we can end up with complex compound tenses such as the Future Perfect Continuous (I will have been doing). The rules to make such constructions, which concern us here, however, are much easier than the rules of use.

The Aspects are, in the hierarchical order they take in complex compound time forms:

- Simple [V+ -X]
- Perfect [HAVE] + [V -en]<sup>1</sup>
- Continuous [BE] + [V -ing]

Thus, the Simple time forms are not modified in any way that exceeds the rules stated in the 'Tense' section of this paper, while Continuous and Perfect are constructed using an auxiliary and an impersonal verb form -one of the two participle forms of English.

### **Combining Tense and Aspect:**

The basic formula for combining Tense and Aspect is:

Tense --> Aspect (-->Aspect),

in a hierarchical order. That is, each element in the formula determines the precise form of the one that follows.

1<sup>st</sup> Person Singular + Present + Continuous + [DO] =

I am doing...

3<sup>rd</sup> Person Plural + Future + Perfect + Continuous + [DO]=

We will have been doing...

---

<sup>1</sup> [V -en] means the past participle. As many others, I use the -en ending as a cipher for the simple reason that it is the most common ending of irregular past participles. The regular ending, of course, is -ed, and there are many irregular '-en -forms' that do not end in -en.

To spell out the second, more complex, example: The Tense determines the primary auxiliary verb: Future with [WILL]. The primary Aspect determines the secondary auxiliary verb [HAVE] and the form of the following verb [-en]. That verb happens to be [BE], used as the secondary Aspect's auxiliary (Continuous). In turn, 'been' demands that the next verb should be the present participle, i.e., [-ing]: it operates the Continuous Aspect.

It is important to notice both that the hierarchy cannot be violated, and that the Simple Aspect rules out all combinations. Thus, we could almost consider the Perfect + Continuous combination as a second-order Aspect; it certainly is easier to teach it that way. On the other hand, the basic mechanism also works for the passive, which is practically ruled out by complex compound tenses.

### **The Most Important Tenses in English:**

Here follows a short and rather basic overview of the most important tenses in English. I exclude all time forms that combine a Tense with more than one Aspect. Signal words given are purely orientational -they rather express the "feel" of the relevant tense than any kind of rule.

#### 1) Present + Simple

I	V
you	
he/she/it	V-s
we	
you	V
they	

- Use for:
  - extended present
  - present habits
  - 'eternal truths'
- Signal words: NOWADAYS, ALWAYS, OFTEN, ...

"I like swimming."

#### 2) Past + Simple

I	
you	V-ed
he/she/it	
we	
you	V-ed
they	

- Use for:
  - Actions that belong to the past (Bygones)
    - Those actions have to be finished at  $t_r$
  - Narratives
- Signal words: YESTERDAY, LAST [week...], IN THOSE DAYS, X [years...] AGO, ...

"Yesterday, I went to see my grandparents."

As the Will-Future is, by definition, a compound form, we shall deal with it farther down. While it is indeed a combination of Future and the Simple Aspect, thus a functional Simple Tense, structurally it is patently not 'simple'.

### 3) Present + Perfect

I		[V-en]
you	have	
he/she/it	has	
we		
you	have	
they		

- Use for:
  - Actions that have only just finished – nothing new has yet begun.
  - Actions that have not taken place up to  $t_s$  but might afterwards.
  - Repeated actions over a long period of time that presumably will be repeated.
- Signal words: YET, UP TO NOW, SINCE, JUST...

"I haven't been to Paris yet."

"We have just arrived."

"I have told you thousands of times..."

### 4) Past + Perfect

I		[V-en]
you	had	
he/she/it		
we		
you	had	
they		

- Use for:
  - Actions that, at a past  $t_R$ , had only just finished –nothing new had yet begun.
  - Actions that had not taken place up to  $t_R$  but might afterwards.
  - Repeated actions over a long period of time that might have been, or were, repeated or interrupted afterwards.
  - To set the scene in a narrative in the past: if  $t_{R1}$  is in the past, and  $t_{R2}$  is farther back in time, use the past perfect.
- Signal words: YET, UP TO THEN [or THAT DAY], SINCE, JUST...

"She had only just finished when..."

"We had never been to London, so..."

"Why hadn't he told her?"

The Perfective Aspect is 'stronger' than the Continuous one: If we combine the two, the latter follows the former. As we shall see, the Perfective Aspect is also the one that is harder to explain and grasp without taking recourse to a learner's native tongue, which might have very different rules (German) –or no Perfect (Irish). Thus, while for the present purpose it is convenient to arrange the Aspects hierarchically, it can be preferable to

change their sequence when teaching, as is indeed the usual practice.

### 5) Present + Continuous

I	am	[V-ing]
you	are	
he/she/it	is	
we	are	
you		
they		

- Use for:
  - Temporary actions that are taking place at the moment of speaking.
  - Plans and intentions concerning the immediate future.
  - To give temporary meanings to stative verbs.
  - Temporary, limited routines.
- Signal words: RIGHT NOW, AT THE MOMENT, FOR NOW, ...

“Are you listening?”

“I’m watching the football match tonight.”

“She’s being unpleasant today –she must have a headache.”

“I’m writing my thesis at the moment.”

### 6) Past + Continuous

I	was	[V-ing]
you	were	
he/she/it	was	
we	were	
you		
they		

- Use for:
  - Temporary actions that were going on at a past t<sub>R</sub>.
  - Longer past activities that were interrupted by a fast, unconnected event.
  - To give temporary meanings to stative verbs, if your t<sub>R</sub> is in the past.
  - Temporary, limited routines of the past.
- Signal words: AT THAT MOMENT, BACK THEN, WHILE, [...] WHEN [something happened], ...

“She wasn’t listening.”

“I was watching the match when the phone rang.”

“He was having a headache –such a sad excuse!”

“Back then, I was looking after my niece at the weekends.”

Above, we mentioned the concept of ‘stative’ verbs. Now is the moment to say a few words about what those are. Stative verbs, as opposed to ‘dynamic’ ones, are verbs that do not imply actions or change but rather states and characteristics. So, for example,

“My dog has sharp teeth.” → Possession/characteristic feature.

“Trujillo lies on a hill.” → Unchanging position: Towns do not tend to walk around.

Dynamic verbs are used to express actions, events, processes –there is change happening, something is going on.

“I’m running down the hill.” → Movement

“The dog bit her.” → Action

Many verbs can be used in both ways. Thus, “The dog bites” would make reference to a habit –a characteristic behaviour, basically stative. Similarly, if you use HOLD in the sense of *hold an office*, you are talking about something very similar to possession or a personal characteristic or attribute. If you use it in the sense of *hold a pen*, you are describing an action.

In the middle, there are verbs of stance –temporary state or position. Trujillo will not move from its hill, but if my dog is lying in his basket, he may move at any moment.

The distinction is relevant to our choice of Aspect: Stative verb meanings exclude the Continuous Aspect, unless it be in the sense of a temporary or put-on feature. Dynamic verbs often suggest the Continuous –“I’m holding a pen in my hand,” not “I hold a pen in my hand.” Stance verbs are even clearer in their preferences: “The dog lies in his basket” is simply not correct.<sup>2</sup>

Our discussion of the English Tenses in the narrower sense established above concludes here; we shall now move on to the Future. “*De futuris rebus dicere est difficile,*” as the Romans said. But, is it?

## **Future Time**

English possesses a whole range of ways of referring to the future, but no inflected Future Tense. Thus, the two most frequently-used ways of talking about the future are constructions with the modal auxiliary WILL and the Present Simple. Let us first have a look at the latter:

	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tue</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thu</b>	<b>Fri</b>	<b>Sat</b>	<b>Sun</b>
<b>Morning</b>	School	School	School	School	School	_____	_____
<b>Afternoon</b>	Football	English	Football	English		Eating Out	
<b>Evening</b>		TV		Going Out		Going Out	Fly to London

---

<sup>2</sup> It can be correct if it occurs in a subordinate clause, though: “I like those peaceful moments when I listen to old-school blues records in my room, the dog lies in his basket and I read a book while outside, the rain is falling.”

What we have here is a schedule, a timetable that is well-established NOW. Thus, on Monday I know that I have my English class tomorrow, and another one on Thursday. Those are scheduled events that have been decided on some time back. Often, I might also use the Present Continuous instead. I might prefer it in certain circumstances for stylistic reasons (the –ing forms in the table are likely candidates) or to express a sense of immediacy either of the event or of the decision.

The example of our flight to London illustrates the difference between Present Simple for references to the future on the one hand and will-future on the other: Flying to London is a one-off action of ours, a special event. At the same time, the plane does the flight three times a day, adhering to a habitual schedule. Thus, I'd say:

“On Sunday, I'll fly to London. The plane leaves at half-past nine.”

Remember it is still Monday, and Sunday is still far off. Again, to stress immediacy, we might have used the Present Continuous. But if we had used the Continuous for the time the plane leaves, we would imply a disruption of the schedule:

“The plane should have left at nine, but now it's leaving at half-past.”

## **The Will-Future**

WILL is a modal verb, not a primary auxiliary verb like HAVE or BE with their inflected forms and their uses for non-auxiliary meanings. WILL does not change, and unlike the two mentioned above, it cannot be preceded by another auxiliary or modal. As a modal, it denotes intention and prediction; in some contexts, WOULD can be considered its past tense form –but not in all.<sup>3</sup>

The intention/prediction meanings are also important when we use WILL as an auxiliary for the future. But let us start with formal aspects:

I	will	[Inf]
you		
he/she/it		
we		
you		
they		

In the more complex variations of the will-future, we modify the Infinitive and use combined infinitives such as the Continuous Infinitive “be + [-ing]”; the hierarchy remarked upon above cannot be violated, and additional auxiliaries have to follow the sequence HAVE→BE. This also holds in the case of

<sup>3</sup> That is, whenever a backshift is necessary (reported speech...) we use WOULD as the ‘past tense’ form of WILL. Otherwise, WOULD is semi-independent. Thus, we can understand WOULD as the ‘past subjunctive’ rather than the ‘past tense’ form of WILL.

the Passive Infinitive “be + [-en]” –a marker of voice, not time form.

As we said above, the modal ‘prediction’ meaning is always present when we talk about the future, and the use of the will-future, no less its derivatives, stresses this. The ancient meaning of WILL, as a stronger variant of WANT, is also present: We often use the will-future to make offers, i.e. willingness to do something for someone else.

Thus, the form is used for the following purposes:

- ✓ ‘Pure’ future –indicating a high-probability prediction, based on information we possess now, concerning future time:
  - “The calculating power of computers will go on growing exponentially in the foreseeable future.” → Active
  - “In the future, knowing more than one foreign language will be considered a part of literacy.” → Passive
- ✓ Offer and Request –again, these point forward to the future, on logical reasons. Keep in mind that the use of WILL for a request is very direct and can be considered impolite. A subjunctive WOULD is the less direct alternative:
  - “We’re out of milk, you say? Don’t worry, I’ll get some.” → Offer
  - “Will you close the door?” → Request/Demand
    - “Would you close the door?” → Less direct Request
- ✓ Present Prediction –this term refers to conclusions drawn from information we have now and referring to now:
  - “She’s been travelling for ten hours –she’ll be tired.”

Complex future time forms add an Aspect to the Future ‘Tense.’ The results, such as the Future Perfect Continuous (They will have been working on that cathedral for 200 years next autumn.) are analogous to the relevant Aspect forms in other Tenses. We shall not go into details here. There are, however, two tendencies that have to be remarked upon:

- Complex future time forms are quite likely to indicate Present Prediction rather than Future Time –if we are talking about tomorrow, it is often easy to avoid the linguistic complications of using more than one Aspect at a time, but expressing high probability conclusions in a Perfect situation suggests a modal WILL.
- The tendency to avoid the Passive Voice increases considerably with the complexity of the time form. There simply is no Future Perfect Continuous Passive.



## **The Going-To Future**

I	am	going to [Inf]
you	are	
he/she/it	is	
we	are	
you		
they		

The Going-to Future can be considered a special variant of the use of the Present Continuous for the future. It indicates real or virtual intention ('virtual' meaning that we treat something inanimate as if it had intentions) and plans, and has a strong connotation of imminence, i.e. proximity in time. It is often

used in the Past Tense (X was/were going to...) to indicate failed intentions. Consider:

- I'm going to see the Iron Maiden concert in Mérida on July 11.
- I was going to call earlier, but I've been so busy I just couldn't.

The Going-to Future is compatible with the Continuous Aspect but not with the Perfect. Generally, the event we are referring to when using the Going-to Future tends to be a bit farther along the line, remote, than when we use the Present Perfect.

## **Final Words**

Like most things humans have been busy creating over a very long time, language is rather intuitive than logical. Everything above is approximate, a rough guideline inspired by a bit of modern linguistics. We have discussed the main uses of the main time forms, but we have skipped things like the backshift in reported speech, and this outline is far from complete. It should be useful, though, and the schematic tables should help clarify points like the Verb Group's structure and the common elements of all time forms, as well as the basic points of use.