

# Time, tense, and aspect

*Tense* is a term that refers to the way verbs change their form in order to indicate at which time a situation occurs or an event takes place. For finite verb phrases, English has just *one* inflectional form to express time, namely the past tense marker (*-ed* for regular verbs). Therefore, in English there is just a contrast between *present* and *past* tense. Needless to say, non-finite verb phrases (*to-infinitives* and *-ing forms*) are not marked for tense. When occurring with modals, verb phrases are used in their *base* form, with no tense marker.

Each tense can have a *simple* form as well as be combined with either the *progressive* or *perfective* aspect, or with both of them:

*I work; I'm working; I have worked; I have been working* (present)

*I worked; I was working; I had worked; I had been working* (past)

Sentences can also be used in the *passive voice* (note that the perfect-progressive is not normally found in the passive):

*I am told; I'm being told; I have been told*

*I was told; I was being told; I had been told*

*Time* and *tense* are not overlapping concepts. Though *tense* is related to *time*, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two. Tense is a grammatical category: rather than with “reality”, it has to do with how events are placed, seen, and referred to along the past-present-future time line. Thus, a present tense does not always refer to present time, nor a past tense to past time. Actually, the present and past tenses can refer to all three segments of the time line (past, present, and future). For example, the present tense may be used to speak about a future event (often, but not necessarily, accompanied by a future time adverbial), while the so-called “historic present” – frequently used to convey dramatic immediacy – refers to the past as if it were happening now:

*The World Cup starts next week*

*Hear what happened to me the other day. The boss comes in my office and says: 'You're fired!'...*

By the same token, a past tense can refer to present time. This occurs, for instance, in hypothetical sentences, in reported speech, as well as in other structures:

*If I had more money, I would buy a new car*

*Did you tell him you were/are busy?*

*It's time you changed your car*

Furthermore, the past tense can express *tentativeness*, often associated with *politeness*:

*Did you want to make a phone call?*

*Were you looking for me?*

*Aspect* is a grammatical category that reflects the perspective from which an action/situation is seen: as complete, in progress, having duration, beginning, ending, or being repeated. English has two aspects, *progressive* (also called *continuous*) and *perfect(ive)*. Verbs that are not marked for aspect (the majority of them are not) are said to have *simple* aspect.

In British English, the perfective aspect is much more common than in American English, since Americans often use the past simple where Britons use the present perfect.

Verb phrases can be marked for both aspects at the same time (the perfect progressive, however, is infrequent). The following combinations are possible: *present progressive*; *past progressive*; *present perfective*; *past perfective*; *present perfective progressive*; *past perfective progressive*:

*He's sleeping; He was sleeping*  
*He has slept; He had slept*  
*He has been sleeping; He had been sleeping*

Usually, grammars contrast the progressive with the perfective aspect (and the simple, for that matter) on the basis that the former refers to an action/event as in progress, while the latter tends to indicate the completeness of an action, to see actions and events as a whole and a situation as permanent. This is certainly a useful distinction, which will not be questioned here; yet students must be aware that the above is an oversimplified view, as is demonstrated by the fact that the two aspects can combine within a single verb phrase.

### **Progressive aspect**

The *progressive aspect*, either in the present or past tense, generally refers to an action/event (usually of limited duration) in progress at a particular time, to an uncompleted activity, to a temporary state of affairs or a temporary habit.

The *present progressive* is formed by the present tense of the verb *be* + the *-ing form* of the lexical verb, the *past progressive* by *was/were* + the *-ing form* of the lexical verb:

*Can you answer the door? I'm shaving*  
*Look, it's snowing!*  
*I'm going to bed very late these days*  
*We're studying German this year*  
*I was sleeping when I hear a strange noise*  
*I was living in Buenos Aires at the time.*

The activity may also not be, strictly speaking, continuous, that is to say it may refer to a *series* of individual acts:

*Some of the demonstrators are smashing shop windows*

Needless to say, the progressive aspect does not reflect the length of an action, but the *speaker's view* of a certain event. Though aspect and the duration of an action are somehow related – in fact, to describe an event lasting only a short time the *simple aspect* is more frequently used – the simple aspect is not reserved for short actions nor is the progressive used exclusively to talk about events lasting for a (fairly) long time.

As we have seen above, the progressive aspect can combine with the perfective aspect, both present and past, as well as with a modal or a modal and a perfective together. Finally, the infinitive can also be used in the progressive:

*I've been toiling for hours*  
*You must be kidding*  
*He must have been joking*  
*It's too early to be sleeping*

Normally, only so-called *dynamic* verbs are used in the progressive, while *stative* verbs are found in the simple aspect. Yet, there is no one-to-one relationship between dynamic verbs and progressive aspect or between stative verbs and simple aspect: as we shall see later on, stative verbs can sometimes occur in the progressive – when, for instance, they refer to a situation which extends over time but is not permanent – while some dynamic verbs – those referring to actions taking a very short time – usually occur in the simple form. Indeed, the difference between stative and dynamic verbs is not so clear-cut as is often thought to be, and thus deserves to be examined in some detail. Such difference is better conceived in terms of a continuum, and it would be more correct to talk about the stative or dynamic *senses* in which a verb is used, though the traditional distinction between stative and dynamic *verbs* is undoubtedly convenient (provided it is not applied in a simplistic way).

*Stative verbs* are verbs of “being”. Since they refer to “states”, they are normally used with the simple aspect. On the contrary, *dynamic verbs* are verbs of “doing”, they refer to activities, events and processes. They can occur in both the simple and the progressive aspects, depending on the meaning speakers wish to convey. The first of the following sentences refers to a habitual, repeated action, the latter to an action in progress at the time of speaking:

*I work on Saturday morning*  
*I'm working now*

In general, two elements determine if a verb is frequently or rarely found in the progressive aspect: the length of the action described by the verb and the status of the subject as either agent or experiencer. The progressive form is common in clauses that have a human agent as subject and refer to an action, event, state or situation which last for a substantial period of time; contrariwise, verbs that are rarely used in the progressive form describe temporary states of short duration or actions that take place very quickly.

*Stative verbs* indicate possession and describe thoughts, beliefs, feelings, wishes, preferences, perceptions of the senses, as well as states of being. Verbs that typically occur with stative senses are:

- 1) verbs of perception, such as: *appear, feel, hear, see, seem, smell, sound* and *taste*;
- 2) verbs that refers to mental, emotional and cognitive states, such as: *adore, assume, believe, care, consider, desire, detest, dislike, doubt, envy, expect, fear, find* (meaning “consider”), *forget, forgive, guess, hate, hear* (meaning “to be told”), *hope, imagine, intend, know, like, love, mean, mind, notice, prefer, realize, recall, recognize, refuse, regard, regret, remember, see* (meaning “understand”), *want, wish, wonder*;
- 3) verbs that contain the idea of “being” and “having”, that refer to situations which cannot easily be imagined as having a time limitation: *be, have* (meaning “possess”), *belong, compare* (meaning “be similar to”), *concern, consist, contain, cost, depend, deserve, differ, equal, exist, fit, hold, include, interest, involve, lack, matter, measure, need, owe, own, possess, remain, require, resemble, suit*.

Some examples of verbs normally used in stative senses:

*It just seems strange to me*  
*I detest football*  
*The police intend to prosecute him*  
*Of course I recall our first meeting!*  
*The whole estate belongs to him*  
*I'm afraid this will involve plenty of paperwork*  
*It surely matters how you spend our money!*  
*I owe you a favour*  
*We think we deserve some reward for our work*  
*My opinion on the issue of genetically-modified food does not differ from yours*

The progressive aspect is unacceptable with stative verbs describing *qualities* – i.e. (relatively) permanent and inalienable characteristics/properties of the subject referent – as different from *states*, which refer to less permanent situations and thus can occur in the progressive:

*They own a beautiful country house / \*They are owning a beautiful country house*  
*She has wonderful eyes / \*She's having wonderful eyes*

Most stative verbs are not incompatible with the progressive aspect, though. When used in the progressive form, these verbs are reclassified, and a change of interpretation takes place. They may refer to an action/situation or behaviour that has limited duration:

*He is not an honest man; I'm sure he's not being honest with you*  
*I love music; I'm loving the music tonight*  
*That car costs quite a lot; This night out is costing me a fortune:*

Stative verbs can also take the progressive form when the idea of an uncompleted physical or mental state is emphasized. Furthermore, verbs expressing attitudes or emotions may convey tentativeness if used in the progressive (often the *past progressive*):

*I'm hoping they will reconsider their decision*  
*I'm forgetting all I have learnt at school*  
*I was wondering if I did the right thing*

Verbs referring to sensory perceptions are usually preceded by *can/could*. However, they can also be used in the progressive, when emphasis is put on the process of perception:

*I can hear you*  
*I could feel the difference*  
*There's no need to shout. I'm hearing you!*  
*I'm not seeing well with these new glasses*

The deliberate acts corresponding to the involuntary sensory reactions indicated by *hear* and *see* are expressed through the verbs *listen* and *look*. On the contrary, *feel*, *smell* and *taste* refer to both voluntary action and involuntary perception. Needless to say, verbs referring to voluntary actions can be found in the continuous form:

*I (can) hear what they say; I'm listening to what they are saying*  
*I (can) see her; I'm looking at her*  
*I felt / could feel a hand touching my shoulder; I'm feeling the quality of the leather*  
*I (can) smell gas; She's smelling the flowers*  
*I (can) taste cinnamon in the cake; He's tasting the custard*

When they refer to a temporary condition, verbs describing bodily sensation can be used in both the simple and progressive form with hardly any difference in meaning:

*My knee aches badly; My knee is aching badly*  
*I feel tired; I'm feeling tired*

As we have already stated, *dynamic verbs* indicate activities, they do not describe events as a whole. They can occur in both the progressive and non-progressive form. They include verbs indicating a temporary situation or an activity having some duration (for example *cook, jog, live, read, study, work*):

*I was living in New York at that time*  
*I'm making a cake*

Some dynamic verbs are *punctual*, i.e. they refer to events that have very little duration, and thus they generally occur in the simple aspect. Examples of punctual verbs are *break, close, hit, jump, knock, nod, and tap*. When used in the progressive, they often indicate the *repetition* of an action:

*They were jumping in with excitement*  
*Someone's knocking at the door.*

A punctual verb can also be used in the progressive aspect for emphasis. This could be the case, for instance, when speakers see events in slow-motion, or when they want to focus on something which happened while something else was going on, even though this latter is an action taking only a little time to be completed:

*Here Beckham is committing a nasty foul*  
*The bullet struck him while he was closing the window*

Two more examples: *They were hitting the man with a baton; He's opening the door of the hotel.* The first sentence refers to the repetition of a momentary act, to a *series* of blows delivered to the man; the second would make sense, once again, if interpreted as a series of acts (the person performing the action is a hotel doorman), or if reference is purposely made to the few seconds an act such as opening a door takes to be completed. In a radio or television commentary about an important political meetings, for example, it would not sound strange even to dwell upon the opening of the door of a Prime Minister's residence.

Verbs indicating a change of state or position, such as: *arrive, become, die, drown, grow, land, leave, stop, turn*, can be used in the progressive aspect. When this is the case they refer to the period of time leading up to the change of state (which need not take place):

*Do something! They're drowning*  
*I'm growing old*  
*The plane is landing*  
*I'm leaving*

A few verbs can be used either in the simple or the continuous form with no significant difference of meaning:

*You look great / you are looking great*  
*I feel depressed / I'm feeling depressed*

Other verbs can be used in both aspects, but with a difference in meaning. Consider the following examples:

*I think you're wrong* (= believe); *I'm thinking about what you said* (= reflecting on)

*She comes from France* (= lives in); *She's coming from France* (= travelling)

*I see what you mean* (= understand); *I'm seeing her quite often* (= meet)

*This room looks really nice* (= the verb refers to the appearance of the room); *He's looking at you* (= he has directed his eyes in your direction)

*Your suitcase weighs too much* (the verb refers to the weight of the suitcase); *People at the check-in desk are weighing his suitcase* (= they are measuring how heavy the suitcase is)

*The rules apply to everyone* (= concern); *We are applying for a trading licence* (= make an application for)

*I consider him to be the best in his field* (= think); *They are considering my application* (= look carefully at)

*Would you mind if I borrowed your bike?* (= object); *Our friends are minding the bags* (= take care of)

## Perfective aspect

The *perfective aspect* is used to refer to a state or action which has taken place before the time of speaking, as well as to a state or action (or series of actions) occurring in a period of time we imagine as continuing until the present or until a certain moment in the past (until *now* or until *then*), or that has just ended. Remember: the events and situations referred to by the perfective aspect have some relevance to the time of speaking (the present in the case of the *present perfective*, the past in the case of the *past perfective*, the future in the case of the *future perfective*). The perfective aspect is also used to indicate the completeness of an action, to see events as a whole:

*I have tidied my room*

*I've often spent my holidays in South America*

*She had just found a solution to the problem*

The *present perfective* is formed by *have/has* + *past participle*, the *past perfective* (statistically less common than the present) by *had* + *past participle*, while the *future perfective* by *will have* + *past participle*:

*I have had the same car for twelve years! It's time to get a new one*

*I had lived in Paris for two years when I decided to come back home*

*We will have been together for ten years next month*

The *perfective aspect* can combine with the *progressive aspect*, with a modal or with a modal and a progressive together (examples of the first and third combination are also provided above); perfect infinitives are also to be found:

*I've been running*

*He had been watching TV all day*

*You should have done this more carefully*

*He must have been kidding*

*They seem to have liked the film*

Note that the perfect progressive aspect indicates the *possible incompleteness* of an action. In the following examples, it is not clear whether the action has been completed or not:

*I've been repairing my bike* (I may or may not have finished repairing the bike)

*They have been cleaning their room for hours* (they may or may not have finished cleaning)