

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF TENSE

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Abstract. The article investigates various principles of differentiating tense forms of the English language.

Key words. Tense, aspect, verb, sentence, action, time, grammatical categories.

The verb often describes what happens or what someone does, and in the English language the verb varies in forms according to when something happens or when someone does something. The change of form is called tense and tense refers to different forms of verbs through various combinations. In the English language, the word ‘tense’ is used to denote a characteristic of the verb in a sentence. The tense of a verb is used to depict the particular time in which a specific event is taking place.

According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, the term ‘tense’ is defined as “any of the forms of a verb that may be used to show the time of the action or state expressed by the verb” [6]. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides a slightly different definition. According to it, the word ‘tense’ is defined as “a distinction of form in a verb to express distinctions of time or duration of the action or state it denotes” [6]. “The tense of a verb group is its form, which usually shows whether you are referring to past, present, or future time”, according to the Collins Dictionary [7], and the Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘tense’ as “any of the forms of a verb which show the time at which an action happened” [6].

Tenses are often considered to be the backbone and the most fundamental element of the English language. Without tense, everything seems to be absurd. Tenses help you describe actions that take place at different times. It helps to give clarity to your context and the information you are trying to convey. It also allows you to build complex sentence structures. According to Viberg, the word tense is the old French word for “time” and this is the most significant change affecting form in the English verbs [2, 33]. However, tense and time do not always mean the same thing. The past tense can be used for present time when someone expresses politeness, and the present tense can be used when talking about past time in order to give a dramatic touch when telling a story.

The present and the past tense are the two only tenses that are considered being “real” tenses in the English language, since these are verb forms that have a specific inflection: the present, I survive and the past I survived. There is also a tendency to shift these two tenses while writing. Shifting between the past and present tense creates a specific effect in narrative writing. One can write in the past tense, but all of a sudden

shift to present tense in order to make the story more exciting. Tense-shift often occurs in different texts, especially in academic texts where a researcher describes how research was carried out (past tense) and draws a conclusion from the results (present tense) [12,50].

There is no proper future tense in English due to the fact that there is no specific form of the verb to express future events. Future events are expressed by means of different other constructions and the two most regular ones are shall/will and be going to. However, since the future tense is not considered as a “real” tense in English, the auxiliary verbs words shall and will are considered more formal than be going to, and the word shall is more used in British English than in American English. Future tense refers to an action that is about to happen in the near future or a future state of being, for example:

I will go to the store. (Future event)

I will be successful. (Future state of being)

Future tense can refer to something we think will happen in the future and the words be going to are based on something we have heard or seen and therefore we express a prediction about the subject we are going to talk about [12,51].

The present tense refers to present time or a state of being. As mentioned before, the present tense can also describe future and past time, for example:

I run in the park every day. (Present)

A woman walks into a shop. (Past)

The party ends at 10 o'clock. (Future)

Something that is defined as present means that it has existence at the present moment, allowing for the possibility that its existence might stretch into the future and the past as well. Quirk et al. gives an example: Paris stands on the River Seine and explains that, even though this example is described as present state of affairs, this state of affairs has also obtained for several centuries in the past, and it may well exist for an unlimited period in the future as well [3,89].

One of the most common problems for English learners is the usage of the right verb form of the verb in present tense. Some learners have difficulties with inflections such as –s or –es on the verb to indicate agreement with the subject. For

example: She smells like a flower and they smell like flowers is the correct way using the verb in present tense. The verb has to agree with the subject in terms of number and sometimes person. If the head of the noun phrase is singular, the correct way is to put an –s (sometimes –es) on the verb. If the head of the noun phrase is plural then there is no –s on the verb, for example: He/She drives home tomorrow (-s), They/We drive home tomorrow, no (-s) [3,90].

The past tense refers to something that happened in the past and describes an event that occurred in the past or a state of being, for example:

He went to the store. (Past event)

She was sad. (Past state of being)

However, the present and past tense in the English language have six forms: the simple present, simple past, present continuous which is an aspect, past continuous, present perfect and past perfect [1,25]. Simple present tense is used to describe a regular action, in contrast to continuous present tense which shows that an ongoing action is happening. The continuous past tense shows a continuing action that occurred in the past, and the simple past tense indicates that something happened at a certain moment in the past. Present perfect refers to actions that started in the past and continued to the present and past perfect refers to an action that started and was finished in the past [2, 28], for example:

Maria rides the bicycle. (Simple present)

She is riding the bicycle now. (Continuous present)

Herman slept hard yesterday. (Simple past)

He was sleeping all day. (Continuous past)

I have been in Africa. (Present perfect)

He had visited his parents. (Past perfect)

Past, present and future are tenses while perfect and continuous are aspects and, verb forms are related to both time and aspect. Aspect refers to the time of an action regarding whether the action is in progress, complete or showing duration. In many languages, whether tense is used or not, aspect is a central category of grammar as tense is used to express different temporal meanings. The tense relates to the event itself while the aspect expresses the time structure regarding the event. This means that languages vary with regard to the extent to which tense and aspects are used. The continuous expresses that the event in the verb should be considered as ongoing. The simple present form (he eats) is never used when expressing something that is going on in the present situation it only refers to a habitual action (he eats every day). Aspect indicates whether an action is started, completed, ongoing or repeated. Two sentences can have the same tense but different aspects, for example:

David sings well. (Simple present)

David is singing well. (Continuous present)

The first sentence refers to David's competence as a singer and the second sentence refers to David's performance on a particular occasion (Quirk et al. 1985: 1987). The same contrast could also be made for past tense, for example:

David sang well. (Simple past)

David was singing well. (Continuous past)

The simple past describes the event as a whole, and the continuous past describes the event as an activity in progress. As mentioned earlier, past, present and future are tenses while perfect and continuous are aspects. According to Quirk et al., tense and

aspect are problematic in English when there is a choice that has to be made between simple past and present perfect, for example [3,26]:

Sara lived in Barcelona for five years. (Simple past)

Sara has lived in Barcelona for five years. (Present perfect)

These two sentences indicate a state of affairs before the present moment, but the simple past indicates that Sara is not living there anymore because the period of residence has come to an end. The present perfect indicates that Sara is still living there because the residence has continued up to the present time and may continue in the future.

The perfect aspect refers to an action that happened in the past, but without any details about when the action occurred. It describes that something happened in the past (indeterminate past tense) during the time leading up to the present moment. The perfect aspect differs from the past tense since the past tense refers to an action that happened at a specific time [1,63], for example:

I have washed my clothes. (Present perfect)

Yesterday I washed my clothes. (Past tense)

In the first sentence the action happened in the past without any details if it happened a week or a day before. The second sentence indicates that the action occurred in the past time due to the word “yesterday”.

In conclusion, some preliminary remarks are given concerning the notion tense and its relation to time, in particular defining tense as the grammaticalisation of location in time; this necessitates some discussion of other expressions of time in language, in particular of the conceptually distinct notion aspect, and of ways other than grammaticalisation in which location in time can be expressed in language. The discussion of deixis provides a framework of the logical possibilities for locating events in time, with discussion of which of those possibilities are found, or at least are found recurrently, across the languages of the world. The article also provides further background on the problems inherent in defining the meaning of a grammatical category, with examples drawn from problems that arise in the definition of tense categories in various languages.

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