CHAPTER 5

The tenses: A general overview

This chapter discusses in general terms when and why we use the various tenses. Tenses are basically grammatical forms that relate the time being spoken about to the time of speaking. Generally, past tenses show that we are talking about something before the time of speaking; present tenses show that we are talking something occurring at roughly the same time as the time of speaking; and, “future” tenses show that we are talking about something after the time of speaking.

Of course, tense is not the only way of keeping track of when things happen. For example, On November 20th, 1066, at 4:00 in the afternoon... certainly establishes a clear past setting. Similarly, in The new semester starts next month, the phrase next month establishes a clear future setting; this example is particularly interesting as the verb is in the present tense but next month indicates not the present time, but a projection into the future.

Temporal setting, tense, and aspect.

The interaction of the temporal setting, tense, and aspect can be illustrated through the analysis of a story:

Last night, two men broke into my house. They tried to open the safe, but they had forgotten to bring a flashlight so they turned on some lights. Some neighbors saw them and phoned the police. Then the men got hungry. They were eating, when the police arrested them.
Later today, …

1. Note that only grammatical forms or grammatical constructions qualify as tenses. Certainly, for example, yesterday shows time, but we would not want to consider it a tense.
Chapter 5: Temporal setting, tense, and aspect.

The temporal setting. When we are taking part in a conversation or reading something written, one of the first things that is necessary is to establish the temporal setting—the time axis—for what is being said. This temporal setting may or may not remain the same for a stretch of text.

The first temporal setting for this short narrative was established immediately by the two words Last night. We know right away that the story is set in the past, a reference time that is maintained throughout the first paragraph. [At the beginning of the second paragraph, the phrase Later today will mark a change in temporal setting.]

Throughout the first paragraph the past time setting established by Last night... is maintained by the use of the past tense. In fact, each and every main verb in the narrative is marked with past tense.

And, then, once the reference time is established, it is necessary to know what order the things occurred in. Normally, keeping track of the sequence of events is relatively easy. In telling a story, events are reported in the same sequence which they occurred in. What happened first is reported first, what happened second is reported second, and so on. That is, what happens first is usually reported first, and so on.
The perfect. One event, however, is reported out of sequence: ...but they had forgotten to bring a flashlight. The ‘forgetting’ happened much earlier. This is marked by the use of the (past) perfect, an aspect used primarily to indicate that the marked event is being reported out of sequence.

The progressive. In line 8, rather than using the simple past, the past progressive has been used: They were eating, ... The progressive is used here to indicate that the ‘eating’ did not occur strictly in sequence with the when the police arrested them but rather the ‘eating’ partially overlapped with the ‘arresting’.

An overview. When we are taking part in a conversation or we are reading something written, we need to know when we are talking about the past and when we are talking about the present. That is, we need to keep track of the temporal setting (or, the time axis), that is, whether we are talking about the past, the present, or whenever.

Time axes are marked both through the tenses and through time phrases. The tenses mark the time axis in a general way as either past or present, while the time phrases (such as Last night...) mark the time axis much more specifically as Last night... or Later that day...

The sequence of events. Once we know the time setting, we need to know the sequential (chronological) order of events. Normally, this order is identical to the order of presentation.

Sometimes, however, the order of presentation is not enough to make it the actual order of events clear, either because events may overlap with each other or because events may be reported out of sequence. As a consequence, significant overlap among events needs to be marked by the progressive (or, by some other device). And, as a consequence, events reported out of sequence need to be marked by the perfect (or, by some other device) to show that they happened earlier than the order of presentation might suggest.

Naturally, in natural conversation or normal writing time references are constantly switching and changing, but usually we have little trouble keeping track of these switching time references. In part, our ability to keep track of these changes is due to our ability to make sense out of the conversation, that is, to make inferences about what happened when; and, in part, our ability to keep track is due to the use of tense (past, present) and aspect (progressive, perfect) markers.
In short, tenses help establish (or, maintain) the past and present (or “future”) time setting for the main sequence of events. Then, aspect (the perfect and the progressive) mark the relationships of other events to this main story.

**The past time axis and the past tenses**

**The simple past.** The past tense does little more than mark that the event is on the past time axis. And, as long as events on the past time axis are reported in the order in which they occurred, nothing but the simple past tense need be used.

In the example taken from Sharwood-Smith, there is a sequence of three verbs reporting three events in the same order as the order in which they happened.

I took the child to the clinic. The doctor examined him for a long time very carefully. Finally he pronounced him healthy. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:228)

Since the order of presentation matches the order of occurrence, nothing but the simple past is used.

Not surprisingly, because the simple past is used to report sequences of events, it is often associated with a so-called narrative function. That is, it is used in so-called narrative passages.

However, the order of presentation is not always enough to make the actual order of events clear, either because events may overlap with each other or because events may be reported out of sequence. When it is necessary to show that an action is not part of the sequence of events but rather background material being reported (most often out of sequence) to clarify something on the time axis, the past perfect is used. When it is necessary to show that events at least partially overlap with each other, the overlap is indicated by using the past progressive (or some other device).

**The past perfect.** The perfect aspect marks that an action is being reported not as a part of the sequence of events but as background needed to clarify something on the past time
axis. Typically, the background event is being reported out of sequence — most commonly it is somewhat like a flashback; thus, its relationship to the other reported events must be explicitly marked—usually by the past perfect.

In this example, the temporal setting is established both by the use of the simple past in \textit{began} and by the clause \textit{when she was only two}. The \textit{simple past} is used for events reported in sequence. The \textit{past perfect} marks the two events reported out of order—events that have been included as background to an event in sequence.

Sam started playing professional baseball when he was only fifteen. He became a big league player when he was eighteen. He had already played three years in the minor leagues and had led the league in hitting twice. He was elected to the Hall of Fame five years after he retired.

Notice that the third sentence is like a flashback, a past-in-the-past. As a result, it is in the past perfect.

In this example, the temporal setting is established by the use of the simple past. The \textit{simple past} is used for events reported in sequence. The one bit of background material—the one event reported out of order—is double-marked by the time word \textit{Earlier}... and by the \textit{past perfect}.

Bowdrie built his fire of dry wood to eliminate smoke. Earlier, crossing the plains, he had killed an antelope. Now he cut steaks and began to broil them. He knew better than to relax. (L'Amour 1984: 144)

Again, the sentence in the past perfect is like a flashback.

Normally in telling a story, events are reported in the same sequence in which they occurred. What happened first is reported first, what happened second is reported second, and so on. Not only are events introduced in chronological order, but since all the events are reported in the same order as they occurred in, there is no reason to use anything other than the simple past. After all, what happens first is reported first, and so on.
So far there is no reason to use the past perfect. Simple chronological order is sufficient to keep track of the order of events.

Even in a past time narrative, past events marked with the past perfect are in a minority — *they are the exception, not the rule.* Instead, events occurring on the story line are marked with the simple past with the sequencing of events corresponding to the order in which they are mentioned.

Rule:

Use the **simple past** to present events in the same order that they occurred. Use the **past perfect** to mark past events that are presented out of their natural chronological order.

Oprah Winfrey began speaking publicly in church when she was only two. She got her own TV talk show in 1986. She had already been a TV news reporter and had made her acting debut in the movie *The Color Purple.* Her TV show quickly became one of the most popular shows in the United States.

Notice that the third sentence is sort of a flashback, that is, it is reported out of its natural sequential order. As a result, it is also in the past perfect.

Oprah began speaking publicly when she was only two. Oprah got her own TV talk show in 1986.

She had already been a TV news reporter and had made her acting debut in the movie *The Color Purple.* Her TV show quickly became quite popular.

Use the **past perfect** to mark past events that are presented out of their natural chronological order.
Unlike the conjunctions *while, after,* and *before,* the conjunction *when* does not indicate whether two events overlapped or whether they occurred sequentially. As a consequence, the past perfect is often used in *when*—clauses to show two events did not overlap, but instead occurred sequentially.

a. When they *had eaten* dinner, they talked about future plans.
b. When they *ate* dinner, they talked about future plans.

In sentence (a), with *had eaten* in the past perfect, eating and talking about future events must be interpreted as sequential. In sentence (b), with *ate* in the simple past tense, there is overlap between eating dinner and talking about future plans. In this pair of sentences, the past perfect is used not because something is being reported out of sequence but rather because otherwise it is unclear whether the events are overlapping or sequential.

**The past progressive.** The progressive aspect marks an event as at least partially overlapping with a particular time or with another event. This (at least partial) simultaneity is quite evident in these sets of examples (taken from Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:227-229).

> I drew the curtains apart. The sun was shining. The children were playing in the yard. Some women were hanging clothes on the washing lines. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:228)

What is being reported here is not a sequence of events but a description of what was happening—more or less simultaneously—when the curtains were parted.

> The prison guard ran to the wall. Two convicts were climbing to the top. Another was already jumping down to the other side. (Michael Sharwood Smith 1988:229)

Again, what is being reported here is not a sequence of events but a description of what the guard saw happening—more less simultaneously—when he reached the wall.
Not surprisingly, because the past progressive is used to describe a scene—that is, it describes what is going on at a given point in time, it is often associated with a so-called descriptive function. That is, it is used in so-called descriptive passages.

**The “future-in-the-past”**. The “future-in-the-past” is to show, as the term suggests, future plans and future expectations set in the past. Notice, for instance, that in the example Martina’s future expectations are indicated by the construction *was going to*…

On Friday afternoon Martina Rodriquez got off work early. She drove home. As she drove, she made some plans for the weekend. She was going to wash her car; she was going to drive up to Yosemite; and, she was going to take a long relaxing walk along her favorite hiking trail. But she was too tired so instead she stayed home and caught up on her sleep.

Another way of indicating the “future-in-the-past” is with *would*… With *would*… a past setting (*she thought…*) is combined with a future expectation or plan (*…that she would drive up to Yosemite*).

…As she drove, she made some plans for the weekend. At first, she thought she would drive up to Yosemite, but then she realized that she wouldn’t have time.

Note that if the tense of *was/were going to*… and *would*… is changed, we have *is/am/are going to*… and *will*…

**The past perfect progressive**. The past perfect progressive comes out of the basic characteristics of the perfect and the progressive: the marked event is background to another event and often reported out of temporal sequence (hence, the perfect); the marked event continued up to the time of the other event (hence, the progressive).

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1. The term ‘descriptive function’ like the term ‘narrative function’ does not explain anything. It is, if you will pardon the term, purely descriptive.
2. *Was/were going to*… and *would*… show future projections from a past time axis; *…be going to*… and *will*… show future projections from a present time axis.

These forms also have progressive and perfect variants, for example, *…would be driving*, *…would have driven*, *…was going to have…*, and so on.
Running steadily, he rounded the last corner. He looked up. He could see the finish line. When he finally crossed the finish line, he had been running for three hours.

Here, the perfect shows that the first event had already started when the other event began; the progressive shows that the first event partially overlapped with the second event.

**The present time axis and the present tenses**

**The present time axis.** Although narratives with their past time setting are usually told on the past time axis, other sequences of events with present relevance, such as instructions, use a present time axis. Not surprisingly, however, the present time axis is typically used to discuss current concerns.

**The simple present.** The simple present tense is the unmarked tense. In a sense, anything that has not been assigned to one of the other tenses is left to the simple present; consequently, it has multiple functions and uses which are only made clear by the various other elements in the sentence (or, in the context).

The simple present example often reports a generalization about the world rather than reporting an actual event. Needless to say, generalizations cannot be pointed to, nor can they be recorded with a camera; only instances (tokens) of generalizations can actually be seen.

Notice that the example describes a generalization, not an actual event.

Bill plays video games. Simple present.

It is also not a description of what is ongoing at the moment; if it were, it would be in the present progressive (*Bill is playing a video game*), not in the simple present. Because of this and similar examples, this usage is often characterized as general, timeless, generic, gnomic, or habitual. In philosophical terms, the simple present often reports a *type*.

In addition to generalizations, the simple present can also report actual *states* existing at the moment of speaking.

*Do you see* the bug near the table?

*I feel* tired.

The soup *tastes* a little too sour.
The simple present cannot, however, be used to report actual events or processes that are normally thought of as *dynamic*.

\[
\text{Are you looking at the bug near the table?  \\
\text{Stop him! He is escaping!}  \\
\text{Jim is sleeping in the other room.}
\]

As these examples make obvious, the present progressive, not the simple present, is used to report such actual, ongoing events and processes.

**The present progressive.** The present progressive reports a specific, on-going instance of a tangible, real-world event. It can actually be pointed to in progress. For reasons that are obvious, this usage is often characterized as referential, temporary, progressive, specific, and definite. In philosophical terms, the present progressive reports a token.¹

The present progressive itself is used to describe an event in progress as it is being described—this, and nothing more. Other characteristics often associated with the present progressive follow from the fact that it describes an inprogress event. Because the event is in progress, it follows that it must have some duration; because it is still in progress, it follows that it is still incomplete; and because it is still in progress, it has a certain immediacy, and, hence, a certain vividness.

**The present perfect.** Semantically, the present perfect is used to relate past events to the present time-axis, that is, to relate past events to our current interests.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{past time} & \text{(showing a relationship to)} & \text{present time line} \\
\text{event} & \text{now} & \text{time line}
\end{array}
\]

Present perfect: past events related to the present

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¹ Of course, a sentence such as *Bill is playing tennis* can be made into a generalization by adding a phrase such as *almost every day.*
Technically, the present perfect is a present tense because it begins with *have* (or *has*), a present tense verb—a label based on its form. Terming it present tense is, however, appropriate not just because of its form but also because of its function: its *use* always implies a relationship with the present.

**Meaning.** The basic function of the present perfect is used to relate past events to the present time-axis. It occurs with events that started in the past and are still continuing in the present; here, the relationship to the present time axis is obvious.

Finian has taught English for several years now.
Henry has been on drugs for almost two years.

The present perfect occurs with actions or states that began in the past and which have “present relevance”.

Said to a friend interested in seeing a movie currently playing:
I *have seen* that movie. *It is* great! ¹

Spoken by a trainer to one of his fighters:
Your next opponent *has knocked out* his last four opponents.

The present perfect occurs with reports of “currently relevant” experience.

Spoken to someone asking about the food in a particular restaurant:
*I have only eaten* there once.

Spoken to someone about to leave for a year in Singapore:
*I have lived* in Singapore off and on for years.

The present perfect occurs with what is sometimes termed “hot news”, that is, with announcement of something that has just happened.

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¹ Saying *It is* great!, rather than saying *It was* great! is because this sentence is also being related to the present time axis, not the past time axis.
Kim *has* just fallen asleep.  
Graham *has* lost his glasses, again.

What is common to all of these situations is that a past event is being related to the present time axis.

**No definite time markers.** The present perfect cannot co-occur with a definite past time marker. For example, the sentence *He has taken the medicine at 3:00 yesterday afternoon* is not possible. The ungrammaticality of this sentence is due to the fact that it contains two incompatible time axes: the present perfect *has taken* relates the event to the present time-axis, while the phrase *at 3:00 yesterday afternoon* relates the event to a past time axis.

In casual conversation, native speakers use this tense with great frequency since one of the most obvious reasons for mentioning past events is that they are somehow relevant to what is happening now. And, because it is their relevance to the present that is in focus, the past time is left indefinite. In fact, it is so common for indefinite past events to be reported in present perfect Crowell (1964:388) goes as far as to advise students to choose the present perfect whenever the reader has no way of knowing the exact time when the action took place.

**The “future” tenses.** In English, the “future” is marked not by a separate set of future tenses, but by other means, for example, by *be going to*... and by *will*... These forms show future plans and future expectations.¹

Shirley *will eat* the salad.  
Shirley *is going to eat* the salad.

These “future” forms also occur with progressive and perfect variants. The progressive variant indicates some sort of partial overlap or partial simultaneity between itself and some other time or some other event. For instance, the example given is incomplete without some reference either to the time of Shirley's eating or else to something else that was happening at the same time as Shirley's eating.

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¹ Parallel to the “future-in-the-past”, which is a future projection from the past time axis, these future-marking forms are a future projection from the present time axis.
Shirley will be eating the salad… “future” progressive
…is going to be eating…

The perfect variant is incomplete without some reference either to a time marking the completion of Shirley's eating or else to some event that happened after Shirley's eating.

Shirley will have eaten the salad… “future” perfect
…is going to have eaten…

Note that if the tense of ...be going to... and will... is past, we have was/were going to... and would...

Terms

To check yourself, see if you can briefly describe each of the following terms and illustrate it in a phrase or sentence (underlining the relevant part).

temporal setting (or, time axis)

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<th>tense</th>
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present perfect “present (or, ‘current relevance’) relevance”

form versus function
Chapter 5: Terms