

The Structure of English Tenses

The number of English tenses is arbitrary because it distinctly depends on the number n of grammatical categories of the verb that comprise the n -dimensional object which is further called the structure of English tenses. In our study, we consider three categories with a different set of values and semantic functionality as the basis for tenses formation. *It is important that we distinguish the term "tense" defined as one discrete component of the above mentioned object from the name of one of the tense-forming grammatical categories "Tense";* henceforth we will capitalize the names of all categories and their values. These three basic categories are Tense, Aspect, and Phase. The tenses structure will therefore be the superposition of them.

TENSE

The Infinitive. The infinitive is a non-finite verb form (which does not have the Tense category) which is usually considered the most basic and general form. It is characterized by the particle "to" before the base form, which is also called the bare infinitive. In grammar analysis the infinitive is normally written as "to V" where V stands for the base verb form.

Person & Number. The categories of Person and Number are minor ones which deal with the relation of the action and its doer to the speaker and interlocutor and the actual number of the speakers/doers/interlocutors accordingly. Basically there are three values of Person -- 1st (the speaker is the doer), 2nd (the interlocutor is the doer), and 3rd (neither the speaker nor the interlocutor are doers), and two values of Number – singular (one doer) and plural (two or more doers).

Past Form & Participle II. The past form of the verb (which is clear Past Simple positive) and the Participle II forms are normally Ved (according to the rules of suffixation). There are many verbs which have irregular Past and Participle II formation (the so-called irregular verbs). Those must be learned for practice. In our practice, we will use V_2 for the past form and V_3 for Participle II.

Semantics. The category of Tense conveys the information about the position of the action relative to the present moment on the time axis ("now," or the zero point). It is therefore clear that Tense can have three values, viz. Past, Present, and Future.

Formation Formulas.

Past: positive: V_2 ; negative: did not V. Exceptions: to be (positive: was (1st & 3rd person sing.), were (2nd person sing., pl.); negative: was not, were not accordingly).

Present: positive: V; negative: do not V; 3rd person singular: positive: Vs; negative: does not V. Exceptions: to be (positive: am (1st person sing.), is (3rd person sing.), are (2nd person sing. & pl.); negative: am not, is not, are not accordingly).

Future: positive: will V; negative: will not V.

ASPECT

The Brackets Operator. The brackets operator "[]" applied to the verb "to V" (here we will usually leave only the base form for pure simplicity) takes on the values of all categories which are specific for its current form, except for the one being considered or changed. Thus, if you have [V] with the Past Tense, then the brackets operator collects the information about all values present on the verb, with the exception of Tense.

Semantics. The values of Aspect are Simple and Perfect. The Perfect Aspect shifts the action into the past, thus considering the result of the action instead of the action itself. It holds the action as a subject but addresses its impact or consequence.

Formation Formulas.

Simple: [V]

Perfect: [have] V₃

PHASE

Semantics. The category of Phase has to do with continuity of the process which the verb signifies. It has two values: Non-continuous and Continuous. The former does not convey information about the duration or continuity of the process in time; it might be one-time or repeated. The Continuous Phase explicitly emphasizes the fact that the process has the property of being continuous and uncompleted, although there are a few cases when this may be done for the sake of stylistic coloring ("You are constantly coming late.") or functional change ("I am leaving Boston tonight.").

Formation Formulas.

Non-continuous: [V]

Continuous: [be] Ving

APPLICATION & EXAMPLES

It may be seen that the three-dimensional model 3 x 2 x 2 yields 12 possible forms for one verb. The above mentioned categories are fully independent so we have the superposition of the semantic properties as well as the graphical formation. E.g., the verb form "had been sleeping" has the Past Tense, Perfect Aspect, and Continuous Phase, what gives us the idea that the process is placed in the Past, had a meaningful result, and was going on still unfinished. The formation can be analyzed step by step: Perfect (Continuous (Past (to sleep))) = Perfect (Continuous (slept)) = Perfect ([be] sleeping) = {it is clear that [] here means Past because "slept" is just the Past Tense of "sleep"} = Perfect (Past (be) sleeping) = Perfect (was sleeping) = Perfect (was) sleeping = {Aspect affects the auxiliary verb} = [have] been sleeping = {here [] means Past because "was" is the Past Tense of "be"} = had been sleeping. Managing and application of the rules of formation must be gained through practice.