

"Time And Tenses"

Dr. Jassim Mohammed Rayhan

University of Babylon\ College of Basic Education

ABSTRACT

The aim of this modest paper is to show the connection between " time and tense" and how the English tenses are used each in suitable place . The paper also aims at showing interrelation between tenses.

The researcher has divided the paper into two main parts . The first part is devoted to discuss the past time and what tenses are used in referring to this time, also the simple past tense is discussed through comparison with the present perfect , past perfect and past progressive.

In the second part, the researcher explained how future time is expressed. In other words .what means or ways over used in referring to future time.

Part One

Time is universal concept having nothing to do with linguistics. It is of three divisions ; present, past and future. Tense is a purely grammatical idea. It is the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time .In other words , tense relates the meaning of a verb to a seal of time.(Quirk and Greenbaum, 1983 ; 40).

English verbs have only two tenses or two verb forms . These traditionally called (simple present – go – and simple past–went". All other forms, e.g . the past perfect, the present progressive, etc, are made by using auxiliaries and past participle as well as the present participle.

Each tense can have a simple form ; and each can be combined with either progressive or perfect or with both , thus;

Simple: I write

Progressive: I am writing

Perfect: I have written

Perfect – progressive: I have been writing

Sometime there is no direct correspondence between time and tense; there are many examples where the tense and the time referred to are not the same,

e.g.

We leave tomorrow. (Present tense, future tense).

I were in London. (past tense, future tense)

Shakespeare is born in 1564.(past tense, future tense). (Lewis, 1986;47)

It is an interesting feature that English does not have a future tense. This of course , does not mean that it is not possible to talk about future time in English , but that there is no verb form associated with future time . (Ibid ; 50)

A/ Past Time

There is a special problem of past time reference in English , the question of how to choose the use of the simple past and that of the present perfect. By a past time happening , we mean that took place in the past and finished in the past without having any relation with any other tense.

The simple past is used when the past happening is related to a definite time in the past. In contrast, the present perfect is used for a past happening which is seen in relation to a later event or time. Thus , the present perfect means "past time related to present time".

He has lived in Baghdad for ten years.

The first sentence shows that he spent ten years in Baghdad but it does not tell us whenever he is still living there and even we do not know whether he is still alive .The second one implies that he is still living in Baghdad. This sentence also shows clearly that he is still alive. (Leech and Svartdivk ; 65)

Similarly, by comparing the following sentences ;

She took English courses last year.

She has already taken English courses.

The first sentence indicates that "there is no implication for the present. It is a simple statement of fact whereas the second one indicates that her present performance in English should that recent past events". (Praninskas , 1975 ;186)

Another difference between the simple past and the present perfect is that of "continuity in the future". The following two sentences can explain this difference very clearly ;

Adam tried several ways of learning English.

Adam has tried several ways of learning English.

In the first sentence there is an implication that he is not going to try any more ways whereas the second indicates that he will continue to try new ways.

Adverbials used with the present perfect refer to a period beginning in the past and stretching up to the present. They include since, for, up to now, lately, already, recently, just and now :

I have worked ; since last January

; up to now

; lately

; already

Whereas the adverbial used with the simple past refer to a period now past;

; yesterday (evening)

I worked; through out February

; on Monday

There are other adverbial which can be used with either the simple past or the present perfect . These adverbials include ; today, this month, for an hour . for a year, etc.

worked ; to day

I have worked ; this month

; this year

; for an hour

However, there is some tendency especially in American English to use the past in formally in place of the perfect,

I saw it already (I have already seen it). (Quirk and Green baum;1983;44)

When the present perfect is used with indefinite events in a period leading up to the present time does not indicate that the event may continue at the present time but it refers to a recent indefinite past;

Have you eaten (yet)?

However, for such sentences, there is a tendency in American English to prefer the simple past;

Did you eat (yet).

When the simple past , as we have already explained, refers to a definite time in the past may also be identified by;

1. The preceding language context, or
2. The context outside language.

Examples of the two types are;

Jack has become engaged; it took us completely by surprise.

(Here the past tense "took" is used because the event has already been identified in the first clause.).

Did the postman bring any letters?

3. (Here we can use the past tense without language context because it is understood that the postman calls at a given time in the day).

B/ Present perfect and present perfect progressive;

The present perfect progressive is like the present perfect but it shows a limited duration. It is used to denote an action that begins in the past, continues through a given period of time up to the present moment when it is still continuing.

I have been learning English for ten years.

Like the present perfect, the present perfect progressive can suggest that the results of the activity remain in the present;

You have been fighting i.e, I can see that you have been fighting because you have a black eye. In such cases the activity has continued up to the recent past, not up to the present.

Unlike the present perfect, the present perfect progressive with event verbs usually suggest an action continuing into present;

I have read your book (I have finished it)

I have been reading your book. Normally (I am still reading it).

(Leech and Svartrik 1975, 67).

C/ past progressive versus simple past

The past progressive indicates incompleteness of an action in the past whereas the simple past. This can be illustrated by the following two sentences;

He was reading a book that evening.

The first sentence implies that he finished reading, whereas the second one shows that he did not finish it. To clear this,

The sick man died.

The sick man was dying.

The first sentence shows that the man is dead now whereas the second sentence does not tell us whether the man is dead now because we can simply add to it , but suddenly he got over his sickness and became alright. Thus the first sentence indicates completion of an action whereas the second one shows incompletion of an action in the past.

(Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; 45)

When two actions happen in the past and one is within the other, one of them should be in the simple past and the other in the past progressive ;

He took my photo while I was having dinner.

I had my dinner while he was taking my photo.

The first sentence is the normal arrangement but the second suggests that either "he was a very slow photographer or I was a very quick eater"

But in a case of having two actions and both of which happen in the past at the same time and run together or parallel to each other both actions must be put in the past progressive.

While he was looking at some magazines, I was watching T.V

Furthermore, the past progressive is used in the following places.

1. When a certain time issued in the middle of the action;

By ten O clock , I was sleeping.

2. When the starting point of the action is mentioned ;

Yesterday I was sleeping since eight O clock p.m.

3. When the finishing time is mentioned;

Yesterday I was reading till one O clock.

We can compare the present perfect, the present perfect progressive and past progressive to each other , thus;

He has eaten my apples.

He has been eaten my apples.

He was eating my apples.

In the first sentence it is clear that the action of eating is completed and no apples are left The second implies that some apples will be completed in the near future. The third sentence claims that the. (Ibid)

These days, the progressive forms are increasing at the expense of the simple forms. This is a little bit unusual, because the latter is shorter and more economical, but people desire , often vaguely and subconsciously to make what they say(are saying) more lively and vivid.

My friend is hoping to spend Easter in London..

You are really imagining things. (Potter,1969;120)

D/ Simple past or past perfect;

When two actions happened in the past one after the other, the first one should be past perfect and the second simple past;

I had seen my friend when I came here. The first action should have happened and finished before the second one begins.

However, in some cases, the past perfect is optional when the conjunction or the time word such as, earlier e.g

We arrived at the station after the train (had) left.

I saw (had seen) my friend before I came here .

The same thing with;

Ali had (had had) his breakfast then he went to school.

Because the time word "then" shows that the action of having breakfast takes place before the action of going to school, but the past perfect is obligatory in;

We arrived at the station to find that the train had left. Because it is the past perfect which tells us which action happens first, otherwise we can not tell whether the arrival happens first. (Ibid).

Indirect speech, the past perfect is obligatory in a transference of the present perfect;

"The bridge has collapsed." I told you The bridge has collapsed. (Ibid)

The past perfect is also used in indirect speech to transfer the simple past as in ;

Oliver said "I got up at six O'clock"

Oliver said that he got up at six O'clock. (Praninskas,1975;197)

Thus, we have seen that sometimes when two actions happen in the past , we use the past for the second and sometimes we use only the simple past but there is a slight difference in meaning;

When I had seen the television show, I called the police .

When I saw the television show, I called the police.

"The first sentence merely relates the two actions in time without suggesting any cause and effect. The second one suggests that there is a connection between my seeing the show and calling the police; perhaps I want to complain about something." (Robert,1968;80)

E/ Past perfect progressive;

This tense is used to give continuity to the verb or action of the perfect tense. It is just like the past perfect but it shows a duration of time ;

I had been talking to her for two hours before I came here.

PART TWO

Future Time

There is no obvious future tense in English, instead there are several ways and means of denoting future time.

A/ Will/Shall

1. With infinitive, they refer to colorless and bare future;

I will /shall go home tomorrow.

They will be here in a few minutes.

2. Will + have+ p.p this combination is used to denote an action that is completed in the future before some other given future action or future time begins;

When I go home tonight, I shall have worked eight hours.

By ten O'clock, the audience will have left the theatre. (Miller, 1955;157)

3. Will + have + been + ing. form.

This combination is used to denote an action that continues through a given period of time until another given future action or given future time begins;

By seven O'clock tomorrow morning, I shall have been sleeping eight hours .(the action of sleeping begins at 11 p.m , continues for eight hours until 7 a.m when it is still continuing). (Ibid)

There are other auxiliaries which can refer to future time;

He may play football tomorrow.

I will come to the station at ten O'clock.

4. Will+ be + ing form. This combination is used in the following situations;

a/ When the starting point of the action is mentioned .

She will be writing letters from 10 O'clock.

b/ When the finishing point of the action is mentioned

She will be writing till five O'clock.

c/ When the starting and the finishing points mentioned.

She will be writing from 10 O'clock till 12 O'clock.

d/ When two actions happen in the future and at the same time and run parallel to each other , one of them is making the other progressive.

While she will be writing letters. I shall be reading newspapers.

e/ When a certain time is mentioned in the middle of the action ;

By 10 O'clock , I will be sleeping .

f/ To show certainty ;

I shall be coming tomorrow.

B/ Be + going to + infinitive

This construction is used to denote the futurity , it has two more specific meaning ;

1. Present causes of an action that takes place in the future . In this chase it is used with both human and non-human subjects;

She is going to have a baby (she is pregnant now).

It is going to rain (there are dark clouds gathering in the sky now.

2. Present intention or determination ;

I am going to pass the exam.

Both (1 and 2) express colored (not pure) future.

However, there is only one case in which (Be + going to + infinitive) colorless future, that is when used in the third person.

The new hotel is going to cost two million dollars. (Potter, 1969; 125).

C/ Be + going to or will/ shall.

Will or shall is preferred to " be going to " in the conditional sentences.

If I play football this afternoon (that may not happen) I will/shall not be able to visit my friend.

On the other hand , (Be +going to) is preferred in;

I am going to play football this afternoon. Which means the speaker arranged to play.

D/ Be +to + infinitive;

e.g,

1. Arrangement or Plan;

He is to get married very soon.

2. Order or Command.

You are to be back early.

You are to take your medicine at six O'clock.

3. Conditional Future;

If he is to pass the exam , he must work harder.

E/ Be + about to + infinitive.

It expresses near future;

He is about to die.

It may express certainty;

The government is certain to resign. (Quirk and Greenbaum,1973;50)

F/ Present Progressive;

Like "going to" this tense can express a definite future time and its time is fairly immediate. Verbs used with tense are those of movement and transitional verbs, such as leave, arrive etc;

The train is leaving tomorrow.

The prime minister is coming next month.

This tense requires adverbials of time and it indicates arrangement and plan.

(Allen,1974; 18)

G/ Simple present;

This tense is used to express a future action about which a decision has already taken.

The train leaves at 8:30.

We attack at dawn.

(Eckersley, 1960; 160)

Furthermore, in indicating a future time this tense is used in the following situations.

1. To refer to the calendar.
Tomorrow is Sunday.
The day after tomorrow is Monday.
2. To describe unchangeable events;
The high tide is at six O'clock.
The football match is on Friday.

Conclusion;

Throughout this paper in which English tenses are discussed, the researcher has concluded that Arab students or learners of English are unable to use the correct tense when speaking or writing though they have been studying English for many years. The researcher also believes that among the reasons behind such a difficulty are the followings;

1. The confusion of "time" for "tense", where the learners of English think of the former as being equal to the latter. This corresponds to the traditional understanding of tenses as being divided into past Present and future , where as modern views of tenses divide them into past and present.
2. The interference of the mother tongue which is either positive , where formal and functional similarities are found , or negative, where formal and functional difference exist. But the fact that some tenses in English do not have their equivalents in Arabic is not because Arabic is poor, rather than English is, as it were too extravagant.

Some of the most difficult tenses to translate into Arabic are mainly the continuous and the perfect tenses. To take an example, let's consider the following sentence. "He is eating apples". This sentence if it is translated into Arabic, it could either express a habit "He eats apples" or the present " He is eating apples now".

The fact that an English sentence must have a verb, it is also problematic because in Arabic some sentences sound absurd if a verb is used , since they need no verb at all. e.g,

الطالب مجتهد

But to believe that English tenses are more than tenses in Arabic is a more fallacy , though we have already mentioned it at the beginning for clarity. It is not the tenses that are more but the time references that are various.

Bibliography

- Allen, Standard W. "Living English Structure" London, Longman Group Ltd., 1974.
- Close, R .A., "A Reference Grammar for Students of English", London, Longman Group Ltd. 1960..
- Eckersley, C.E. and Eckersley .J.M.. "A Comprehensive English Grammar".

London , Longman Group Ltd 1960.

Leech, Geoffrey and Svartvik, Jan. "A Communicative Grammar of English" . Loaton .Longman Group Ltd, 1975

Lewis, Michael. "The English Verb". London w1, Language Teaching publication, 1980.

Miller, Cyrit . "A Grammar of Modern English for Foreign Students." Longmans. Green and Co. Ltd, 1955.

Potterer, Smeon . "Changing English ." London w1, Andre Deutsch Ltd,1969.

Praninskas, Jean "Rapid Review of English Grammar (2nd.ed)" .New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Inc. Engle Cliffs, 1975.

Quirk, Randolph and Greenbaum, "Sidney University Grammar of English" .London , Longman , Group Ltd. 1973.