

## 8. Tense, aspect and mode

Tense, aspect and mode are three interrelated yet largely distinct sets of verb-phrase categories in English. The tense system grounds events in time, relative to the moment a sentence is uttered, either past, non-past or future. While this is the general characterization of the tense system, there is quite a bit of variability, for example non-past forms used to express past events for heightened rhetorical effect. However, a full exposition of these variations is beyond the scope of this study.

Aspect has to do with the way the internal temporal structure of situations or events is presented, e.g., whether they happen all at once, or endure over an extended period of time. Aspect in English is not nearly so firmly grammaticalized as tense. To the extent that is expressed grammatically at all, is expressed via analytic constructions involving the auxiliaries *be* and *have* (section 8.2).

Traditionally, "mode" or (mood) has been thought of as consisting of such categories as "declarative," "imperative," "interrogative" and "subjunctive." While all of these categories do exist in English, they do not constitute any kind of unified grammatical system. Thus, in this sketch they are treated in other sections. Imperatives are treated in section 14, interrogatives in section 13, and subjunctives will be mentioned briefly in section 17. In the present section we will introduce the grammatical system commonly known as "modal auxiliaries" (section 8.3).

### 8.1. Tense

Verbs in English are inflected for past tense. Lack of tense inflection in a grammatically main verb indicates non-specified tense. This form is glossed as NOPAS 'no pasado' in the examples:

- (70) a. I play-∅.   b. I play-ed  
      1SG jugar-NOPAS   1SG jugar-PAS  
      'Yo (habitualmente) juego.'                                 'Yo jugué.'
- c. I play-∅             next             Friday.   'Jugaré el viernes que viene.'  
      1SG jugar-NOPAS siguiente viernes
- d. Then he                     say-s             to me . . .   'Luego me dijo. . . '  
      luego 3SG:M:NOM decir-NOPAS a 1SG:NN
- e. She             know-s             the answer.   'Ella sabe la respuesta.'  
      3SG:F:NOM saber-NOPAS DEF respuesta

Verbs that are not specified tense (examples 70a, c, d and e) are simply not grounded in time. They may refer to states that hold at the same moment as the time of speaking (70e), or presently relevant habitual patterns (70a), but when they refer to a

realis event, the event cannot be construed as occurring in the "present," i.e., overlapping in time with the speech act. Example 70c can only be construed as future, and 70d normally as past, but perhaps as future, as in a description of a script of a play. However, it cannot be understood as "present," i.e., uttered at the same moment as the event described.

While the suffix *-ed* is the "regular," or "major" means of forming the past tense in English, there are various minor classes of verbs that take different past tense forms. Here are a few examples:

(71) *dive* class

Non-past	Past	Gloss
<i>dive</i>	<i>dove</i>	busear
<i>drive</i>	<i>drove</i>	manejar
<i>strive</i>	<i>strove</i>	esforzarse (archaic)
<i>ride</i>	<i>rode</i>	ir montado
<i>write</i>	<i>wrote</i>	escribir
<i>smite</i>	<i>smote</i>	golpear (archaic)

(72) *grow* class

Non-past	Past	Gloss
<i>grow</i>	<i>grew</i>	crecer
<i>know</i>	<i>knew</i>	saber/conocer
<i>throw</i>	<i>threw</i>	tirar
<i>blow</i>	<i>blew</i>	soplar

(73) *drink* class

Non-past	Past	Gloss
<i>drink</i>	<i>drank</i>	beber
<i>sink</i>	<i>sank</i>	sumergirse
<i>sing</i>	<i>sang</i>	cantar
<i>ring</i>	<i>rang</i>	sonar (campana)
<i>sit</i>	<i>sat</i>	sentarse
<i>swim</i>	<i>swam</i>	nadar

(74) Irregulars

Non-past	Past	Gloss
<i>hit</i>	<i>hit</i>	golpear
<i>eat</i>	<i>ate</i>	comer
<i>go</i>	<i>went</i>	ir
<i>win</i>	<i>won</i>	ganar
<i>run</i>	<i>ran</i>	correr
<i>fly</i>	<i>flew</i>	volar
<i>come</i>	<i>came</i>	venir
<i>lose</i>	<i>lost</i>	perder
<i>choose</i>	<i>chose</i>	escoger
<i>buy</i>	<i>bought</i>	comprar

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Future time is made explicit either by adverbials, as in 70c above, or by means of the auxiliaries *will* (*shall* in some dialects/registers) or *gonna* ('going to' in the standard written variety) plus the bare form of the verb:

- (75) I **will** play. 'Jugaré.'  
1SG AUX1:FUT jugar
- (76) We-re **gonna** have a party. 'Vamos a tener una fiesta.'  
1PL-ser.PL.NOPAS AUX2:FUT tener INDEF fiesta

The difference between the future in *will* and the future in *gonna* is a matter for further investigation.

## 8.2. Aspect

Aspect is less fully grammaticalized than tense in English. Certain aspectual distinctions are expressed analytically with an auxiliary and a semantically main verb. The two most fully grammaticalized aspects in English are *progressive* and *perfect*. Progressive aspect is formed with the auxiliary *be* 'ser/estar' plus a present participle (-*ing* form) of the main verb (example 77a). Perfect aspect is formed with the auxiliary *have* 'tener/haber' plus a past participle (-*ed/-en* form) of the semantically main verb (example 77b):

- (77) a. I **was** play-**ing**. PROGRESSIVE (PAST)  
1SG estar:PAS jugar-PPRES  
'Yo estaba jugando.'
- b. I **have** play-**ed**. PERFECT (PRESENT)  
1SG tener:3SG:NOPAS jugar-PPAS  
'He jugado.'

Both progressive and perfect aspect are independent of tense marking, which is expressed on the auxiliary. Compare the following to the examples in 77:

- (78) a. I **am** play-**ing**. PRESENT PROGRESSIVE  
1SG estar:1SG:NOPAS jugar-PPRES  
'Yo estoy jugando.'
- b. I **had** play-**ed**. PAST PERFECT  
1SG tener:PAS jugar-PPAS  
'Yo había jugado.'

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Because the auxiliary takes the tense inflection, one can insightfully understand the auxiliary as being the grammatically "main verb," while the participle (present or past) expresses the main semantic content of the clause.

Other, less fully-grammaticalized, aspects also occur. Though these constructions express aspect-like meanings (the internal temporal structure of an event), grammatically they can be insightfully analyzed as transitive main verbs plus complement clauses (see section 16 on complement clauses). Aspects expressed in this manner include various phasal notions, such as the following:

(79) b. I **kept** play-**ing**. CONTINUATIVE

1SG continuar: PAS jugar-PPRES

'Continué jugando.'

c. I **finish-ed** play-**ing** COMPLETIVE

1SG terminar: PAS jugar-PPRES

'Terminé de jugar.'

d. I **began** play-**ing** INCEPTIVE

1SG empezar: PAS jugar-PPRES

'Empezé a jugar.'

### 8.3. Modal auxiliaries

There is a class of words in English that are traditionally termed *modal auxiliaries*. In most clauses, these words occur after the first major constituent in the clause. When they do occur, the semantically main verb is in the bare infinitive form:

(80) a. I **must** play. b. I **should** play.

1SG tener: que jugar

1SG deber jugar

'Tengo que jugar.'

'Debo jugar.'

c. There **may** be a pen in this desk.

EXIST posiblemente ser INDEF bolpén LOC DEMO1 escritorio

'Es posible que hay bolpen en este escritorio.'

d. I **should-a** listen-ed to my mother.

1SG DEON1- PAS escuchar-PPART a 1SG: GEN madre

'Debo haber escuchado a mi mamá.'

As discussed in section 13, in yes/no questions, any auxiliary, including the modals, must occur first in the clause.

Semantically, the modal auxiliaries in English can be divided into two groups: the epistemic and the deontic modals. Epistemic modes express the speaker's assessment of the likelihood that the event described is, or will be, realized. Deontic modes express the speaker's assessment of how necessary the described situation is. There is some overlap in these groups, i.e., some modal auxiliaries (*must*) fall into both groups. Here are some examples:

Some modal auxiliaries in English					
Epistemic			Deontic		
Non-past	Past	Meaning	Non-past	Past	Meaning
<i>may</i>	<i>may</i>	posiblemente	should	shoulda	deber
<i>can</i>	<i>coulda</i>	poder	must	–	tener que
<i>might</i>	<i>mighta</i>	posiblemente	oughta	–	deber
<i>must</i>	<i>musta</i>	inferencia			

For those modal auxiliaries that have both a NON-PAST and a PAST form, the non-past form is followed by the bare form of the sematically main verb (81a), while the past form is followed by the past participle (81b):

- (81) a. She        might                    leave.                    'Es posible que ella salga.'  
                3SG:F:NOM posiblemente:NOPAS salir
- b. She        might-a                    left.                     'Es posible que ella haya salido.'  
                3SG:F:NOM posiblemente-PAS salir:PPART