English Verb Tenses

Ian Jacobs

August 2, 1995

1 Introduction to Tenses

For those who like numbers, there are twelve "traditional" tenses in English: four for the past, present, and future. English tenses are complicated for two reasons:

- **Form vs. Meaning**: Unlike French verbs, for example, an English tense does not have distinguishable endings. This implies that one must learn fewer distinct forms, but those few forms start to all look alike.
- **Tense vs. Time**: A tense does not always refer to the time one might suppose. For example, the present perfect tense refers to the past and the simple and progressive presents may refer to the future.
- **Patchwork**: English tenses often overlap or intertwine in their usage. Consequently, it is helpful to learn about groups of related tenses, rather than one tense at a time.

In the following sections, we present diagrams that illustrate how groups of tenses function together.[1] We do not discuss all uses of every tense.

1.1 Summary of Forms

The following table lists the twelve different tenses for the verb "to work."

simple present	I work
present progressive	I am working
present perfect	I have worked
present perfect progressive	I have been working
simple past	I worked
past progressive	I was working
past perfect	I had worked
past perfect progressive	I had been working
simple future	I will work
future progressive	I will be working
future perfect	I will have worked
future perfect progressive	I will have been working

[1] Some examples in the following sections are adapted from `The Grammar Book` by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman.

2 The Past

2.1 The specific past

When you are describing a sequence of events that happened around a *specific* time in the past (e.g., yesterday, two hours ago, in 1984), use the tenses described below.

Simple past actions may be single events, or activities with duration that *begin and end in the past.*

```
Yesterday we ate at Sardi's.
I lived in France from 1987 to 1994.
You didn't see me this morning, but I was in class.
```

The **past progressive** (or continuous past) describes background action. Past progressive actions usually occur *while* a simple past action is taking place.

```
While he was watching TV, his friend called to tell him the good news.
When she arrived, her mother was finishing dinner.
```

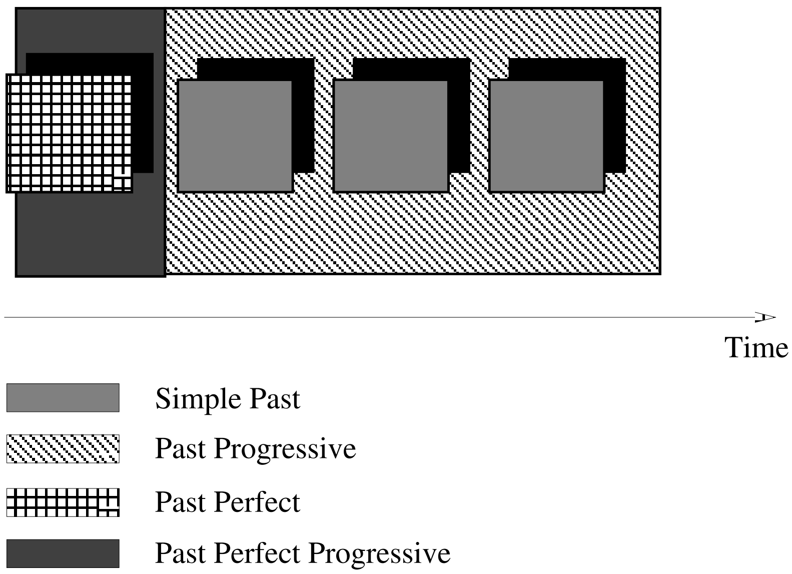
Two past progressive actions may occur together.

```
While they were watching the movie, we were buying ice cream.
```

The past progressive may also describe an ongoing action at a specific time in the past even if a simple past action is not mentioned:

```
What were you doing at 8 o'clock this morning?
I was taking the bus.
```

The Specific Past



During a story at a specified time in the past, several actions may take place. Sequential events in time are all expressed by the simple past. However, actions that take place *before* the sequence are described by the **past perfect**.

```
I had already eaten when the fighting begin.
```

When a sentence contains a word like *before* that indicates order in time, the simple past may replace the past perfect.

```
Did you have the chance to visit Luxor before they closed the temple?
```

When the action taking place over a period of time before the main sequence of simple past events, use the **past perfect progressive**.

```
Carol had been working very hard, so her doctor told her to take a vacation.
```

2.2 The unspecific past

When an event takes place at an unspecified time in the past, use the **present perfect**.

```
I have visited Spain.
```

Notice the difference in meaning between “I have visited Spain” (at some unknown time in the past) and “I visited Spain in 1986.”

- The present perfect is often used to describe events that took place in the unspecified recent past.
- The words *never*, *ever*, and *already* frequently appear when the present perfect is used in this context.

```
Have you ever seen the Eiffel Tower?
I have already seen that movie.
We have never gone there for dinner.
```

2.3 Repeated activity in the past

Habitual events in the past are treated differently from specific events in the past. The form **used to** (not just “used”!) indicates an activity that was done repeatedly in the past and that is no longer done.

```
I used to play the saxophone.
My mother used to make me sandwiches at lunch.
```

The form **would** may replace “used to” when the action does not involve a state of being. Thus,

```
During the summer, I would work with my grandfather.
During the summer, I used to work with my grandfather.
I used to live in Chicago.
(INCORRECT) I would live in Chicago.
I used to be an actor.
(INCORRECT) I would be an actor.
```

Repeated and habitual activity in the past may also be indicated by the **simple past** when the activity was repeated during specified interval.

```
He went to the swimming pool every day last year.
It snowed almost every weekend last winter.
```

2.3.1 Past actions that continue to the present

In previous sections, past actions began and ended in the past. However, some actions may continue into the present. The **present perfect** describes an action that began in the past and continues into the present.

```
I have been in the United States since Saturday.
I have been in the United States for two weeks.
```

The **present perfect progressive** may also be used to describe actions that began in the past and continue through the present.

```
I have been living in Seattle for seven years.
Burt has been going out with Alice for two months.
```

The present perfect progressive is "even more" present than the present perfect in this case. It emphasizes that the action is taking place now. Sometimes it even suggests that the action may not continue much longer.

```
I have lived in New York since September.
I have been living in New York since September, but I'm moving soon.
```

2.3.2 Very recent past actions

When an action ended in the very recent past (essentially the present), the **present perfect** may be used, and is often accompanied by the word **just**.

```
The President has just avoided an assassin's bullet.
```

The **simple past** may also be used.

```
I just spoke with her two minutes ago.
```

The present perfect is "even closer" to the present than the simple past when used to describe events that recently terminated.

3 The Present

3.1 General statements

Use the **simple present** to make general statements and timeless truths.

```
Most bananas are yellow.
Water freezes at zero degrees Celsius.
```

3.2 Ongoing actions in the present

The **present progressive** is used to describe actions going on now.

```
She's talking on the phone.
The robbers are getting away!
```

3.3 Repeated current activity

Use the **simple present** to describe repeated or habitual activities around the present.

```
I take the bus to school every day.
```

However, when the action is repeated in the *immediate present*, use the **present progressive**.

```
My friends are hitting tennis balls in the backyard.
```

3.4 Temporary actions

The **present progressive** is used to describe temporary activity.

```
I'm studying biology at the University of Michigan.
We're living in a two bedroom apartment.
```

Notice the difference between the last example and "We live in a two bedroom apartment." This sentence sounds more permanent than the progressive form, which suggests instead that the situation may end soon.

3.5 Events narrated in the present

When telling a story as if it were taking place in the present, use the **simple present**.

```
First I arrive at her apartment. She opens the door cautiously.
I show her the flowers and she let's me in. The rest is history.
```

3.6 Willingness to do something in the present

The auxiliary **will** is used with the simple form of the verb to express the fact that one accepts (or does not accept) to do something in the present. This form looks very much like the simple future, but in fact expresses willingness in the present or very near future.

```
The phone is ringing? I'll get it.
I will not tolerate this type of behavior.
```

3.7 Simple Present or Present Progressive?

Some verbs rarely appear in the progressive tense and the simple present form is used instead. These are usually verbs of *state*.

- **Sensory perception**: see, hear, taste, smell, notice, realize, recognize.
- **Mental perception**: think, suppose, believe, mean, agree, disagree, remember, forget, understand, get (as in "I get it.").
- **Emotion**: like, dislike, love, hate, want, wish, hope, care, mind, forgive, refuse.
- **Relationships**: have, own, owe, belong to, seem, appear, need, suit, depend.

Some state verbs, such as have slightly different meanings according to their form. For example, in the simple present, "think" means believe. In the present progressive, "think" refers to active thinking.

```
I think that's a wonderful painting. (state)
What are you thinking about? (active thinking)
```

4 The Future

The **simple future** may be expressed with two forms. In some situations, only one form may be used.

- **will**: used when one decides to do something at the moment of speaking.
- **be going to**: used when the future activity has already been planned.
- **will** or **be going to**: either may be used to make predictions about the future.

4.1 The specific future

When you are describing a sequence of events that will happen at a *specific* time in the future, use the **simple future**.

```
Unless it rains, he will walk to school tomorrow.
He is going to walk to school tomorrow.
I'm going to see a movie tonight.
(INCORRECT) I will go to see a movie tonight.
You can't go? I'll pick her up at the airport.
(INCORRECT) You can't go? I'm going to pick her up at the airport.
```

As in the past, background activity may be occurring at the moment of a future event. To describe this background activity, use the **present progressive**. **N.B.** The **present** tense may be used in the subordinate clause in such a sentence.

```
I will be sleeping when you get home.
```

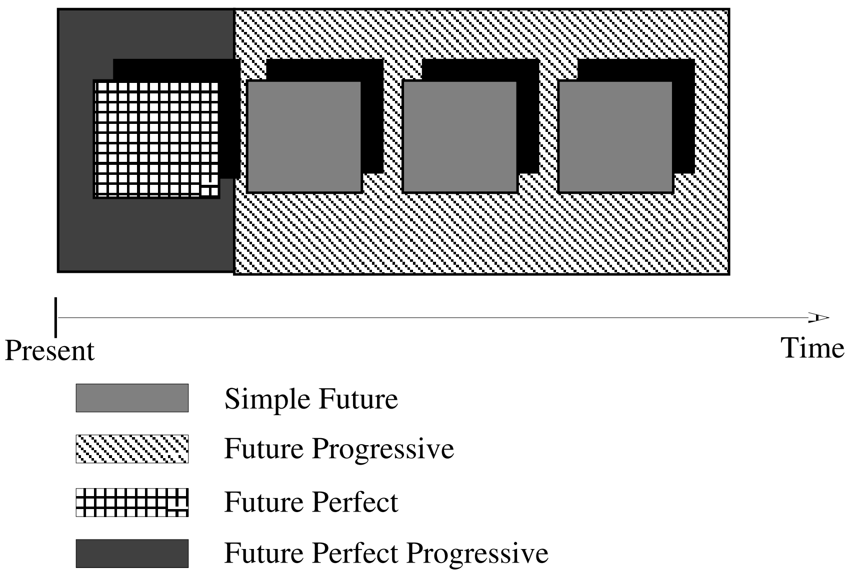
During a story at a specified time in the future, several actions may take place. Sequential events may be expressed by the simple future or present tense, depending on placement in the sentence. However, actions that are completed *before* the sequence are described by the **future perfect**.

```
I will have finished by 5 P.M.
I will have already finished dinner when she gets home.
You will arrive at 9 P.M.; I will have already set up camp.
```

The **simple future** of the verb *to be* may also be used (with adjectives, etc.) to express events that happen prior to a future sequence.

I'll be ready by 5 P.M.

The Specific Future



The **future perfect progressive** describes actions that are taking place in the present and will continue into the future up until or through a specific time. The actions may involve duration or be habitual.

I will have been working here for ten years on January 1 of next year.

4.2 Repeated activity in the future

Use the **simple future** to describe a future habitual action.

Joel will take the bus to work next year.
Joel is going to take the bus to work next year.

4.3 Ongoing activity in the near future

To describe an action that will be *in progress* at a specific time in the near future, use the **future progressive**.

The teachers will be having dinner at seven tonight.

4.4 Duration of a future activity

To indicate the duration of a future activity, use the **future progressive**.

`My sister will be working on her thesis for the next five years.`

4.5 Present actions that continue into the future

Use the **simple future** to describe present actions that continue into the future, but with some future termination in sight.

`Nora will live in Caracas until she finishes school.`

4.6 Using the simple present to describe the future

The **simple present** is often used in subordinate clauses to refer to the future.

```
Before she arrives, we will turn off the lights.
When she opens the door, we'll all sing 'Happy Birthday'!
When the plane leaves, you'll regret what you said.
If she passes the exam, she'll be able to do the PhD.
```

The **simple present** is also used to refer to future scheduled events. In this case, an adverb of time indicates the future.

`I have a meeting next Wednesday at 9 P.M.`