



Why is English Grammar so difficult (not)?

Increasingly, I am being referred to websites that offer elaborate maps, tables, or diagrams of the English verb system. These are bewildering in their complexity and microscopic in their detail. The English verb system is represented as comprising literally dozens of different tenses, moods, voices, as well as all their possible combinations and permutations. Each are neatly labeled and exemplified, often with somewhat far-fetched examples, for example, "Will you have been washing that car for five years in March?" These maps are further complicated by the fact that many forms have more than one meaning attached to them, giving rise to multiple branch-lines and intersections.

The implication - for teachers as well as for learners - of these seductively intricate verb maps is that the learning of English grammar involves internalizing a complex constellation of isolated forms, along with all their associated meanings, in much the same way that London taxi drivers are required to learn "The Knowledge" - a mental mapping of every one of the city's tens of thousands of streets. The advice given to teachers in the teacher's guide to *Kernel Lessons Intermediate* (O' Neill et al., 1971) still holds true:

How is the learning of the verb-forms going? If students are still making mistakes, begin regular testing of all the verbs. If necessary, start the students learning the forms again from the beginning. THESE MUST BE KNOWN CORRECTLY.

The Students' Book of *Kernel Lessons* had 25 units, of which 20 were devoted to some aspect of the verb phrase: *present*

continuous, past simple, present perfect continuous, even the wonderfully named future in the past! Contemporary coursebooks are true to this tradition: every one of the 12 units of *New Intermediate Headway* (Soars and Soars, 1996) is dedicated to a verb phrase structure, popularly known as a "tense." Test this for yourself: Open the contents page of the coursebook you are currently using: How much of it is verb-based? And how many of these verb structures are combinations of these seven elements: present, past, future, perfect, continuous, active, and passive, each combination presented as if it was somehow a unique and independent structure?

But is the English verb phrase really as complex as these models and syllabuses make it out to be? Compared with many languages such as Spanish, Turkish, and German whose verbs are inflected for person, number, tense and more - the morphology of the English verb system is transparently simple, the single biggest complication being the present tense third-person *s*. Of course, the system of auxiliaries partly makes up for the lack of inflections, but even so,

with only two auxiliary verbs that impact on meaning (*be* and *have*), the learning load, from a formal point of view, is not (or need not) be great.

What seems to complicate the picture are the *meanings* associated with these forms. Thus, one grammar (Cowan, 2008) ascribes four different meanings to the present perfect, eight different

meanings to the present simple, and another eight different meanings to the

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present progressive. Moreover, many of these meanings are attempts to deal with so-called exceptions to the more general rules. Thus, the use of *always* with the present continuous (*She's always giving me marmalade; We're always trying to improve our customer care*) is attributed to speaker irritation. Or instances that don't fit the rule, such as (the attested) *Last summer, I've been to New York, Washington, Atlantic City*, are dismissed as errors. At the same time, there are uses of particular structures that are seldom if ever accounted for in the standard grammars, such as present perfect continuous for indefinite past events: *Have you ever been shampooing your hair and the water has gone off?* or *would have done* for real (as opposed to unreal) past hypotheses: *Napoleon would have been six at the time*. Or present continuous for timeless situations: *He never wears his glasses when he's playing tennis*.

A number of grammarians, frustrated at this proliferation of rules, sub-rules, and exceptions, have attempted to describe what might be called "a unified theory" of the verb phrase in English—that is, a theory that reduces this apparent complexity to a few, very simple choices, each choice is associated with a particular choice of form. The guiding principle is (they argue) that for every form there is a meaning: And *only one*.

The basic principles of this unified theory are these:

1. There are only two tenses in English, and each tense has one core meaning;
2. There are also two aspects, each with a core meaning, neither having anything to do with time;
3. The two tenses can each combine with one or both aspects and the resultant meanings are the sum of the meanings of the components;
4. Modal auxiliaries can be mapped onto this tense-plus-aspect system so as to express the speaker's stance, and the system can also be configured for voice (i.e., active

or passive) in accordance with the requirements of the unfolding discourse.

Let's have a look at the first two of these principles in more detail.

1. If the term tense describes the way that verbs are inflected to encode the notion of distance in time, then there are only two tenses in English: *work* and *worked*. Because statements about the future inevitably involve a degree of subjectivity, it's not surprising that future meaning is mainly expressed through the use of modal verbs (in English at least). There is no future tense.

It's now generally accepted by grammarians (such as Lewis, 1986, and Yule, 1998) that tense is deictic. That is, it's part of the way we "point" using language, and belongs to that larger linguistic system that accommodates expressions of personal deixis, such as *me, you, and them*, spatial deixis

(*here and there*), and temporal deixis (*now and then*). English distinguishes between a deictic center (*me, here, now*) and an outer, more remote, circle: *them, there, then*. When situating an event in this outer circle, that is, away from the here and now, we use the remote form of the verb, for example, *worked*. Otherwise, we use the unmarked form of the verb, *work*. A situation may be remote because it is disconnected from the present, that is, in the past: *I once worked as a lumberjack*. Or because it is disconnected from reality: *I wish I worked in a chocolate factory*. Occasionally, we also use the remote form (-ed) to express social distance: *Sorry, where did you say you worked?*

The non-remote form, on the other hand, situates events and states in the "inner circle." Thus, *I like chocolate, I promise to be good, he kicks the ball, it tastes nice, he walks to work* are all located in the here and now. (Only co-text will tell us whether these events are habitual or not: *He often walks to work; it sometimes*

tastes nice...). Likewise, an event in the past (either real or imaginary) can be made immediate through the use of the non-remote form: *This guy walks into a bar... Michael Jackson dies!* Scheduled future events have an immediacy too: *I fly to Boston on Monday*. Thus, there is nothing intrinsic to the non-remote form that determines whether it is present, or habitual, or a timeless fact, or anything else - only that it is psychologically *near*. By contrast, adding -ed to a verb makes it psychologically *far*. So, not only is there no future tense in English, there is no present or past tense, either!

2. Verb meaning can also be tweaked depending on how the speaker views the situation in question. These "ways of viewing" are called aspects and there are two in English: the progressive and the perfect. (The simple form is not an aspect: It simply connotes lack of aspect). Just as in the noun phrase system in English we can distinguish between units (*a lemon, two lemons*) and mass (*lemon juice*), a similar distinction is available in the verb phrase. We can construe events as being entire, bounded, indivisible, or as unbounded, evolving, indeterminate. Compare:

I watched her cross the street.
I watched her crossing the street.
I heard a dog bark.
I heard a dog barking.

Adding -ing to a verb converts it from a unit (like a *lemon*) to stuff (like *lemon*). That is, rather than seeing the event from outside, as a whole, we are seeing it from inside, as somehow evolving and unbounded. Compare:

I live in New York.
I'm living in New York.
She watched a movie.
She was watching a movie.

Depending on the choice of verb, and the context, "the view from inside" can have a number of pragmatic implications. It can, for example, make the event seem temporary, incomplete, or repetitive. But these are *only* implications: They are not intrinsic to

the meaning of the -ing suffix. Nor does the addition of -ing tell us when the event took place. The only indication of time is located in the auxiliary. Thus: *I am living in NY* = non-remote; *I was*

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living in NY = remote. Likewise, the -ing addition tells us nothing about the duration of the event: *I lived in NY for two months* and *I was living in NY for two months* describe exactly the same event and time-span. The only difference is that the latter is viewed as evolving, as a process, as divisible: *As stuff*.

It should also be noted that aspectual meaning is influenced by the choice of verb type. Compare, for example: *She was leaning on the door* vs *She was banging on the door*. Since *bang* is a punctative verb, *banging* implies repetition. Not so *leaning*. And never forget: All interpretation is ultimately contingent on context.

What does the choice of perfect aspect add to the equation? Perfect

aspect implies relevance: The event is seen as being somehow connected - either to the deictic centre (*here and now*) or the outer circle (*there and then*). Thus, *I lived in NY* conveys distance and no connection; whereas *I have lived in NY* implies connection - in this case to the present. Why might an event be viewed as connected to the present? Perhaps because it is still occurring: *I have lived in NY for two months now*. Or because it occurred (or didn't occur) in a span of time leading up to the present: *I have never - in my whole life - lived in Los Angeles*. Or because it has effects that persist into the present: *I have lived in NY, so I can tell you how to get to Times Square*.

Again, it's worth reiterating that perfect aspect has nothing to do with time; nor does the perfect mean that a

situation is complete or incomplete: Only the context can tell you that.

Finally, progressive and perfect aspects can combine, and the meaning of the combination is simply the meaning of its component parts. Thus: *I have been living in NY* = the situation is relevant (i.e., somehow connected) to the here and now, and it is viewed as a process, that is, unfolding, staged, divisible, indeterminate. Again, nothing in the choice of tense or of the two aspects tells us when the situation occurred, or for how long, or whether it is complete or not. Everything depends on the lexis and the context. *I have been sleeping* is clearly complete. *Have you ever been working on your computer when the power has gone off?* is clearly situated in some indefinite past.

Since the meaning of a composite verb-plus-tense-plus-aspect combo is simply the aggregate meaning of its parts, there should be no need to teach each combination (*past continuous, present perfect continuous, past perfect* etc) as separate, independent items. If the learner has the feel for what -ed does to a verb, or what *be + -ing* does to a verb, or what *have + -en* does to a verb, it should be sufficient both to interpret and to generate all possible combinations. Adding modality and voice invests the system with further nuances.

Think of the time that could be saved if tense and aspect (i.e., verb morphology) were reduced to just two or three units in a coursebook! Time that might be better spent on the real problem of verbs in English, that is, knowing which verbs take which patterns, that is, verb syntax. Of course, it could be argued that any rule-based instruction - however accurate the rules - is a waste of time, and that the only way to learn the verb system is through exposure, attempts at use, and feedback. But that's another story.

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