

TIME AND TENSE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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***ABSTRACT:** This paper reviews the research carried out in the area of Time and Aspect of English by well known grammarians. According to Huddleston and Pullum, English has two-dimensional systems of temporal reference which comprises the categories of primary tense and secondary tense. Primary tenses express the distinction between past and present time. For example, "He went to school" contains a verb in the preterite tense (went). In "He goes to school" the tense of the verb is present (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 116).*

Quirk et al (1973) classifies verbs as lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs. All auxiliary verbs are divided into primary and modal. Tense is taken to express time and aspect is taken to express manner. They also talk about a distinction between dynamic and stative verbs.

Zandvoort (1962) talks of neutral present, iterative present and actual present. Past also has iterative meaning. Perfect is divided as continuative, resultative and experiential perfect, on the basis of meaning.

Leech and Svartvik (1975) talk of present state, present event, present habit, temporary present, temporary habit. Present perfect is divided into resultative, indefinite, habitual and stative.

INTRODUCTION

A Second learner of the English language has to struggle with many tasks concerning vocabulary and grammar. The correct usage of the verb comprises proper understanding of the grammatical categories of time, tense, and aspect. This paper attempts a brief review of the concepts discussed by eminent grammarians namely, Quirk et al, Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey K. Pullum, R.W. Zandvoort, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik. **Tense** is used to express the location of an event or state in time, which can be divided into future, present and past. On the other hand, **aspect** expresses the way in which the action or the state is experienced.

Quirk et al (1973)

Quirk et al classifies verbs as lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs. Auxiliary verbs are again divided into primary and modal. Lexical verbs are the main verbs and the Auxiliary verbs are the helping verbs. And tense expresses the universal time through verbal form that is past, present and future. Aspect concerns the manner in which the verbal action is experienced and also shows whether the action is completed or not completed. Example:

- a. Robin wrote the letter yesterday.
- b. While Robin was writing the letter, the postman came.

In (a) the lexical verb **wrote** shows Robin's writing the letter was completed in the past, whereas in (b) he thinks that the situation had started and was in the middle when the postman's arrival took place. They explain this concept showing the variations of tense and aspect markers such as -ed, -es, will/shall which are used to indicate past, present and future tense and the progressive marker -ing and the perfective marker -en to indicate aspect. The progressive marker remains stable, irrespective of the forms of lexical verbs to which it is always affixed. It is -ing added to the base of both regular and irregular lexical verbs except modals (shall, will, etc) which are not inflected.

The perfective marker is generally realized as -ed, and there are several other variations. The future tense is not marked inflectionally like the past and the present third person and singular number. Instead, it is formed by means of a periphrasis, namely shall/will followed by the base form of verb. The future markers **shall** and **will** are called modals, as they in addition to indicating future tense, also serve to express modalities like intention, permission, promise and so on.

Quirk et al also speak about the uses of dynamic and stative verbs, since some verbs are sometimes stative and sometimes dynamic in regard to whether they refer to stative or dynamic situations. Stative verbs are not usually used in the progressive tenses such as **be**, **seem**, and **like** etc. Example:

Sheela likes her parents.

Here we cannot get a progressive form because we are referring to a state of mind, not a process.

Dynamic verbs are used in the progressive tense such as eat, grow and so on. Example:

She is eating a banana.

However, there are situations where **be** is used as non-stative verb. Example:

Sheela is being a good girl today. (*is behaving well*)

The above analysis shows the use of verb forms to indicate tense: past, present, future and the progressive marker -ing and the perfective marker -en to indicate aspects in English.

The past participle form of verbs is used to express perfective aspect and also in passive constructions. For example:

She has written a book.

This novel has been written by her.

It is also used sometime in an adjectival construction:

Mashed potato is easier to eat.

Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey K. Pullum (2002)

Huddleston and Pullum emphasize on the verbal systems of tense, aspect and mood, which are marked inflectionally, or analytically by auxiliaries. Tense is used to locate the situation or period of time. The two terms in the tense system are present tense and perfect tense. Example:

a) She *went* to school Preterit vs. present

b) She *goes* to school

a) He may *have known* her Perfect vs. non-perfect

b) He may *know* her

The verb forms in the sentences refer to past and present time. The present perfect involves two tenses: past and non-past. Example:

I have read only two of the books.

Both *have* and *read* are verbs by themselves and they carry respective tense selections *have* is **non-past** and *read* is **past**.

Here Huddleston and Pullum are of the view that all occurrences of the auxiliary *have* are underlying past tenses. They argue that the terms past, present and future refer to certain parts of time itself. They are relational notions. For example:

- a) He *died* of lung cancer.(past time)
- b) I *promise* to let you have it back tomorrow. (Present time)
- c) If you *see* her tomorrow give her my best regards. (future time)

In (a) the time of dying is past and it is understood as a time earlier than now, than the time when I utter the sentence. There are two terms in the relation as the *time referred to*, symbolized 'tr', and the time of orientation, symbolized 'to'.

In (a) 'tr' is the time of dying, 'to' is the time of utterance, and the relation is *earlier than* or *anterior to*. In (b), 'tr' is the time of promising, 'to' again the time of utterance and the relation is *simultaneous with*. In (c), 'tr' is the time of your seeing her, 'to' the time of utterance and the relation is *later than* or *posterior to*.

The above statement can be symbolized as follows:

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| Past time | Tr anterior to To- Tr < To |
| Present time | Tr simultaneous with To-Tr = To |
| Future time | Tr posterior to To-Tr > To |

Present Tense is used to indicate occurrence and state. Example:

- a) I promise to let you have it back tomorrow.(Occurrence)
- b. I live in Berlin. (State)

In (a) the time of promising coincides with the time of speaking. In (b), the situation is referring to the present time. The time does not show when it began or how long it will continue.

Perfect Tense

Perfect Tense **expresses a present state resulting from past action**. Example:

He is believed to have written it last week.

The following are the manifestation of perfect tense:

(a) Present Perfect

The basic meaning of the present perfect is described as referring to past with present relevance of a previous situation. The following are the four major uses of the present perfect.

- i) the continuative perfect
- ii) the experiential perfect
- iii) the resultative perfect
- iv) the perfect of recent past

(i.) Continuative Perfect

It is used to indicate a situation that begins in the past, continues up to the present and may extend into the future. Example:

She has lived in Berlin ever since she married.

(ii) The experiential perfect:

The present perfect may refer to some event that has taken place at least once in a period leading up to the present. For Example;

We have now walked ten miles.

(iii) The Resultative Perfect

The present Perfect in English refers to a past event, the result of which still exists at the present time. Example:

She *has broken* her leg.

(v) The perfect of recent past

The present perfect indicates a situation completed in the recent past. Example:

Harsha has just gone out.

(b) Past perfect

It refers to a time further in the past, seen from the view point of a definite point of time already in the past. For Example:

Harsha had lived in London for ten years. (When I met him).

In the indirect speech, if the reporting verb is in the past, the verb of the reported speech which in the simple present is changed into the simple past. It is called back-shift. Example:

He said, "I like it." = He said that he liked it.

(c) Progressive Aspect

Progressive aspect is marked with the periphrastic form: be -ing. Example;

Harsha is singing now.

This sentence describes a situation in progress.

R.W. Zandvoort (1957)

Zandvoort speaks about ‘**tense**’ as that which denotes two verbal forms (past and present) and an equal number of verbal groups (perfect and future) whose main function is to denote the ‘**time**’ at which an action takes place. Example:

Harsha is playing (Present)

Harsha played (Past)

Harsha will play (Future)

Simple Present

The simple present in English mainly is used in three ways (Zandvoort: 1962: 59)

(i) Neutral Present

(ii) Iterative Present

(iii) Actual Present

(a) Neutral Present: The neutral refers to the state which extends into past and future without any limitations of time. Hence Leech (1971:1) and Quirk et al. (1972: 85) term it “the unrestrictive use of the simple present”. It includes **eternal** truths. Scientific statements and other similar states. Example:

The Ganga flows from the Himalayas.

Water boils at 100oc.

We live in Sweden.

However, the unspecified duration of the situation can be specified by adding adverbials of time to this. Example:

At present we live in Australia.

(b) Iterative present: The habitual or iterative present refers to a situation that can be successfully repeated at intervals within a period of time. For example:

I get up at six every day.

This paper appears twice a week.

(c) Actual present

Actual present is to indicate a state or action in the present. Example:

The manager wants to speak to you.

The simple present also is used to indicate the future or the past. Example:

I start work tomorrow.

Robin tells me that you have been abroad (...has told...)

As indicated earlier, the simple present is used to describe past events. Example:

He just *walks* into the room and sits down in front of the fire without saying any word to anyone. (Historic present)

This type of narration is used to create rhetorical effects.

Simple Past

The simple past is used to indicate the past events. Example:

I met her yesterday.

In this regard, the present perfect also refers to the past events without a definite reference to the past. Example:

I have just met her.

In both sentences, the meeting took place in the past, but in the former one the time is specified i.e. *yesterday*.

The simple past may be used with habitual or iterative meaning. Example:

I *saw* her every day.

However, there is a separate habitual aspect in English (though only in the past tenses) with the construction *used to + inf*. Example:

I used to see her every day.

Perfect tense

It is used to indicate an action that falls within the time -sphere of the present. Example:

I have already eaten.

The present perfect has the following uses such as:

a) Continuative perfect

Perfect is used to indicate a situation that begins in the past, continues up to the present and may extend into the future. Example:

We've lived here for ten years.

(a) Resultative perfect

It refers to past events, the result of which still exists at the present time. Example:

I have bought a new T.V.

In this sentence, buying a T.V took place in the past, but its effect still exists. The resultative perfect does not need any adverbial of time.

(b) Experiential perfect

It refers to some event that has taken place at least once in a period leading up to the present. Example:

Mr. Varma has been to Japan.

Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (1975)

Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik talk about time, tense and aspect. Verbs may refer to an event or to a state.

(a) Event verb

An event verb shows a definite beginning and end. Example:

He became unconscious.

(b) State verb

A state verb does not have well-defined beginning and end. Example:

He remained unconscious.

Present time

The following are the main ways of referring to something which occurs at the present time.

(a) Present state (the simple present tense). Example:

She is hungry.

(c) Present event (the simple present tense). Example:

He declares the meeting closed.

In this sentence, an event has begun and ended at the moment of speech.

(d) **Present Habit** (the simple present tense). Example:

I walk every day in the morning.

It shows an event that is repeated every day.

(d). **Temporary present** (the present progressive). Example:

My brother is living in a rented house.(temporarily)

(e)**Temporary Habit** (the present progressive). Example:

She is walking to work while her kinetic is being repaired.

It shows a temporary habit *walking*.....

Past time

It refers to past actions. Example:

I read your book yesterday.

Her father suffered from T.B. all his life. (i.e. he is now dead)

Present perfect

Present perfect has the following uses.

a) Resultative Perfect

It refers to a past event with results in the present time. Example:

His leg has been broken. (i.e. it is still not healed)

b) Indefinite Event

It is used to indicate an indefinite situation. Example:

Have you ever been to France?

c) Habitual Perfect

It refers to a habit in a period leading up to the present time. Example:

She has played at a Wimbledon since she was eighteen.

d) Stative Perfect

It refers to a state upto the present time. Example:

The super market how long has it been open?

Perfect progressive

The perfect progressive deals with present and past. Example:

She has been writing a letter. (Present perfect)

She had been writing a letter. (Past perfect)

According to Leech and Svartvik, in some contexts, the present perfect and the present perfect progressive are interchangeable.

Robin has looked after the business for several years.

Robin has been looking after the business for several years.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to present the work done by grammarians on different aspects of tense, time and aspect in English.

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