

On the Function of English Verb Tense

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英語の動詞時制の機能について

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The aim of this paper is to assert that present-day English has only two tenses, and in this new light to reconsider the meaning or function of the English verb tense. In this attempt, it is also hoped that this way of viewing tense may be of some usefulness to teaching English, particularly reading and writing.

INTRODUCTION

1.0. English grammars vary in the recognition of the number of "tenses" from two to twelve: "past," "present"; "future"; "past perfect," "present perfect," "future perfect"; "past progressive," etc. In this divergency it seems most reasonable and constructive to assert that English has only two tenses, neither more nor less, which correspond to the formal contrast of the finite verbs, though some, like *must* and *cut*, (partially) lack this contrast. The reason for this assertion is for simplicity and generality.

1.1. First, we shall take the following sentences into consideration.

(1) I shall be thirty-five years old next April.

(2) I said I should be thirty-five years old (the) next April.

Though in (1) the "shall be" is what is called a "future tense," in (2) the "should be" is not called such but is usually explained as *shall* being turned into the "past form" owing to the "sequence of tenses." This sounds strange and inconsistent, for it is apparently

more natural and consistent to say that the "should" is the "past" tense and the "shall," the "present." And, according to the contrast of the finite verbs, all the "tenses" may be classified into either of the two tenses. Consequently, the "future tense" is to lose its special status in English grammar, and the *will* and *shall* here are naturally to be returned to those *will* and *shall* with meanings or functions of their own, which have been grouped together with *can*, *may*, *must*, etc. We shall call these two tenses Preterit and Non-preterit because the words "past" and "present," usually referring to time, seem somewhat misleading.

1.2. Next, we shall consider the constructions *have* + *-ed* and *be* + *-ing*, where *-ed* and *-ing* indicate the "past participle" and the "present participle" respectively,—standing for the base of a verb. It is true that these constructions frequently occur within the "tenses," and it could be natural that one should tend to set up such "tenses" as "present perfect," "past progressive," etc. But they also appear, no less frequently, outside of the "tenses," as in the following:

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1 Prof. A. Ohta has statistically shown that this contrast of the two forms are more basic distributionally as well, in his *Tense and Aspect of Present-day American English* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1963), 2.0.4.3.

- (3) He is ashamed of not *having*
²⁾ *studied* harder in his youth.
 (4) *Having done* his day's work, he
 went out into the field near by.
 (5) He pretends *to be making* a re-
 search into the difficult problem.

Here again, therefore, it seems more appropriate and constructive to consider that they have some particular functions of their own, independent of the "tenses." We shall call these constructions Perfect and Expanded Forms, regardless of whether they occur within the "tenses" or not.

PERFECT AND EXPANDED FORMS

2.0. W.F. Bryan seems to have pointed out³⁾ that the function of the "(present) perfect tense" is merely to indicate that the speaker or writer situates an action, state or occurrence in a retrospective stretch of time that includes his own "now." And if we perceive some meaning concerning result, repetition, continuation, etc, he continues to insist, that meaning never comes from this form but from the meaning or character of the verb, some modifiers, or the whole context. Though Bryan has come to this conclusion with regard to the "(present) perfect tense" used exclusively in head-clauses and simple sentences, similar things seem to be said with any other case where the Perfect Form appears.⁴⁾ That is, it seems that the fundamental function of the Perfect Form might be generalized as situating an action, state or occurrence in a retrospective stretch that spreads from a certain point included in the stretch toward a distance prior to, or away from, it.

2.1. The "past perfect tense," for example, was usually said to be a shifting back of the "present perfect and past tenses" into the (more distant) past. But "the past perfect

expresses the meanings of the present perfect transferred to a point of time in the past"⁵⁾ might be a more appropriate description, because the more distant past is not necessarily expressed by means of this form, as in:

- (6) I felt as I *felt* once coming home from an out-of-town football game.
 (Hemingway, *Fiesta*)
 (7) Afterward I discoursed at some length on which ones I had liked best (I *ate* no less than two of each kind, for fear of giving offense), to the delight of the two Cavilleris.
 (E. Segal, *Love Story*)

And if the retrospective function is regarded as the fundamental of the Perfect Form, then the Preterit Perfect may naturally refer to the more distant past.

2.2. Now we shall take these sentences into consideration.

- (8) By next Monday, he will *have stayed* in Athens for exactly two weeks.
 (9) He may *have done* it.
 (10) He seems *to have read* the book.
 (11) He repents *having invited* her.
 (12) *Having been* sick so often, I *have* learned to take good care of my health.

Though the sentence (8) is in a "future perfect tense," the "will have stayed" here is to be regarded as Non-preterit *will* + Perfect Form, whose (future) point of retrospection is explicitly indicated by "next Monday." And this "next Monday," decidedly a future time, is recognized in a direct connection with the speaker or writer's own "now," as is often the case with the Non-preterit tense: "He comes tomorrow," "They start next Wednesday," etc. In (9) to (12), though the point of retrospection is not explicitly mentioned, it seems to be realized from the context, in these cases from the Non-preterit tense. In other words, it seems significant that all the four sentences

2 The italics in the example sentence here (and hereafter as well) is mine.

3 W.F. Bryan, "The Preterite and the Perfect Tense in Present-day English" (1936), translated by K. Chujo in *The English Philology Library* 37 (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1959)

4 Cf. A. Ohta, *op. cit.*, p. 41 and pp. 57-58; Gero Bauer, "The English 'Perfect' Reconsidered," *Journal of Linguistics* 6 (1970), pp. 189-198.

5 E. Krusinga, *A Handbook of Present-day English*⁵ (Groningen: Noordhoff, 1931), 599.

in question may be rewritten as follows:⁶⁾

- (13) It *is* probable that he *has done* it.
- (14) It *seems* that he *has read* the book.
- (15) He *repents* that he *has invited* her.
- (16) As I *have been* sick so often, I *have* learned to take good care of my health.

Moreover, in the Preterit context, all the sentences above ((8) to (16)) may retain their Perfect Forms only with the change of tense (and some other parts), and the point of retrospection may be explicitly indicated or be understood from the context where the sentences occur.

3.0. The essence of the Expanded Form may be difficult to extract, as is easily seen in the following confusion of Kruisinga:⁷⁾

Indeed it may be that this descriptive function is the fundamental function of the progressive, whereas the function that has given rise to the name "progressive" is only due to the context. It should be added, however, that the progressive function is the usual one in the present and preterite.

But it might be possible (and appropriate as well) to assert that the fundamental of the Expanded Form is the "introspective"⁸⁾ function, i. e. to indicate that the speaker or writer takes an action, state or occurrence in the middle of its process. According to this interpretation,⁹⁾ it is natural that this form should give a sense of duration or incompleteness, and with verbs of action, it may denote progression, or further, a sense of (near) future, according to the nature of the verb and the whole context.

3.1. When the center of this "introspection" coincides with a certain point of time in reality, then the Expanded Form may serve as a circumstance around the point. We shall take the following for instance.

- (17) I stroked her hair and patted her shoulder. She *was crying*. (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*)

Here, the former sentence plays the role of the point and the latter explains the circumstance around it. Furthermore, if a certain point of this kind is common to more than one Expanded Forms, it may imply simultaneity or even identity, as in the following:

- (18) I looked back from the door. Mike had one hand on the bar and *was leaning* toward Brett, talking. Brett *was looking* at him quite coolly, but the corners of her eyes *were smiling*. (Hemingway, *Fiesta*)

- (19) Massart shook his head again. He *was looking* at Andrés but he *was not seeing* him. (Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hereafter shortened as *For Whom*)

In this way, where Expanded Forms are employed, the narrative may linger and result in an emotional or descriptive effect.

3.2. What has been stated above, in the last analysis, seems to be true, too, when Expanded Forms occur with non-finite forms of the verb *be*.

4. The retrospective and "introspective" functions of the Perfect and Expanded Forms mentioned above might be indicated in Figures 1 and 2, and, when the two forms co-occur and fuse, in Figure 3.

6 The sentence (9), for example, may have the possibility of being rewritten as "It is probable that he did it," but then the meanings of the two result sentences naturally differ from each other, which implies that the original sentence may have at least two meanings. In either case, however, the Perfect Form might be said to be a kind of signal of the retrospection.

7 Kruisinga, *op. cit.*, 508.

8 Though it may be somewhat inaccurate and improper, this term is introduced because of the lack of any other compact term which is more precise and accurate.

9 Cf. Ohta, *op. cit.*, 2.2.1.0. Here he says, "Progressive forms indicate an action in the process," and tries to account for various meanings of the Expanded Form on the basis of the concept "process."

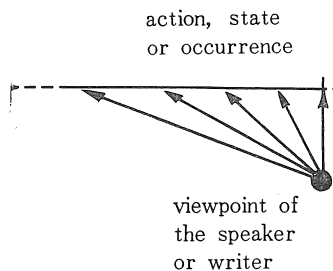


Figure 1

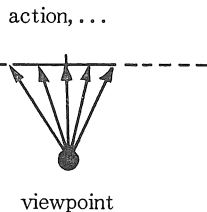


Figure 2

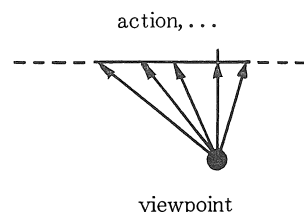


Figure 3

PRETERIT VS. NON-PRETERIT

5.0.0. As is well known, the classical “tenses” do not necessarily serve to indicate time relations: suffice it to remember their “subjunctive uses.” On the other hand, time may be indicated, more definitely, by adverbs, conjunctions, etc. Consequently, it seems more appropriate to consider that the tense has nothing essential to do with the indication of time.¹⁰ In the last analysis, the fundamental function of the English verb tense seems to be to denote the difference of mode of consciousness.¹¹ That is, the above-defined two tenses, Preterit and Non-preterit, serve to indicate, respectively, that the speaker or writer takes an action, state or occurrence as prior to, or completely separated from, his own “now,” and that he is conscious of it in some other direct connection with his “present” situation.

5.0.1. We shall take the following sentences into consideration.

- (20) Father died thirty years ago.
 (21) Father has been dead for the past thirty years.
 (22) It is thirty years since Father died.

These three sentences differ in the use of tense, though they all refer to the same fact. In (20), the father's death is regarded as a

past fact, as something completely separated from the speaker or writer's “now.” In (21), this past fact is looked upon as what has some direct connection with his own “now.” And in (22), the situation is a little more complex: the speaker or writer is conscious of the fact in a twofold way, as the use of the two different tenses shows.

Now we shall take the following pair of sentences for example.

- (23) People *believed* that the earth *was* round.
 (24) People *believed* that the earth *is* round.

In (23), the content of *that*-clause is perceived in much the same way as the head-clause. That is, the speaker or writer takes the whole matter to be separated from his own “now.” But in (24), the content of *that*-clause is not perceived in the same way as in (23). The speaker or writer is conscious of it in some direct connection with his own “now.” In other words, he may also believe that the earth is round, which is not implied in (23).

5.0.2. Next we shall take the following “subjunctive” sentence into consideration.

- (25) If he had not died thirty years ago, Father would be sixty-four now and he might have become president of the company.

¹⁰ Cf. Ohta, *op. cit.*, 2.0.2.0. & 2.0.2.1.; Bauer, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Cf. Itsuki Hosoe, *An Enquiry into the Meaning of Tense in the English Verb* (Tokyo: Taibundo, 1932). He claims that it is not the essential function of the tense forms to indicate the distinctions of time.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*; Ohta, *op. cit.*, 2.0.3.; J. D. MacCawley's arguments concerning the presuppositions of the “present perfect” in his “Tense and Time Reference in English,” *Studies in Linguistic Semantics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), pp. 106-109.

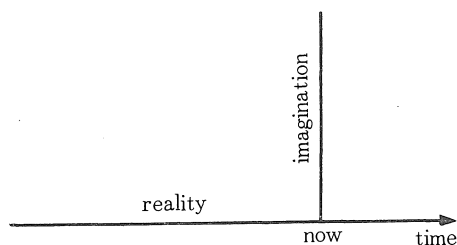


Figure 4

Since the Preterit tense is used, the whole content is regarded, needless to say, as separated from the speaker or writer's "now." But this separation from the "present" might be said to be perceived not horizontally but vertically as in Figure 4, for the speaker or writer is now in a world of imagination, and not in the world of reality. And because of this separation from the "present," the "subjunctive use" of the Preterit may serve as what is called "euphemistic" or "polite" expression as well.

5.0.3. Thus the Preterit tense may be used in two different ways, factually and imaginatively, though it may sometimes be difficult to discern between them at first sight. At any rate, however, both ways are the same in that an action, state or occurrence is perceived as completely separated from, and not directly connected with, the speaker or writer's "now."

5.1.1. As the name of "narrative past" shows, the Preterit is the common tense for narrative where one event after another is represented as a completed perception, and the speed of narrative is, usually, rather great. But the progress of narrative may be blocked by the use of the Preterit Expanded or of the Preterit Perfect, and the narrative, loitering about or going backward, may turn descriptive or expository, emotional or reflective. Examples are as follows:

- (26) "No," she said and then she was in the robe and he *was holding* her tight to him and trying to kiss her

lips and she *was pressing* her face against the pillow of clothing but *holding* her arms close around his neck. (Hemingway, *For Whom*)

- (27) I went back in the room and got into bed. I *had been standing* on the stone balcony in bare foot. I knew our crowd *must have all been* out at the bull-ring. Back in bed, I went to sleep. (Hemingway, *Fiesta*)

5.1.2. The Preterit Simple may serve for this lingering description as well as the speedy narrative above-mentioned. Suffice it to compare the two uses of *stood* in this:

- (28) He *stood* up from the table, his face white, and *stood* there white and angry behind the little plates of hors d'oeuvres. (*Ibid.*)

These two kinds of function of the Preterit Simple, though they may also depend on the nature of the verb used and the context, may be compared to the two meanings of *then*: "(a) 'next' or 'after that' as in *Then he went to France*, (b) 'at that time,' as in *Then he lived in France.*"¹³⁾ The former carries the narrative on, while the latter lingers over the situation as it was at that time.

Also, as Jespersen says,¹⁴⁾ it may be noticed that there is often a distinctive emotional coloring in the "lingering" Preterit, while the "narrative" Preterit Simple is lacking in it. In the following passage, for example, it will be noticed that, after the sentence "He was a short and solid old man...," the narrative slows down and becomes descriptive, lingering over the old man.

- (29) He spread the photostated military map out on the forest floor and looked at it carefully. The old man looked over his shoulder. He was short and solid old man in a black peasants smock and grey iron-stiff trousers and he wore rope-soled shoes. He was breathing heavily from the climb and his hand rested

13 O. Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (London: Allen, 1924; 1958), p. 276.

14 *Ibid.*

on one of the two heavy packs they had been carrying.

(Hemingway, *For Whom*)

It should also be noticed that Expanded and Perfect Expanded forms are employed here, too.

5.2.1. The Non-preterit tense may sometimes be employed in narrative by the name of "historical" or "dramatic present," where the speaker or writer visualizes what happened in the past as if it were now present before his eyes, and the effect is usually colloquial or dialectal. And Prof. Ohta says that "the so-called 'historical present' is not compatible with past time indicators in the strict sense.¹⁵⁾ This may also prove the speaker or writer's consciousness of the "present."

5.2.2. Generally speaking, however, the Non-preterit seems to be used mostly for the expression of truth, notion, idea, habit, or conception of something at the speaker or writer's "present." So, while it is frequently used in the development of ideas, the Non-preterit scarcely appears in novels or short stories except in dialogues and (interior) monologues.

Such being the case, when the Non-preterit is found in the Preterit context, it may usually indicate either that a mere conception is expressed or that the idea expressed is regarded by the speaker or writer as a kind of truth, as something of ever-lasting value. Examples are as follows:

(30) She moved awkwardly as a colt *moves*, but with that same grace as of a young animal. (Hemingway, *For Whom*)

(31) He knew how boring any man's war *is* to any other man, and he stopped talking about it. (Hemingway, *Across the River and into the Trees*)

(32) Suppose you were about to fly out into space in a rocket, and to make a flight around the moon to see the other side. The other side *may* look very much like the one you *know*, but even so, you would like to see just to be sure. (*Progressive English Readers* 1. Kairyudo, 1966)

And this kind of use of the Non-preterit may reflect the mode of consciousness or the opinion of the speaker or writer.

CONCLUSION

6.1. According to the two-tense system proposed here, what has been called "future tense" is automatically to lose its grammatical status, with the formal contrast *will/would* or *shall/should* receiving a greater attention. And it seems more appropriate to consider that the constructions *be* + *-ing* and *have* + *-ed*, occurring outside the classical "tenses" as well, have certain particular functions of their own which have nothing essential to do with the tense system.

6.2. And, in the last analysis, it seems that the fundamental function of the English verb tense is not to indicate time relations but to reveal the way of perception or mode of consciousness of the speaker or writer. In other words, the tense indicates whether the speaker or writer takes an action, state or occurrence as completely separated from his own "now," or he is conscious of it in some other direct connection with his "present" situation.

15 Ohta, *op. cit.*, 2.0.4.1.