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International Digital Organization for Scientific Research. ISSN:2550-7958.

IDOSR JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND ENGLISH 2(1) 110-124, 2017.

## **Tense And Aspect: A Critical Analysis Of Existing Theories**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tense is arguably one of the most difficult aspects of language learning, teaching and use in both L1 and L2 contexts. The difficulty is more pronounced with the linguistic reality that the concept is conveyed in different ways in given human languages. Thus, many linguistic scholars have attempted to provide explanations or definitions for it in a bid to enhance language learning and acquisition. Ironically, these explanations have deepened the nebulous nature of the concept of tense in that different scholars try to explain it from different theoretical backgrounds. This paper is a critical review of the different scholarly descriptions of tense as well as aspect. In the end, an eclectic theoretical approach is proposed as a model for the representation of the concepts of tense and aspect in modern grammar.

Keywords: Tense, Language, Existing theories and Modern grammar.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tense in the context of this paper is used in relation to 'tense and aspect'. Scholarly issues on tense and aspect are therefore reviewed. Tense systems provide a way of locating an event that is, specifying its position in time. It is important to state that tense has a wide range of perception, particularly when it comes to real practice. Some may conceive it as a time marker; others may regard it as a verb change that occurs in a sentence. On both sides however, there lies some relationship in that a verb may be changed when one means to denote a certain tense [1].

## TENSE

Tense is referred to as a deictic category that places a situation in time with respect to some other time, usually the moment of speech. Aspect on the other hand is concerned with the different perspectives which a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some event, action, process [2].

To use the language of systemic functional grammar, tense and aspect are systems of the verbal group. While tense has time reference, aspect shows how the verb is experienced. Comrie, (1976)[3] observes that tense is “a feature of the time that relates the organization of the clause to the non linguistic concept of time.” Therefore, the acquisitions of both the time reference and how the verb is experienced are important in language acquisition.

Tense as a linguistic category is expressed in Comrie, Bernard (1985)[4] as “the means of expressing time relationship through the particular grammatical form of the verb.” According to Aliyu there are two basic tenses in English: the past and the non- past. This classification of tense does not include aspect. For example:

- a. Many passengers missed the bus (past)
- b. The train leaves at 6am every day (non-past)

According to Muir (132), there are three factors which tend to be complex in the tense system of English:

1. Confusion of tense aspect.
2. Confusion of tense and reference.
3. Non-consideration of more complex tense formation.

Eckersley, Charles. and Eckesley. (1974)[5] further explain that the system of aspect has been confused with that of tense and in certain respects, the two do merge but they are

different systems and should be kept apart in description. Muir says: “ aspect is perhaps best considered primarily as a distinction between the clause: the difference between “ I have eaten the apple” and “ I am eating the apple” is that, the former draws attention to the fact that the action is completed while in the latter, attention is directed to the fact that the action is in progress. Quirk and Jowitt, David (2013)[6] define aspect as “the manner in which the verb action is regarded or experienced”. The time reference is not quite obvious in aspects. It shows the action as complete or in progress and draws a contrast between the perfective and the imperfective. They however highlight the striking regularities of the relative position of tenses: “by tense we understand the correspondence between the form of verbs and our concept; events are expressed in relation to it”. Tense is the system, which expresses the concept of time and makes the choice from present, past and future.

Although tense and aspect are basic linguistic concepts, different notions have been conceptualized about them. Muir, James (1972)[7] offer explanations that should help clarify these notions. They use some salient definitions to make clear distinctions and connections. They are:

1. Deictic tense/Absolute tense. This specifies a relationship between speech time (ST) and event time (ET) where ET prior to ST defines the past, ET simultaneous with ST indicates present, and ET subsequent to ST specifies future. In other words, the deictic centre in absolute tense is the speech act.
2. Relative tense. This specifies a relationship between event time (ET) and reference time (RT). Hence, absolute relative tenses contain an additional relationship ST; for example, past perfect establishes the relationship ET prior to RT prior to ST. Present perfect also establishes the ET prior to RT relation.

3. Grammatical Aspect (viewpoint Aspect). This refers to “the presentation of events through the grammaticized viewpoints” where perfective viewpoints focus on the whole situation and imperfective viewpoints focus on part of a situation.
4. Lexical Aspect. This represents “the inherent temporal properties of verbs” and particular sets of properties combine to shape the following categories: states, activities, accomplishments, achievements.

These distinctions and classifications are meant to provide a clearer understanding of the differences and interconnections that exist between tense and aspect. They show that tense and aspect are two separate grammatical features but that these features are connected in use with regard to time and reference. This basic understanding is necessary and important for primary school and secondary school teaching of English.

Tense is used to express time, used to express the location of an event or state in time through verbal form, while aspect is taken to express manner, the way in which the action is experienced and shows whether the action is completed or not completed (Quirk *et al*, 1972)[8]. For example:

- i. Ruthy wrote the letter yesterday
- ii. While Ruthy was writing the letter, the postman arrived.

In the first example (i) the use of the lexical verb ‘wrote’ shows that the writing of the letter was completed in the past, whereas in the second example (ii), Ruthy started the action of writing the letter and was at the middle when the postman’s arrival took place. Quirk *et al* explain these concepts showing the variations of tense and aspect markers such as -ed, -es, will/shall which are used to indicate past, present and future expressions of tense; while the progressive marker -ing and the perfective marker -en or -ed indicate aspect. The

progressive marker remains stable, irrespective of the forms of lexical verbs affixed. It carries the -ing added to the base of both regular and irregular lexical verbs except modals (shall, will etc) which are not inflected.

In English language, tense is a category which is strictly realized by verb inflection. Thus, the threefold distinction inherent in our notion of time is reducible to two (past and present) morphologically; English verbs do not have future forms apart from the present and past forms:

- a. Joy walks to school every Monday (present)
- b. Joy walks to school tomorrow (future)
- c. Joy walked to school yesterday (past)

Thus, the division of time into the semantic triad of past, present and future is unequally separated into past and present categories in English tense system. While past, present and future exist in our interpretation of time, we do not have a three tense verb system in English with the tenses corresponding exactly to our notion of time [8].

All lexical verbs have forms which indicate present or past time. Quirk *et al.*, (1972)[8] have identified five forms of normal English verbs, namely: the BASE, the “-S’ FORM, the PAST, the ‘-ing’ PARTICIPLE, and the ‘-ed’ INFLECTION, for both the past and the participle (e.g. stop, stop, etc). Irregular lexical verb form vary from three (e.g. cast, casts, casting) to eight (e.g. be, am, is are, was, were, being, been). Most treatments of the English tense system put tenses and aspects apart. However, there is a relationship between the two features of English verbs which is germane to the classification of tenses in this paper. Quirk et al also state that:

aspect is so closely related in meaning with tense, that the distinction in English grammar between tense and aspect is little more than a

terminological convenience which helps us to separate in our minds two different kinds of realization of tense and the syntactic realization of aspect[9]

Furthermore, the two tense system result from the structure of the English syntax which seems to exclude the semantic classification of the terminology. Obviously, it is based on form that modern grammarians group the tenses into two forms namely present and past using the morphological change that the verbs experience. Each tense is marked by different forms. However, the semantic component of tense incorporates the aspect as well dependent on our interpretation and use that relate to the current paper[10]

#### **ECCLECTIC APPROACH**

As a result of the inadequacies of grammatical theories, an eclectic approach to the investigation of tense is adopted in this work. It is believed that such a model can adequately explain the use of tenses to learners. The model does not belong wholly to a particular grammatical school. It draws upon the works of several authors. These Grammarians who share similar opinion on tense and aspect include: Salaberry and Shirai (2000), Muir (1972), Bardovi (2000), Binnik (1991), Leech (2014), Aliyu (1996), Pryse (1984) Maciver (1986), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Quirk et al (1972), Eckersley and Eckersley (1974), Leech (1971), Palmer (1974), Close (1975) and Woods and Mcleods (1990). These grammarians share similar opinions concerning time relationships, with each of them recognizing the features of the tense and aspect. From these contributions, we could gather that tense provides the idea of time, it makes reference to time. The present locates an event in the present time; the past locates event in the past and the future locates an event in future time. This description is classified below:

**PRESENT TENSE, CONSISTING OF THE FEATURES:**

- a. Simple present tense
- b. Present progressive tense
- c. Present perfect tense
- d. Present perfect progressive tense

**PAST TENSE, CONSISTING OF THE FEATURES:**

- a. Simple past tense
- b. Past progressive tense
- c. Past perfect tense
- d. Past perfect progressive tense

**FUTURE TIME, CONSISTING OF SOME GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTIONS FOR EXPRESSING THE FUTURE.**

Literature on the various aspects of tense is presented in the following sections.

**PRESENT TENSE**

For the treatment of the features of present tense, we find the works of Close Salaberry, Rafael and Yasuhiro Shirai (2002)[11]. and Woods and Tomori, Olu (2004)[12] useful. The forms and meaning of the five features of the present form are discussed below:

**SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE**

Woods and Mcleod (35) distinguish the following meanings (uses) of simple present tense:

- A. To express general truth of facts, as in:
  - i. Water freezes at zero degree centigrade
- B. To describe habits or habitual actions, as in:

- i. I fry eggs everyday
- C. For sports commentaries, demonstration (experiments), exclamations and per-formative declaration, as in:
  - i. And Pele scores!
- D. To discuss the content of literary works and speeches, as in :
  - i. Achebe treats the theme of conflict of culture in *Things Fall Apart*

### PRESENT PROGRESSIVE TENSE

The present progressive tense is used when the speaker sees the event as happening between two points of time; either the time of speaking or was planned in the past. More plainly, Eckersley and Eckersley (19) explain that the present progressive tenses express actions that began in the past and will terminate in the future, but which at the moment of speaking is incomplete and is still in progress. Example:

- i. It is raining again.

Quirk and Greenbaum (44) state that “the progressive can express incompleteness even with a verb like “stop” whose action cannot in reality have duration, thus “the bus is stopping” means that it is slowing down but has not yet stopped. It can also be used for habitual action, conveying an emotional coloring such as irritations. For example:

- i. He is always writing with a special pen

### PRESENT PERFECT TENSE

Mcleod and Woods (37) distinguish three meaning (uses) of the present perfect tense which are relevant to this paper as presented below:

- A. To express a state of the past up to the present time. Example:
  - i. We have taken our holidays in August so far.

- B. To express events in periods leading up to the present time. Example:
- i. Have you ever been to London?
  - ii. Yes I have been there.
- C. To express habits or recurring events in a period leading to the present time.
- Example:
- i. I have recovered from my illness

### PRESENT PERFECT PROGRESSIVE TENSE

The present perfect progressive tense is used to express the duration of an event or action up to the present. The tense suggest that the action is still continuing at the moment of speaking and even into the future. Example:

- i. It has been raining every day this week.

The activity may have ended in the recent past, as in:

- i. It has been raining but it has stopped now.

The syntactic forms of the present perfect progressive tense are have/haven't been + present participle (Quirk and Greenbaum, 45).

### PAST TENSE

For the treatment of the constituent features of the past tense categories, Leech (1971), Eckersley and Eckersley (1974), and Woods and Mcleod (1990) are considered useful guides. The form and use of the various past tenses are discussed here:

### SIMPLE PAST TENSE

The simple past tense is used to express an action wholly completed at some points in the past. Time past can be specified by an adverbial or by the context. Examples:

- i. I saw Mary last month.

The phrase “used to” followed by the infinitive verb form refers to a habit, an action or a state in the past, as in:

- i. They never used to do any homework.

### PAST PROGRESSIVE TENSE

The past progressive tense conveys three meanings:

- A. The event, or state continued for some time, as in:
  - i. I was thinking about the test tomorrow.
- B. The time or duration of the state or event is limited as in:
  - i. He was making some tea when they arrived.
- C. The state of event is not necessarily complete or finished:
  - i. What were you doing when I phoned you yesterday?

### PAST PERFECT TENSE

The past present tense is used when a speaker wants to refer to event or states in a time before a point of time in the past. Thus, the tense is used to make it clear which event or state in a sequence preceded which. Examples:

- i. We arrived at the station to find that the train had left.

The tense is formed with ‘had’ + past participle.

### PAST PERFECT PROGRESSIVE TENSE

The past perfect progressive tense is used to stress the duration of habit or state in a time before a particular time in the past. Thus a time expression is always included. Example:

- i. When Mary got to the meeting the lecturer had already been speaking for more than half an hour.

The syntactic form of the tense is made up of had + a present participle ('ing' participle).

### FUTURE TIME

Morphologically, English verbs have no inflectional forms for future time. However, there are some grammatical constructions for expressing future time, for example modal verbs. Jowitt also explains that modal verbs (like will and shall) are used to 'talk about future time' Tomori, Olu (2004)[12] and Close (1975) distinguish the following as ways of expressing future in English: Will/shall + infinitive, Be going to + infinitive, Present progressive tense, Simple present tense, Will/shall + be + progressive, Be about to + infinitive, Future in the past, Future perfect and Future perfect progressive.

### WILL/SHALL + INFINITIVE

The future "will/shall" are used mostly for predictions with the subjects of all three persons to express predictions. Example:

- a. I will arrive tomorrow.

### BE GOING TO + INFINITIVE

There are two basic meaning of the grammatical forms for future. The first meaning expresses the future fulfillment of a present intention or plan, as in:

- a. We are going to get the report out early next week.

The second meaning is to express the future result of a present cause. Examples:

- i. She is going to have twins. (she is pregnant)
- ii. The train will be arriving at eight o'clock.

### PRESENT PROGRESSIVE TENSE

The present progressive form of a verb is used to express a future event that will happen soon. Example:

- i. We are having fish for dinner.

Basically, each sentence refers to a future event which arises from a present plan.

### SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE

The simple present tense is used to refer to a definite future event. The tense is accompanied by an adverbial, referring to future time, unless it occurs in a context where a definite point of time in the future is assumed. Example:

- i. Tomorrow is Friday.

### BE ABOUT + INFINITIVE

This feature(though not exactly a tense) is used to convey the meaning of a near future as in:

- i. The program is about to begin.

The form has almost the same meaning as 'just going to': example:

- i. The program is just going to begin.

### BE + INFINITIVE

This form can be used to refer to a fixed, obligatory future plan or program. Example:

- i. The government is to make the changes.

The form is also used to express requirements and to report order or prohibitions, as in:

- i. You are to report to the Head of Office tomorrow.

### THE FUTURE IN THE PAST

The future in the past is used to view a future event or start from a point in the past. Many of the future forms discussed earlier can be used to express future in the past. Examples:

- A. Be going to + infinitive, as in:
  - i. I was going to tell you all about that.
- B. Be about + infinitive as in:
  - i. He was about to go when I arrived.
- C. Past progressive as in:
  - i. He was leaving for London the next day.
- D. Be to + infinitive, as in:
  - i. He was about to regret his decision.
- E. Be about to, as in:
  - i. He was about to hit me..

In addition to these constructions, Eckersley and Eckersley (1974) and Woods and Mcleod (1990) distinguished two other constructions for future. They named them as:

- i. Future perfect and
- ii. Future perfect progressive

These constructions have been integrated as components of the future tense in this study. These grammatical constructions have their particular nuances of meaning and are far from being interchangeable.

### **FUTURE PERFECT**

The future perfect expresses an action or a particular event that will be completed or a particular state that will be reached by a specific time in the future as in:

- i. It is five o'clock; they will have arrived home by now.

### **FUTURE PERFECT PROGRESSIVE**

The future perfect progressive is used to express the duration of an action up to a certain time in the future. Example:

- i. By May 2015, we shall have been living in this house for exactly ten years.

The form of this tense is made up of will/shall + have been + participle (Palmer, 36).

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper highlights the common uses of tense-aspect in English which serve as guide to the subjects' use of tense. Thus, some scholar views are reviewed here to improve understanding and uses of tense-aspect, especially for the purpose of teaching English as a second language. The scholarly views include those of traditional, structural and transformational generative grammarians, offering an eclectic approach to the investigation of tense. It is believed that such a model can adequately examine the use of tenses of most learners of English. The argument/description does not belong wholly to a particular grammatical school. It draws upon the works of several authors (as reviewed).

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