Meaning and the English Verb

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Key to Symbols

ˈ*will*:

The bar ˈ indicates that the following syllable is stressed.

**It has rained tomorrow*:

The asterisk indicates an unacceptable or 'non-English' utterance.

Simple Present:

The initial capitals indicate a grammatical category.

'possibility':

The quotation marks indicate a semantic category.

AE: American English

BE: British English

Introduction

1 Every language has its peculiar problems of meaning for the foreign learner; and most people would agree that in the English language, the most troublesome problems are concentrated in the area of the finite verb phrase, and include, in particular, questions of tense, aspect, and modal auxiliary usage. The object of this book is to describe such fields of usage systematically and in some detail for teachers and advanced students of English as a second language, or for that matter, for anyone interested in the subtle workings of the English language.

Much – some might say, too much – has already been written on the semantics of tense, aspect, and modality in modern English. Some of the most perceptive as well as the most useful treatments are to be found in course books such as W. Stannard Allen's *Living English Structure*. Recent more scholarly accounts have made important contributions at a specialist academic level (they include Robert L. Allen's *The Verb System of Present Day American English* and Madeline Ehrman's *The Meaning of the Modals in Present-Day American English* in the U.S.A., and F. R. Palmer's *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb* in Great Britain). A third group of writers – those of the 'orthodox' grammatical tradition represented by Poutsma, Kruisinga, and Jespersen – remains the most plentiful source of detailed and well-documented information; as well as much insight on the subject.[1]

2 Why, then, this book? Because, in my opinion (and in the opinion of foreign students and teachers with whom I have discussed these matters) there is still a need for a book which co-ordinates and makes more accessible what can be learned from the literature just mentioned, systematically explaining the semantics of the English finite verbal phrase in a way unencumbered by discussions of syntax and morphology, and in a way which presupposes no specialist interest in linguistics. Furthermore, I have tried to rethink the subject in the light of developments in semantics over the past few years: developments which have resulted in a sharpening of tools for the analysis of meaning.[2] It is my hope, therefore, that whatever is new in the approach I take will help readers not just to learn facts, but to co-ordinate and deepen their grasp of the language, by seeing facts (wherever possible) not as isolated facts, but in a fresh way, as part of a regular pattern. I should like them to see generalisations where none

were evident before, and perhaps to recognise that the English language is less 'illogical' and wayward than they may previously have thought. This is not to say that exceptional usages or 'irregularities' can be ignored, and much of the space within these covers is devoted to the task of accounting for them.

While stressing what is new in this book, I should also like to acknowledge what is old – that is, the extent to which I have drawn (as anyone writing in this field cannot fail to draw) on the extensive literature I have referred to above. I have avoided placing acknowledgements in the chapters of description, in the belief that this would merely distract attention from the task in hand. But this obliges me here to make clear my general indebtedness to others, and to point out that a Guide to Further Reading, with brief comments (pp. 123–126) gives a more precise indication of how this study is founded upon those of previous writers.

3 As this volume, basically speaking, is concerned with a set of grammatical forms in relation to a set of meanings, a reader might expect a presentation which works from the forms to the meanings like this:

CHAPTER 1 Meanings of the Present Tense
CHAPTER 2 Meanings of the Past Tense
CHAPTER 3 Meanings of the Perfect Aspect . . .

or else one that works from the meanings to the forms, like this:

CHAPTER 1 Ways of expressing past time
CHAPTER 2 Ways of expressing present time
CHAPTER 3 Ways of expressing future time . . .

In fact, I have found it convenient (since in any case there is continual need for reference back and forth from one section to another) to adopt a combination of these two approaches, grouping observations now according to form and now according to meaning. For example, Chapter 1 'Simple Present and Past Tenses' takes grammatical forms as its point of departure, while Chapter 4 'The Expression of Future Time', starts from meaning. What is lost in consistency here is, I feel, atoned for by the flexibility which makes it possible to bring together contrasts and similarities in whatever seems to be the most illuminating way. At the same time, for convenience of reference, there are summaries at the beginning of all chapters, and a full index at the end of the book.

4 In discussing the relation between grammar and meaning, one is faced not only with problems of lay-out, but with problems of terminology. Most of the grammatical categories that have to be discussed (Present Tense, Perfect Aspect, etc.) have labels which are derived from a characteristic feature of meaning, but which can be very misleading if they are used as if semantic rather than grammatical labels. It is a notorious fact, for instance, that the English Present Tense can refer not just to present time, but to past and future time as well. To overcome this difficulty, I have made use of a typographical convention whereby grammatical categories are marked by initial capitals (Present Tense, etc.) to distinguish them from corresponding categories of meaning or reference (present time, etc.). Where necessary, single quotation marks are used to indicate citation of meaning rather than form. Thus the following arrangement:

Lightning can be dangerous ('It is possible for lightning to be dangerous')

represents a semantic gloss on a sentence identified formally.

Grammatical terminology has been chosen solely with the goal of immediate intelligibility in mind. The term 'tense' is used not only for the primary distinction of Present Tense and Past Tense, but also for the sub-categories Present Perfect Tense, Past Progressive Tense, etc. The term 'Aspect' is reserved for the primary categories of Perfect and Progressive modification. In case terms are not found to be self-evident, the following may be given as a tabular guide to the grammatical nomenclature of the first three chapters:

	(non-progressive)	Progressive Aspect
(non-perfect)	Simple Present Tense *he sees*	(ordinary) Present Progressive Tense *he is seeing*
	Simple Past Tense *he saw*	(ordinary) Past Progressive Tense *he was seeing*
Perfect Aspect	(ordinary) Present Perfect Tense *he has seen*	Present Perfect Progressive Tense *he has been seeing*
	(ordinary) Past Perfect Tense *he had seen*	Past Perfect Progressive Tense *he had been seeing*

As the table shows, the expressions 'non-perfect', 'non-progressive' and 'ordinary' are used (wherever necessary) to denote forms unmarked for one aspect or the other. 'Simple' is used of forms unmarked for both aspects.

5 The type of English I am mainly concerned to describe may be called 'contemporary standard British English'. But discrepancies between American and British English, as well as variations of style, are noted where they are important. Dialect variation in verbal usage has been little investigated, but it appears that there are considerable differences, especially in the use of the modal auxiliaries, within Great Britain and the U.S.A., and even between different age—groups. This book therefore necessarily simplifies a rather complex picture, and the labels 'BE' (British English) and 'AE' (American English) can at best be regarded as showing *typical* usage in their respective countries. For information about the English language, I have resorted mainly to introspection into my own command of the language, a procedure which has disadvantages, but which has the one supreme advantage of being practical. Similarly, the examples I use are invented rather than borrowed from texts, as it is of great value in this kind of study to have simple, self-explanatory, economical illustrations. However, the fact that this study has been read in manuscript by a number of native speakers of English has provided a check of my own observations.

NOTES

[1] See the Guide to Further Reading, pp. 123–126.
[2] In particular, I have in mind the use of paraphrase, ambiguity, and acceptability as tests for investigating contrasts and similarities of cognitive meaning. Modern theoretical approaches to semantics lay stress on such concepts: see Jerrold J. Katz and Jerry A. Fodor, 'The Structure of a Semantic Theory', *Language*, Vol. 39 (1963), pp. 170–210. A study of more direct bearing on the present one is Geoffrey N. Leech, *Towards a Semantic Description of English*, London: Longman, 1969, (esp. Chs. 1, 7 and 9).

Contents

One

Simple Present and Past Tenses

6 introduction. SIMPLE PRESENT–UNRESTRICTIVE USE: *7* unrestrictive present; *8* 'eternal truths'. SIMPLE PRESENT–INSTANTANEOUS USE: *9* instantaneous present; *10* comparison between instantaneous present and Progressive Present; *11* asseverations. STATES AND EVENTS: *12* 'state verbs' and 'event verbs'; *13* habitual or iterative present. SIMPLE PRESENT REFERRING TO PAST AND FUTURE: *14* referring to future; *15–17* historic present. SIMPLE PAST–NORMAL USE IN REFERENCE TO PAST TIME: *18* the happening takes place before the present moment, the speaker has a definite time in mind; *19* there is no 'state'/'event' contrast in the past; *20* simultaneous and sequential use of Past. OTHER USES OF SIMPLE PAST: *21* hypothetical use; *22* narrative past; *23* Past Tense referring to present. SIMPLE PRESENT–IMAGINARY USES: *24* imaginary present; *25* fictional use; *26* travelogues and instructions.

6 In all the uses of the Present Tense there is a basic association with the present moment of time (the moment of speech). This association can be expressed as follows: 'The state or event has *psychological* being at the present moment'. This element of meaning does not (as we see in §§ 14–17) exclude the possibility of its having *actual* being at a time other than the present. The Present Tense in special circumstances can refer to past and to future time exclusive of present time: in the 'historic present', it represents past events *as if* they were happening now; in the 'future present', it refers to future events regarded as *already predetermined*.

We may fittingly start, however, with the more usual application of the Present Tense to present time–limiting discussion in this chapter to the Simple Present Tense.

SIMPLE PRESENT: UNRESTRICTIVE USE

7 The UNRESTRICTIVE use of the Simple Present is found with verbs expressing states. It is so called because it places no limitation on the extension of the state into past and future time:

Honesty *is* the best policy. | War *solves* no problems. | How many languages *does* he know? | We *live* in London.

However, limits to the duration of the state may be implied by an adverbial expression which underlines the 'presentness' of the period in question, so indicating a contrast with some other period:

Crime is the best policy *these days*. | War *no longer* solves any problems. | *At present* we live in London.

a. **We live here since 1950* and **We live here for twenty years* are incorrect because the phrases *since 1950* and *for twenty years* identify a period of time leading up to the present moment. The perfect tense is appropriate in these cases: *We* HAVE LIVED *here since 1950*/*for twenty years* (see § 55).

8 The Simple Present is suitable for employment in the expression of 'eternal truths', and so is found in scientific, mathematical and other statements made 'for all time':

Hydrogen *is* the lightest element. | Two and three *make* five.

Not surprisingly, it is also characteristic of proverbs:

Necessity *is* the mother of invention. | A rolling stone *gathers* no moss.

Geographical statements are likewise, for practical purposes, without time limit:

Rome *stands* on the River Tiber. | The Atlantic Ocean *separates* the New World from the Old.

These usages follow from the definition of the unrestrictive use of the Present in § 7.

SIMPLE PRESENT: INSTANTANEOUS USE

9 The INSTANTANEOUS use of the Simple Present contrasts with the unrestrictive use in that it occurs with verbs expressing events, not states. It signifies an event simultaneous with the present moment, and normally occurs only in certain easily definable contexts; for example

In sports commentaries: Napier *passes* the ball to Attwater, who *heads* it straight into the goal! | Walker *swings* a right at the West Indian – he *ducks* and it *glances* harmlessly off his shoulder.

In the patter or commentary of conjurors and demonstrators: Look, I *take* this card from the pack and *place* it under the handkerchief–so. | Now I *put* the cake-mixture into this bowl and *add* a drop of vanilla essence.

In most of these cases, the event probably does not take place *exactly* at the instant when it is mentioned: it is subjective rather than objective simultaneity that is conveyed.

10 We may compare the following as two ways of describing the same action:

I *open* the cage. | I *am opening* the cage.

The second sentence, which contains a Progressive verb form, is a neutral description in answer to the question *What are you doing?* But the first sentence is rather dramatic, because it insists on the total enactment of the event as it is reported: if spoken, one would expect it to be accompanied by a gestural flourish; in writing, it seems incomplete without an exclamation mark. The instantaneous use of the Present also occurs in exclamations like *Here* COMES *the train!* and *Up we* GO! It is generally the 'marked' or abnormal alternative to the Progressive Present, because there are few circumstances in which it is reasonable to regard an action as begun and completed at the very moment of speech.

a. The theatrical quality of the instantaneous present is affirmed in its employment in old-fashioned stage rhetoric (now chiefly used in comic parodies): *The bell tolls! He yields! The spectre vanishes!* etc.

b. It is significant that there is no instantaneous present question form *What do you do?* comparing with the frequently-heard question *What are you doing?* This is presumably because by the time an instantaneous action has been noted and queried it is already in the past, whereas the Progressive allows for a time lag.

11 Less dramatically, the instantaneous use is found in asseverations such as *I beg your pardon.* Here the event and the act of speech are simultaneous simply because they are identical; that is, the thing announced and the act of announcement are one. Other everyday examples are:

We *accept* your offer. | I *dare* you to tell him that! | I *deny* your charge. | I *say* that you are wrong.

These PERFORMATIVE VERBS express formal acts of declaration, in contrast to the Progressive forms *We are accepting your offer*, etc., which merely report the speaker's present activities or future intentions. This usage is also characteristic of more ceremonial contexts, such as

ship-launching: 'I *name* this ship . . .'
judge passing sentence: 'I *sentence* you to . . .'
card and board games: 'I *bid* two clubs.' | 'I *resign*.' | 'I *pass*.'
wills: 'I *bequeath* . . .'

a. The declarative acts discussed here do not include superficially similar expressions of wishes and condolences such as *We wish you every success* and *I send you my deepest sympathy*. These belong rather to the category of cognitive states (§ 37F). The distinguishing marks of declarative acts are (1) that they are almost invariably in the first person, and (2) that they permit the insertion of *hereby* in front of the verb.

STATES AND EVENTS

12 The contrast between STATES and EVENTS has already appeared as the foundation of the distinction between the unrestrictive and instantaneous uses of the Simple Present. It is time now to consider this contrast more carefully.

The choice between 'state' and 'event' is inherent in all verbal usage in English. A state is undifferentiated and lacking in defined limits. An event, on the other hand, has a beginning and an end; it can be viewed as a whole entity, and can also make up one member of a sequence or plurality of happenings.

The difference between the two is parallel to that between countable nouns (those that can be made plural, such as *house/houses*) and mass nouns (those that cannot be made plural, such as *milk*). The division in nouns, however, is more clear-cut, because it is grammatically indicated by the plural ending. There are no such indicators of 'event' status in the verbal phrase. What is more, nouns (with the possible exception of words like *cake*) must be normally placed in one class or the other; whereas verbs are generally neutral, and capable of switching from 'state' to 'event' or *vice versa*.

In fact, to speak more plainly, 'state' and 'event' are semantic rather than grammatical terms. Strictly, we should not talk of 'state verbs' and 'event verbs', but rather of 'state' and 'event' meanings or uses of verbs. It would be inconvenient, however, to avoid the expressions 'state verb' and 'event verb' altogether. These useful labels are retained

here, but it must always be remembered that they are *convenient labels*, for what would be more precisely designated 'verb being used to refer to an event/a state'. We may take the verb *remember* as an example:

> Suddenly I *remembered* the letter. | I *shall remember* that moment until I die.

In the first sentence *remember*, because it refers to the act of recall, is an 'event verb'; in the second it is a 'state verb', representing the notion of 'having in one's memory'. (Quotation marks will always be used with these two labels, as a reminder of their provisional status.)

The following are among the verbs normally used as 'STATE VERBS':

be, live, belong, last, like, stand, know, have, contain.

The following is a selection of verbs normally acting as 'EVENT VERBS':

jump, nod, get, put, land, begin, find, hit, fall, go.

It must not be supposed that these are the only two categories; some other types of verbal function ('activity verbs', 'process verbs', etc.) are considered later, in §§ 36–8.

SIMPLE PRESENT: HABITUAL USE

13 A third use of the Simple Present, that of the HABITUAL or ITERATIVE USE, is like the instantaneous use, confined to 'event verbs'. In fact, its relation to the instantaneous present is analogous to the relation of a plural to a singular noun. The habitual present represents a series of individual *events* which as a whole make up a *state* stretching back into the past and forward into the future. It thus combines aspects of the instantaneous and unrestrictive uses:

> He *walks* to work. | I *buy* my shirts at Harrods. | Whenever ammonia *is added*, the colour *changes* to orange. | He who *hesitates* is lost.

As the last two examples show, the habitual resembles the unrestrictive present in its suitability for 'eternal truths' of a scientific or proverbial nature. To emphasise the element of repetition and universality in these two sentences, one might paraphrase them *On every occasion when ammonia is added . . .* and *Every time someone hesitates, he is lost.*

As a way of interpreting 'event' verbs, the habitual present is

more common than the instantaneous present, which, as we saw in § 9, is rarely found outside a few limited contexts. Many verbs more or less have to be taken in an iterative sense, because the event they describe takes far too long to be envisaged as happening singly and once-and-for-all, within the moment of speech. *He walks to work*, for example, makes one think of an established habit (a series of repeated events), not just of a single event. In fact, few sentences are ambiguous in this respect. Sometimes a plural object helps to single out the habitual meaning:

He scores *a goal*. (instantaneous use)
He scores *goals*. (habitual use)

On other occasions, an adverbial expression of frequency reinforces the notion of repetition:

I *generally/often/sometimes* buy shirts at Harrods. | He cycles to work *most days/twice a week/every day*.

Hence, even when the verb permits both instantaneous and habitual interpretations, some other linguistic indication of iteration is frequently supplied.

SIMPLE PRESENT REFERRING TO PAST AND FUTURE

14 In addition to these three uses with reference to present time (i.e. time including the present moment), the Simple Present may refer to FUTURE TIME exclusive of the present:

I *start* work next week. | The train *leaves* at eight o'clock tomorrow.

This use is discussed in relation to other means of indicating future time in §§ 101–4.

15 Also the Present Tense may be used in reference to the past. The use traditionally known by the term HISTORIC PRESENT is best treated as a story-teller's licence, whereby past happenings are portrayed or imagined *as if* they were going on at the present time. It is most evident where the Present Tense is accompanied, with apparent incongruity, by an adverbial expression indicating past time:

> At that moment in *comes* a messenger from the Head Office, telling me the boss *wants* to see me in a hurry. | Last week I'*m* in the sitting-room with the wife, when this chap next door *staggers* past and in a drunken fit *throws* a brick through our window.

Such utterances are typical of a highly-coloured popular style of oral narrative, a style one would be more likely to overhear in the public bar of a village inn than in the lounge of an expensive hotel.

A distinction may be made between the strict historic present described here, and the use of the Present to narrate fictional events (see § 25).

16 A different kind of historic present is found with 'verbs of communication' in such sentences as:

> Joan *tells* me you're getting a new car. | (in the correspondence column of a newspaper or journal) Your correspondent A.D. *writes* in the issue of February 1st that . . . | The ten o'clock news *says* that it's going to be cold. | We *learn* in the Book of Genesis that all differences of language originated in the Tower of Babel. | I *hear* poor old Mrs. Baxter has lost her cat.

The verbs *tell*, *write*, and *say* here refer to the initiation of a message in the past; therefore we have reason to expect the Past or Perfect Tenses: *Joan has told me . . .*; *The ten o'clock news said . . .*; etc. However, it appears that the verbal meaning has been transferred from the initiating end to the receiving end of the message. The communication is still in force for those who have received it, and so the Present Tense is allowed. In a sense, the Book of Genesis, although written over 2,500 years ago, 'speaks' at the present time: its message is still there for whoever wants to avail himself of it. Verbs like *learn* and *hear*, which refer to the receiving of the message, here refer rather to the state of *having received* the message. Thus *I hear Mrs. Baxter has lost her cat* can be replaced, with little change of effect, by *I understand* (='I have the information') *that Mrs. Baxter has lost her cat.*

17 The following sentences illustrate a similar extension of the Present Tense to cover information which in strict historical terms belongs to the past:

> In THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, Dostoevsky *draws* his characters from sources deep in the Russian soil, not from fashionable types of his day. | Like Rubens, Watteau *is able* to convey an impression of warm, living flesh by the merest whiff of colour.

When discussing an artist and his surviving work, one feels justified in using the Present, because the work, and through it (in a sense) the artist, are still 'alive'. The whole career of a painter, writer, or musician may, in fact, be viewed as a timeless reconstruction from the works themselves. Here there is almost free variation of Past and Present Tenses. The sole difference between *Brahms* IS *the last great representative of German classicism* and *Brahms* WAS *the last great representative of German classicism* is a difference of point of view: i.e. whether one prefers to think of Brahms as a composer still living through his compositions, or as a man who died in the nineteenth century. Subject to § 17*c*, however, we do not have this choice in dealing with the purely biographical details of an artist's life: the Present Tense cannot be substituted for the Past Tense in *Brahms* WAS BORN *in Hamburg*; *Brahms* COMPLETED *his first symphony in 1876*; *Brahms* SPENT *the last 35 years of his life in Vienna*.

a. Free variation between Past and Present Tenses occurs additionally in cross-references from one part of a book to another: *The problem* WAS/IS *discussed in Chapter Two above*. For cross-references to a later part of a book, a similar free variation exists between Present and Future: *We* RETURN/SHALL RETURN *to this topic in the next chapter*. The author has the choice of whether to see his book as a whole artefact existing at the present moment (so that what is written on page 2 is just as much in present time as what is written on page 300); or to see it on a shifting time scale, from the point of view of a reader who reaches page 2 'before' he reaches page 300.

b. In newspaper headlines, the Simple Present is preferred (perhaps because of its brevity) to the Past or Perfect Tenses as a way of announcing recent events: *Ex-champ dies*, a headline reporting the death of a former boxer, contrasts with the Past Tense that one meets in the corresponding prose account: *Bill Turton, one-time holder of the British welter-weight championship,* DIED *at his home in Chesterfield yesterday*. The 'headlinese' use of the Present Tense has something of the dramatic quality of the 'instantaneous present' (see § 9).

c. Two minor uses of the 'historic present' are (1) in photographic captions (*Father O'Brien gives his first blessing*); and (2) in historical summaries, tables of dates, etc.: 1876—*Brahms finishes his first symphony*.