

# Tense, Aspect & Modality

## Lecture notes for Chapter 5 “Sentence Semantics I: Situations”

*Linguistics 3430*  
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### I. Tense

Tense is a **deictic** category. What does this mean? Here are some big questions about the past tense:

- Does the past tense refer to a PARTICULAR time in the past?
  - (1) I took the garbage out.
- Is the past tense **ambiguous**?
  - (2) She said that she preferred white wine.
  - (3) She said that she selected white wine.
  - (2') Elle a dit qu'elle avait préféré le vin blanc au rouge.
  - (3') Elle a dit qu'elle préférait le vin blanc au rouge.
- What's happening in the following contrast?
  - (4) A: My ex-husband was Latvian.  
B: Is he dead?
  - (4') A: I took a cab over. The cab driver was Latvian.  
B: ??Is he dead?
- Do we need the **past perfect**?
  - (5) They fired several people who embezzled from the company.
  - (5') They fired several people who had embezzled from the company.

### II. Aspect

#### A. What is aspect?

- Aspect is the part of a verb's meaning that tells us whether there is change (of state or of location) within some period of time that is of interest to us.
- We call the period of interest *reference time*.
- When linguists use the term *aspect*, they can be referring to either of two things: **grammatical aspect** or **situation aspect** (Aktionsart).
- Sometimes that meaning is **inside the meaning of the verb** (situation aspect); sometimes that meaning is **conveyed by the verb's morphology** (grammatical aspect).
- In narratives, it's the aspect of the verb that tells us which situations **overlap** other situations:

- (6) *C'est la petite Cavinet! En remontant, tout à l'heure, je l'ai aperçue*  
 It's (pres) the little Cavinet! In returning (prp), a minute ago, I her have seen  
*qui se faisait embrasser par le fils Martinez dans le garage à vélos!*  
 who herself made (imp) kiss (inf) by the son Martinez in the shed for bikes

“It’s the Cavinet girl. While coming upstairs, just a minute ago, I saw her getting kissed (lit. ‘who was making herself kissed’) by the Martinez boy in the bike shed.”

(Binet, *Les Bidochon* 3, p. 10)

- (7) *Marius ad Zamam pervenit. Id*  
 Marius:N to Zama:A went:3g:perf:act:ind it:N  
*oppidum munitum erat.*  
 town:N fortified:N was:3sg:imp:act:ind

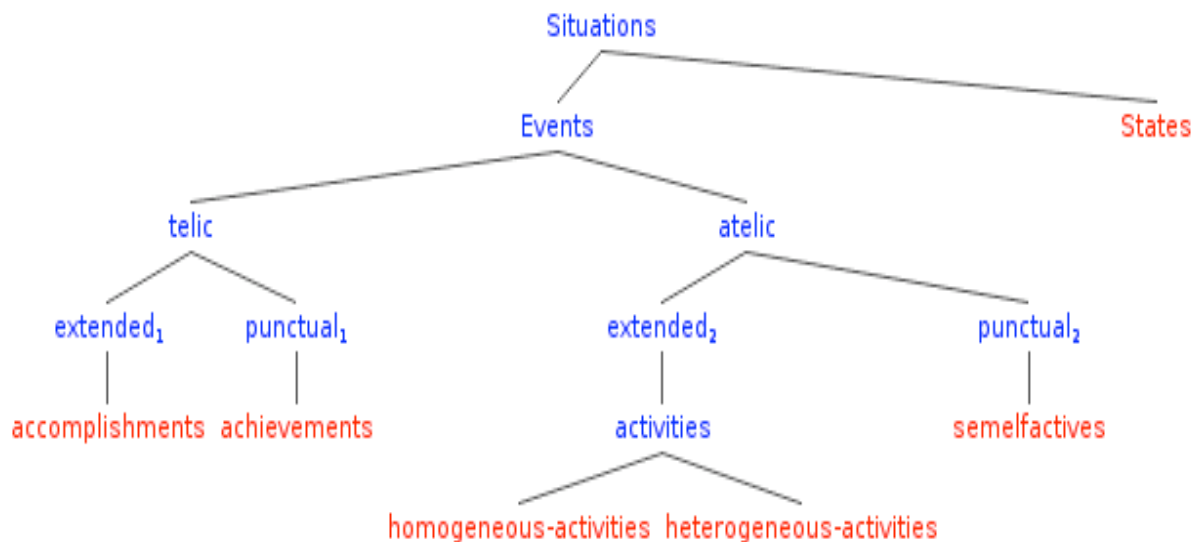
“Marius went to Zama. That town was well fortified.” (Sallust, *Jugurtha* 57.1)

### B. The pancake and plate analogy.

- Speech time = location of the speaker
- Reference interval = a plate
- Tense = location of the plate relative to the speaker
- The situation = a pancake
- Aspect = location of the pancake on the plate: does the pancake flop over the sides of the plate or does it fit inside the plate?
- State = a pancake that flops over the sides of the plate.
- Event = a pancake that is entirely contained by the plate.

### C. Situation aspect.

- Every situation belongs to an idealized type, called its *situation type*.
- There are several meaning distinctions that play a role in situation-type determination.
- But the only distinction that matters for grammatical-aspect determination is the event-state distinction.
- Below is a standard situation-type taxonomy:



- Situation types are categories of **clauses** rather than **verbs**:

- (8) (a) I see the Flatirons. (state)  
 (b) I saw a flash. (event)  
 (c) I remember that guy. (state)  
 (d) I remembered my keys. (event)

- **Event vs. State** (perfective vs. imperfective). You can always figure out if a clause is an event or state clause by using the **present-tense reporting test**: if the situation can be reported as **ongoing right now by means of the simple present tense** (not the progressive present tense), that situation is a state.

- (9) (a) Leslie loves school right now.  
 (b) \*Harry fixes the fence (right now).

- **Problem 5.2 (p. 144)**. For the following verbs, find one sentence context in which the verb is a state verb and one sentence context in which the verb is an event verb: *equal, appear, reach*.

Compare French:

- (10) *Faites pas attention, Mademoiselle. Il vous taquine!*  
 Pay (imper) not attention, Mme. He you teases  
 “Don’t pay attention (to him), Mme. He is teasing you.”  
 (Binet, *Les Bidochon 2*, p. 7).

The ‘*when*-test’: if the main-clause situation can be construed as overlapping the event described by the *when*-clause, that situation is a state.

- (11) (a) When I came in, Sue **was upset**.  
 (b) When I came in, Sue **went out**.

- **Telic vs. Atelic (see Problem 5.4, p. 144)**

- (12) (a) Harry skipped (for ten minutes).  
 (b) Harry skipped home (??for ten minutes)

- (13) (a) Harry sang songs (for ten minutes).  
 (b) Harry sang a song (??for ten minutes).

- (14) (a) Climbers reached the summit (throughout day).  
 (b) A climber reached the summit (\*throughout the day).

**The Telicity Test:** if the clause allows a **durational adverb** (*for x time units*), the situation is **atelic**, but if the clause only allows a **frame adverb** (*in x time units*), the situation is **telic**.

- **Extended vs. Punctual**

- (15) (a) Harry recognized me in ten minutes. (after ten minutes)  
 (b) Harry walked home in ten minutes. (during ten minutes)

**D. Grammatical aspect.** A narrator can choose to present a state as an event or an event as a state. The narrator can do this by using aspectual constructions: perfect, progressive, inceptive, prospective.

- (16) She has now left. (event goes to state)  
 (17) She is now leaving. (event goes to state)  
 (18) She began to feel ill. (state goes to event)  
 (19) She is going to leave. (event goes to state)

Other examples of grammatical aspects are the imperfective and perfective past tenses in Romance languages. They are regarded as grammatical aspect because they can be used to shift situation type.

**E. Is imperfective the same as progressive?** No. Observe the following contrast:

- (20) *Elle avait de l'argent.*  
 'She had some money.'  
 \*'She was having some money'.

**F. What is the function of English progressive aspect?**

- Progressive aspect **overrides** situation type.
- The progressive construction makes events into states.
- How do we know this? Let's apply the **When test**: if the situation can be seen as overlapping an event expressed by a when-clause, then it's a state:

- (21) When she came home (event), we played cards. (no overlap, *we played cards* is an event)  
 (22) When she came home (event), we were playing cards (overlap, *we were playing cards* is a state).

- Because the progressive construction is a stativizer, only event verbs normally combine with the progressive.
- Therefore, the ability to take progressive marking is used as a test for stativity: if the verb is OK as a progressive, it is dynamic (**see 5.1, p. 144**).
- Imperfective aspect (typically) **reflects** situation type.

G. Imperfective aspect and perfective aspect in Romance languages are past tenses that select for verbs with a specific type of situation aspect.

H. Imperfective aspect can also function like the English progressive construction. This happens when the interpreter must resolve a **clash** between **event** situation type and imperfective grammatical aspect:

- (23) Raymonde: *Qu'est-ce qu'ils te voulaient, ces deux messieurs?*  
What-is-it-that-they you wanted (imperf), these two monsieurs?  
Robert: *On s'échangeait nos adresses!*  
One self exchanged (imperf) our addresses!

“Raymonde: What did they want from you, those two men? Robert: We were exchanging addresses.”  
(Binet, *Les Bidochon* 2, p. 50)

### III. Modality

A. **What is modality?** “Modality is a cover term for devices which allow speakers to express varying degrees of commitment to, or belief in, a proposition” (Saeed, p. 125). Modality gets discussed alongside tense and aspect because tense, aspect and modality are all used to express speaker viewpoint on a situation.

- Forms that express modal distinctions are a mixed bag: subjunctive mood (*was* vs. *were*), adverbs (*probably*), modal verbs (like *might*), tenses (like the past perfect).
- Modal markers can be used to **distance** the author. A contrast from Latin involving subjunctive mood:

(24) *Morari volebat quod lassus erat* (indicative imperfective).  
'He wanted to stop because he was tired (subjunctive imperfective).'

(25) *Morari volebat quod lassus esset*.  
'He wanted to stop because he was tired (or so he said).'

- Modal forms can be used to express that **something is or was not the case**. Therefore, modal markers show up when people express the wish that things were or had been different. A contrast from Latin:

(26) *Utinam adesset!* (subjunctive past )  
'Would that he were here!'

(27) *Utinam adfuerat!* (subjunctive past perfect)  
'Would that he had been here!'

- This happens in **counterfactual conditionals** in English:

(28) **If she were less aggressive**, we'd enjoy her company more.

(29) **If she had been less aggressive**, we would have enjoyed her company more.

- Modal forms can be used to express degrees of **certainty**:

(30) (a) She **might** be home.  
(b) She **must** be home.

- (c) **Apparently**, she's home.
- Modal forms can be used to express **degrees of likelihood**:
    - (31) (a) If there **is** a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop from an overhead compartment.
    - (b) If there **were to** be a sudden loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks would drop from overhead compartment.
  - Degree of likelihood** and **counterfactuality** cannot be distinguished in past-tense state sentences:
    - (32) If my students **liked** semantics I'd be overcome with joy.
  - Modal forms can even express social distance (timidity):
    - (33) Excuse me, Ma'am? I **had ordered** a Diet Pepsi?
  - Modality also includes **evidentiality**: the coding of one's source of evidence for an assertion (see problem 5.10, pp. 146-147). An example of an evidential form is the English **reportive present**:
    - (34) I **hear** that she's difficult to work with.
    - (35) My mom **tells** me you're interested in lexicography.

Another example of an evidential distinction is found in the opposition between two past-tense markers in Turkish:

- |      |  |                 |                  |                                   |                                |
|------|--|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (36) | <i>Dirseg-im-</i><br>elbow 1SG.POSS<br>"I hit my elbow!"   | <i>i</i><br>OBJ | <i>ur</i><br>hit | <i>-du</i><br>PST                 | <i>-um</i><br>1SG              |
| (37) | <i>Dirseg-im-</i><br>elbow 1SG.POSS<br>"I must have hit my elbow!"<br>"They tell me I hit my elbow." | <i>i</i><br>OBJ | <i>ur</i><br>hit | <i>-mus</i><br>PST<br>(inference) | <i>-um</i><br>1SG<br>(hearsay) |

**B. The Ambiguity of modal verbs.** The modal verbs in English are auxiliary verbs that include: *can, may, will, must, could, should*. All modal verbs have two meanings: **epistemic** meanings (conclusion from evidence) and **deontic** meanings (permission and obligation).

• **Deontic** uses:

- (38) You must turn your homework in on time.
- (39) You may go.
- (40) I can't stay.
- (41) You should just accept the decision.

• **Epistemic** uses:

- (42) Bob's car is in his driveway so he must be home.
- (43) It may snow today.

- (44) You can't be serious!  
(43) The next exit should be Broadway.

Now let's see if we can do some of the problems in 5.8, pp. 145-146. Remember that you are replacing the current (b) sentence with the following sentence: *You can't be annoyed with me.*