UNIT 11 : USES OF TENSES I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- grasp the concepts of time and tense
- differentiate between the concepts of tense and aspect
- use the different tense forms to perform different language functions
- learn the different ways of expressing future time

11.2 TIME AND TENSE

At the beginning, it is important for you to distinguish between the two terms namely time and tense so as to understand how tense is realised in a sentence.

You may note that–

- Time is a universal category that exists independently of the grammar of any particular language. It is marked by three divisions: Past, Present and Future.

- Tense, on the other hand, is a grammatical category realised through verb forms in order to refer to the way grammar marks time at which an action denoted by the verb took place or will take place.

Let us now take a look at the tense system of English in relation to time. Here we need to distinguish between meaning and form. When we consider meaning, we find that the verb system of English, like the verb system of any other language, can refer to at least three different phases of time viz., Past, Present and Future. Here are a few examples:

1. (a) Sumi played badminton yesterday (Past tense)
   (b) Sumi is playing badminton now (Present tense)
   (c) Sumi will play badminton tomorrow (Future tense)
2. (a) The train left for Delhi in the morning (Past tense)
   (b) The train is leaving for Delhi now (Present tense)
   (c) The train is leaving for Delhi at 8 pm (Future tense)

   or

   The train will leave for Delhi at 8 pm.

However, when we consider form we find that the verb system of English, unlike the verb system of most Indian languages, has the following forms:

1. **Base form:** Play, Leave, Begin, Drink, Ring.
2. **- s form:** Plays, Leaves, Begins, Drinks, Rings.
3. **-ing form:** (is) Playing, (is) Leaving, (is) Beginning, (is) Drinking, (is) Ringing.
4. **Past form :** Played, Left, Began, Rang.
5. **Past Participle form :** Played, Left, Begun, Rung.
6. **Passive Participle form :** (Be)Played, (Be)Left, (Be)Begun etc.

A closer look reveals that the above forms can be grouped only under two categories Past and Present.

Another notable point about the tense system of English is that there is no one to one correspondence between time and tense. If you look at 2(c) above, you will note that the verb form is in the present continuous tense but the time expressed is future. Similarly 'will' in 1(c) is in the present tense and its past form is would. We shall take up this point in the subsequent

sections in greater detail.

I. The base form of the verb has an imperative function, a present tense function and an infinitive function. Here are given two examples of each function:

1. **Imperative function:**
   (a) Come with me.
   (b) Please come here.
2. **Present tense function:**
   (a) You play very well.
   (b) The sun rises in the east.
3. **Infinitive function:**
   (a) I like to play.
   (b) I want to go.

II. The -ing form of the verb has two functions – active participle function and gerundial function. The two examples of each function are given below:

1. **Active participle function:**
   (a) You are playing very well.
   (b) He is reading a book.
2. **Gerundial function:**
   (a) Swimming is good for health.
   (b) I am fond of swimming.

Note :Imperative function : implying order or request.

Eg. Do this. (order)

Please do this. (request)

Infinitive : the base form of the verb (i.e. without any suffix or inflection) used as non-finite verb. It is often preceded by 'to'.

Eg. I came <u>to make</u> a request to you.

Eg. Of bare infinitive

They did not <u>see</u> us.

Three non-finite verb forms:

(a) infinitive with or without <u>to</u>

(b) ing- form (present participle) eg.

(c) - ed form (past participle) eg.

'To' infinitive:

Eg. He wants to see you.

Gerund : verb + ing (eg. Read + ing) having a noun-like function as subject or object. Eg.Reading is a good habit. (subject)

I am fond of reading. (object to preposition 'of')

11.3 SIMPLE PRESENT AND PRESENT CONTINUOUS

Simple Present:

Forms : (i) Base form in all contexts except 3rd person singular : take, eat, do, play etc.

(ii) - s/es form in 3rd person singular: takes, eats plays etc.

Present Continuous:

Form : - ing form of the main verb preceded by 'be'

e.g. is taking, am eating, are doing etc.

Note the following uses of the simple present and present continuous tense forms:

1. We use the simple present tense to describe things that are always true, or situations that exist now and will continue indefinitely.
   (a) The sun rises in the east.
   (b) In summer, the sky is blue.
2. We use the simple present tense to talk about habits or things that take place regularly.
   (a) I always go for a walk in the morning.
   (b) Our classes start at 9.30 in the morning.
3. We use the present continuous tense to describe an event that is going on now.
   (a) What are you reading?
   (b) I'm doing my homework.
4. We use the present continuous tense to describe a situation that is or

may be temporary. Compare sentences (a) and (b) below:

(a) He teaches Economics at Gauhati University (permanent arrangement)

(b) He's teaching in the English Teaching Department (it implies that the position is temporary).

5. We often use the simple present rather than the present continuous to describe states.

(a) I enjoy reading novels.

(b) The book consists of 10 chapters.

Verb of this category include agree, assume, believe, belong to, contain, cost, disagree, feel, hate, have, hope, know, like, look, love, own, prefer, realise, regret, resemble, small, taste.

However, we can use the present continuous time with some state verbs to indicate that the state is temporary, for a period of time, around the present.

(a) I consider him to be unreliable. (this is my view)

(b) I am considering the matter of buying a Nano. (this is something I am thinking about now).

6. We use the simple present tense with verbs that are generally referred to as performatives.

(a) I admit my mistake. (an admission).

(b) I promise you a thousand rupees. (a promise).

Other performative verbs include accept, acknowledge, advise, apologise, assume, deny, guarantee, hope, inform, predict, promise, recommend, suggest, suppose, warn.

We can use modals with performatives.

(c) I would advise you to buy your tickets from the counter.

7. We generally use the simple present tense (or simple past) to relate a story and use the present continuous (or past continuous) to refer to longer background events.

(a) Tom came across a newspaper advertisement and visited the house of the lady. The lady who is reading a book appears to be a teacher.

(b) Tom goes up (went up) to her who immediately engages (engaged) him as her servant.

8. We use the simple present tense to report what we have heard or read.

(a) I hear you're coming tomorrow.

(b) Naipaul relates in this book his impressions of India as a very strange land.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1. Suggest a verb to complete the following sentences (use simple present tense)

a) Artemes Fowl .....a child prodigy from Ireland.(be)

b) When Arun .....his father will go out (come)

c) Now there .....a whole new species to exploit with his ingenious schemes. (be)

Q.2. Choose the simple present or present continuous forms of the verbs in brackets and complete the sentences.

a) It ..... (rain) heavily outside.

b) It usually ..... (rain) in summer.

c) I generally ..... (watch) the TV news at nine o'clock.

d) The police ..... (talk) to a number of people about the robbery.

e) I ..... (go) for a swimming these days.

f) I ..... (hear) a lot of good reports about you these days.

11.4 PRESENT PERFECT AND SIMPLE PAST

Present Perfect Tense:

Form : have/has + verb in the past participle form e.g. have taken, has done etc.

Simple Past:

Forms :

(i) Regular verbs form their past tense by adding - ed to the present tense form e.g. ask - asked, finish - finished.

(ii) Irregular verbs do no take-ed to the present tense form for past tense form e.g. write-wrote; know-knew.

(iii) Irregular verbs form their past tense generally by a change of vowel. e.g. give - gave, fly - flew, eat - ate.

(iv) In a few cases there is no change in the past tense form. e.g. cut - cut, hit - hit, put - put, set - set etc.

11.4.1 Present Perfect

1. When we talk about something that happened in the past, but we do not specify when it happened, we use the present perfect tense.
   (a) I have written the letter.
   (b) He has obtained three days' leave.
2. When we want to establish a connection between what happened in the past and the present time, we use the present perfect tense.
   (a) I've bought the book.
   (b) I've had lunch.
3. When we describe a period of time in which an existing situation had lasted, we use the present perfect tense.
   (a) Things have improved since your last visit
   (b) Prices of essential items have fallen now.

11.4.2 Simple Past

1. When we want to indicate that something had happened at a specific time in the past, we use the simple past tense. We can use a time adverbial to indicate when the event took place.

   (a) Shakespeare died in 1616.
   (b) He arrived at the station in time.

2. We use the simple past tense to describe a situation that existed for a period of time in the past but not now.

   (a) The Ahoms ruled over Assam for 600 years.
   (b) I played chess many years ago.

Note : We use the present perfect when we talk about something the happened in a period of time up to the present. But we use the simple past tense to refer to something that happened at a particular finished time in the past.

E.g. (a) Arup Kr. Dutta is an eminent writer. He has written a large number of children's books.

(b) He wrote A Story about Tea for NBT in 1985.

We can use the present perfect tense to describe a state that existed in the past and still exists now. But we can use the simple past tense if the state no longer exists.

(a) I have known Mr. Baruah for a long time.

(b) I knew him when we were both doing NCC training at Cochin.

11.5 PAST CONTINUOUS AND SIMPLE PAST

Past Continuous :

Form : be + v (ing)

e.g. was doing, were playing

Simple Past :

See 1.4

1. We use the past continuous tense to express an action that was going on during a certain time in the past e.g.

(a) I was working in the library all afternoon.

(b) At nine o'clock I was getting ready for school.

2. When we talk about two past events or actions that went on over the same period of time, we can use the past continuous for both.

(a) While Deepa was watching the TV, her sister was doing her home work.

(b) She was teaching in a high school when I was living in Sivasagar.

3. When we talk about a permanent situation that existed in the past, we use the simple past form rather than the past continuous form.

(a) I worked hard all my life.

(b) I taught in the college for ten years.

4. We use the simple past and not the past continuous when we refer to repeated or habitual actions or events in the past.

(a) Mr. Dutta usually went to office by bus.

(b) On some day he got a lift in a friend's car.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3. Complete these sentences by using either the present perfect or the simple past forms of the verb given in brackets:

a) She isn't here, she ..... (go) to college.

b) I ..... (see) the film before.

c) I ..... (see) the film when it was first shown in Delhi.

d) I ..... (receive) your letter two days ago.

e) I ..... (write) two letters so far.

f) I .....already (explain) it to you.

Q.4. Here are some parts of newspaper reports. Study the underlined verbs and correct them if necessary or put a tick.

a) The State Government declared local holiday on April 22, 23 and 24 in the areas falling within the jurisdiction of the parliamentary constituencies of Dhubri, Kokrajhar.

b) Campaigning for the second phase of the Lok Sabha Election has come to an end at 4 pm today.

c) In the 2004 elections, the Congress has secured 3, 53, 250 votes.

Q.5. Complete the sentences using the past continuous or simple past forms of the verbs in brackets.

(a) Just as I ..... (get) out of the car, I ..... (see) him leaving the house.

(b) Dilip ..... (break) his leg while he ..... (practice) judo.

(c) I ..... (live) in a flat that ..... (belong) to my brother.

(d) I ..... (have) coffee while I ..... (wait) for her to arrive.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

After having read through the unit, you will be able to learn the concepts of time and tenses. The unit discusses the various types and functions of tenses. It provides a systematic idea on the various forms with relevant examples for your easy reference and understanding.



11.7 FURTHER READING

1) Dowerah, Sawpon. *A Students' Grammar of English. Guwahati : Students' Stores.*

2) Eastwood, John. (1994). *Oxford Guide to English Grammar.* Oxford University Press.

3) Eckersley & Ekersley. (ed). (1960) *A Comprehensive English Guide. Harlow : Pearson Education Limited.*

4) Palmer, R. F. (1988). *The English Verb.*Longman Linguistics Library



11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: (a) is, (b) comes, (c) is

Ans to Q No 2: (a) is raining, (b) rains, (c) watch, (d) is talking, (e) am going, (f) am hearing

Ans to Q No 3: (a) has gone, (b) have seen, (c) saw, (d) received, (e) have written, (f) have already explained

Ans to Q No 4: (a) has declared, (b) came, (c) secured

Ans to Q No 5: (a) was getting, sow, (b) broke, was practising, (c) had been living in a flat, belonged, (d) had, had been waiting.



11.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Explain with an example of each how the present perfect, past perfect and past perfect continuous forms of the verbs are formed.

Q.2. Explain the difference in meaning expressed by the tenses of the verb in the following pairs of sentences.

(i) (a) He will come tomorrow.

(b) He shall come tomorrow.

(ii) (a) I shall buy a car.

(b) I will buy a car.

Q.3. Correct the verb forms in the following sentences:

(a) The ship has sank with all hands on board.

(b) Research has showed that cycling is good for health.

(c) Bullfighting is going on in Spain for centuries.

(d) He was hung to death.

(e) Trees are growing more quickly in summer than in winter.

(f) Banks lent money to make a profit.

(g) I have drank from glasses of water.

Q.4. Write the following sentences using the verbs given in brackets in their correct tense form:

(a) I ..... (suffer) from fever for three days.

(b) When Deepa and Rhea came to our house, I ..... (watch) the television.

(c) He ..... (stay) here until the work is completed.

(d) If he ..... (come) to me I would have helped him.

(e) The boy jumped off the train while it ..... (move).

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