

# 18 | Time and tense

## Introduction

'It is important to keep the two concepts of **time** and **tense** strictly apart,' (Otto Jespersen, 1933). This unit attempts to unravel the relationship between real time and grammatical tense.

## Tasks

### 1 Present and past

a Identify the present and past tense verbs in this extract:

#### Olá's experience of English in her own words

My name is Olá. I'm Polish. I was introduced to English for the first time at school at the age of 18. Until that time my only foreign language had been Russian. I made two brief visits to English-speaking countries in my 20s, and then, at the age of 28, I moved to Dublin, where I have now been living for seven years. My English is by no means perfect but quite a lot of English-speakers I talk to think I'm Irish.

(Cook and Singleton 2014)

b How many different *forms* of the present and past tense does the extract include? (If necessary, check the chart in Unit 17 Task 7, on page 112.)

### 2 Time and tense

a Here are some sentences, all instances of authentic speech or writing, taken from the Cambridge English Corpus. Some of the verbs are in the present tense and some are in the past. First, assign a tense to each underlined verb. Then decide if the present tense verbs refer to present time, and if the past tense verbs refer to the past time. If not, what do they refer to? The first one has been done for you:

a Oh here comes the bus... and it's packed. *present tense; present time reference*

b Just yesterday I had to pay \$6 for 10 oranges.

c Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov heads to Washington next week.

d I want a normal life for myself and my children.

e She's a vegetarian, except she eats chicken.

f Then I get a call from him a day or two later and he says, 'Dude, you don't understand'.

g Angela did you want some of the raspberry too? ~ Yes please.

## Tasks

- h If only I was 60 kilos lighter and slightly more attractive.
- i She said she earned \$460 a week, and at least \$200 more in tips.
- j Richard lives to marry his nurse, and dies in 1962.
- k I hear you're going to take that house in Italy.

b How does this exercise support Jespersen's case, i.e. that 'it is important to keep the two concepts of time and tense strictly apart'?

### 3 'Present' tense vs. 'past' tense

Look at the examples in Task 2 that use the form of the present tense and those that use the form of the past tense. Can you see any meaning that is shared by all the examples in each category? As a guide, consider this comment from *The English Verb* by Martin Joos (1964): 'The unmarked tense will be called *actual* and the marked one *remote*. The latter name fits the meaning precisely'.

### 4 Present simple

a Identify all the examples of the present simple in this extract from a short story:

Here Dutch pauses in his game of solitaire and looks in silence.

"My daughter," he says finally. "I sent her through college. Yeh, she's graduated now and has a fine job. I help her all I can. What? Is she tattooed?"

The world's greatest tattoo artist bristles and glowers at the designs on the walls, frowns at the cupids, nymphs, anchors, dragons and butterflies.

"I should say not," he mutters. "She don't belong in this street, not here. She's got a different life, and I help her all I can and she likes me. No, sir, in this street belongs only those who have a long memory. The new ones should start somewhere else. Not, mind you, that tattooing ain't good enough for anybody. But times have changed."

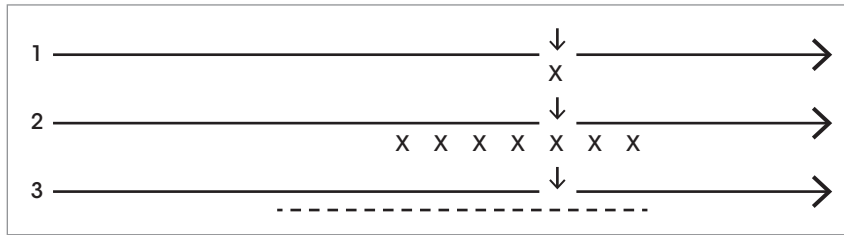
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(from *A Thousand and One Nights in Chicago* by Ben Hecht, 1922)

b Can you find examples in the above text of the following uses of the present simple?

- to talk about present states
- to talk about present events
- to talk about present habits (or repeated events)

c Now, match these time lines to each of the above uses (the symbol ↓ indicates the present).



d Which meanings do you think are most frequent?

## 5 Present simple

Look at this grammar explanation of the present simple from an intermediate level coursebook. What meanings does it *not* mention? Why – do you think?

### 1 Present Simple

Positive form	Negative form	Question form
I / you / we / they <b>work</b>	I / you / we / they <b>don't (= do not)</b> <b>work</b>	<b>Do</b> I / you / we / they <b>work</b> ?
he / she / <b>it works</b>	he / she / it <b>doesn't</b> (= <b>does not</b> ) <b>work</b>	<b>Does</b> he / she / it <b>work</b> ?

We use the Present Simple for:

a repeated actions or habits.

*We go **out** on Saturday nights.*

b something we see as permanent.

*My brother **works** in a bank.*

c describing a state that doesn't change.

*She **looks** like her mother.*

(from *Cutting Edge Intermediate Student's Book* by Cunningham and Moor, 1998)

## 6 Teaching the present simple

Think of typical contexts and/or texts for teaching these uses of the present simple:

- repeated events, habits
- permanent states
- present events
- past events
- future events

## Tasks

### 7 Past simple

Identify the past simple verbs in this extract from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Which are in the passive voice? Which are irregular in form?

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: 'Please, sir, I want some more'.

### 8 Past tense

Look at this dialogue below. What features of the past tense does it display? How could you use it in class in order to highlight one or more of these features?

**A**  3.21 Listen. What did Jason do on his vacation? Practice the conversation.

- Diana Great picture! When did you get back?  
Jason Last night.  
Diana So how was your vacation?  
Jason Oh, it was wonderful.  
Diana Where did you go exactly?  
Jason We went to Hawaii.  
Diana Wow! What was the weather like?  
Jason It was hot, but not too hot.  
Diana Nice. So what did you do there?  
Jason We went to the beach every day, and I went parasailing. I didn't want to come home.  
Diana Well, I'm glad you did. . . . I have a ton of work for you!



(from *Touchstone Student's Book 1* by McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford, 2014)

### 9 Past perfect

Look at this beginning to a short story by Anton Chekhov:

'What shall I write?' said Yegor, and he dipped his pen in the ink.

Vasilisa had not seen her daughter for four years. Her daughter Yefimya had gone after her wedding to Petersburg, had sent them two letters, and since then seemed to vanish out of their lives; there had been no sight nor sound of her. And whether the old woman was milking her cow at dawn, or heating her stove, or dozing at night, she was always thinking of one and the same thing – what was happening to Yefimya, whether she were alive out yonder. She ought to have sent a letter, but the old father could not write, and there was no one to write.

But now Christmas had come, and Vasilisa could not bear it any longer, and went to the tavern to Yegor, the brother of the innkeeper's wife, who had sat in the tavern doing nothing ever since he came back from the army; people said that he could write letters very well if he were properly paid ...

(extract from 'At Christmas Time' by Anton Chekhov, in *The Witch and Other Stories*)

- a Put the main events of the story in the order in which they happened.
- b Identify all the examples of the past perfect.
- c What does this suggest about the meaning and use of the past perfect?

### 10 Past tense errors

Identify and correct the past tense errors in these examples of learners' writing (from the Cambridge English Corpus). How would you explain the correction, in each case?

- a Yesterday there was a birthday party. First we had ate all together fish and chips and had dranked ice tea. Later we had maked the music loud and danced to the music. At eleven o'clock the party was over and I and all the other children were going home.
- b One day Maria go to the school, in the gate was his friend, called Gonzalo, he told her that the day before the director order to move all the things in the school. When they go to class Maria was surprised because her suitcase was missed. She go to the director officce and reclaimed him, he told she that the suitcase could be in the garbage. Maria went to the garbage. When they go to the garbage the suitcase doesn't was there, then Maria go to the director, but he did n't be in his office. Maria revised his officce and she found her suitcase.