

How Tenses Tense All And Sundry!!

Dr. Anil Kumar.P

J-322 Akrutha

Kovaipudur

Coimbatore

Abstract:

Tenses in English language have always posed a massive challenge to all users, irrespective of their literacy, proficiency and sound knowledge in English. Grammar manuals or books have often made the comprehension, understanding and the use of tenses more confounded! This is because books are written with target readers or users in mind. Furthermore, most of the Grammar books fail in emphasising the exceptions that follow a general rule or norm. I have seen the best of Grammarians struggle to use tenses correctly on stage, online platforms and elsewhere. I was annoyed to see an erroneous use of tense in a book written by the HOD of an English Department at a famous University in Tamil Nadu. The preface or introductory piece of his book says ‘‘I had been waiting to write...’’ instead of ‘‘I have been waiting....’’. The context warrants the use of present perfect continuous in place of past perfect continuous. The article delves into all the English tenses with their sub divisions and the confusions they throw in when it comes to their use!

Keywords: Tenses, Present Simple, Present Continuous, Present Perfect, Present Perfect Continuous, Past Simple, Past Continuous, Past Perfect, Past Perfect Continuous, Future Simple, Future Continuous, Future Perfect, Future Perfect Continuous, Grammar Books, Target Readers, General Rules, Exceptions, Erroneous Use Of Tenses By All And Sundry.

INTRODUCTION:

Correct use of tenses, has remained an ‘‘Achilles’ heel’’ for the illiterates, literates and even the most learned users. This article delves into the tenses, their use and their erroneous use by all and sundry. Researches, with hypotheses and their illustrations have already been done to study sample cases of use of tenses. I have had interactions with students at school and college level. I have met and interacted with teachers with and without knowledge of English Language in general and tenses in particular. I have spent some quality time listening to Diplomats, Officers, Academicians with some or no knowledge of English. Furthermore, I have perused the written communications from Principals, Diplomats, Beureaucrats and others perceived to be good communicators. I find to my dismay that the problem has engulfed

almost every one; all and sundry, to say the least!

TENSES IN ENGLISH:

Tenses are primarily the fulcrum around which the entire process of communication(both verbal and written) revolves! There is a tense in every phrase or sentence used.

Communication has a purpose and a listener or a reader comprehends it only from what he hears or reads. An erroneous use of tense can convey a meaning contrary to what has been intended. This defeats the very purpose of communication. Unlike Latin,French,Sanskrit or any other language for that matter, use, of English is highly ‘tense- sensitive’. This is because English has tense forms that cover almost every context in speaking and writing! Let us see the tenses, their forms and uses first.

PRESENT SIMPLE OR SIMPLE PRESENT:

As the name suggests, it is quite simple and it is a form of Present tense. There could be questions as to why and how we use present simple. It is therefore important to have an over view of its use with exceptions.

This form of present tense is used to denote:

a)actions that take place at the time of speaking. An example could be ‘Look, he plays there’. However, one ought to be quick enough to note that ‘Look, he is playing there’ would be a more common usage.

b)a habit. An example could be ‘I get up at 6 O’ clock every day’.This is a standard use with no exception on the possibility of the use of any other tense in this context.

c)a universal truth. An example could be ‘The Sun rises in the east’. A general truth cannot have any other tense or form in its description, no matter whether the description is in the present or the past.

d) historic past. What is historic past? It could be an anecdote or a description of a live action that happened in the past !An example could be ‘It is the year 1945.The great Donald Bradman just walks in now. There is thunderous applause’. On could note that even though the action took place in the past, the narration is in simple present.

e) headlines in newspaper .An example could be ‘Millionaire goes bankrupt’.The millionaire must have gone bankrupt a few days ago or so. Yet the headline uses simple present.

f)a planned future.An example could be ‘ The PM arrives in Mumbai tonight’.It is an action reserved for future.Yet,its certainty allows the use of simple present. But,here one needs to understand that in this context, there could be possibilities of other tense forms being used too. One could also say ‘The PM is arriving in Mumbai tonight’ or ‘The PM will arrive in Mumbai tonight’.It is therefore important to know that a few tense forms are far from rigid when it comes to allowing other forms to replace them on certain contexts!

A student or a reader should construe from a context ‘He teaches us English’ as to whether

the teacher teaches at the time of speaking or the sentence means a regular/habitual action. This should be discernible from the context!

PRESENT CONTINUOUS:

This is indeed not a difficult form of present tense to handle. For it denotes:

a) an action happening at the time of speaking. An example could be "Look, he is playing there". We can compare it with the example I have provided for simple present. There is a clear mention that in such contexts, present continuous is preferred to simple present. However, one should discern well to comprehend the sentence "I am reading MACBETH at the moment". It could either mean I have been reading the play for quite some time and I am yet to finish it or at the time of speaking, I am reading the play. This should indeed be made out from the context. Unfortunately, most Grammar books do not allow us to see a context besides adhering to a rule!

b) an action referring to a planned future. An example could be "The PM is arriving here tonight". Here the sentence refers to a course of action reserved or confirmed for the future. While going through examples of present continuous, we need to decipher contexts very well. The sentence "The PM is working hard on the project" need not necessarily mean the work is going on exactly at the time of speaking. On the other hand, it means the work perhaps started in the past and it is still in progress.

PRESENT PERFECT:

This is arguably the most confusing of all tenses/forms. It denotes:

a) an action that has just been completed. An example could be, "I have finished my breakfast".

b) an unspecified past. An example could be, "I have seen him" or "I have watched this movie". There is no specific reference on when the action happened. This tense could be used with words like 'recently' or 'before'. It could be used with phrases like "in the past". An example could be, "I have done this in the past".

However, we should be careful not to say "I have seen him yesterday" or "I have watched the movie yesterday". To make a specific reference of the past, we need to use simple past tense. The whole idea of using present perfect is to suggest that an action happened in the past and the effect of which is still there in the present. Therefore, the time is unspecified and it demands the use of present perfect.

c) an action that took place in the past and is still continuing in the present. An example could be, "I have not seen him for long" or "I have not seen him since last year". In such contexts, this tense is used with 'since' or 'for'.

PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS:

This form of present tense requires careful use. It denotes:
an action that took place in the past and continuing in the present. An example could be, 'I have been working here since 1990/I have been working here for twenty nine years/It has been raining since this morning/It has been raining for hours'.

One has to clearly understand that 'It is raining' and 'It has been raining' communicate two different meanings. The former suggests that it is raining right now without giving any indication on when the rain started. The latter suggests that it is raining right now and the rain started in the past. Here, one can see that past and present actions are connected to communicate an idea. This tense is often used with 'since' and 'for'. Phrases like 'long time' and 'some time' are also used with this tense.

PAST SIMPLE OR SIMPLE PAST:

This is not a difficult tense/form to use. It denotes:

- a) an action that took place in the specific past. An example could be 'I saw him yesterday'.
- b) an action with or without mentioning the specific time in the past. The example 'I saw him' invariably means I saw him some time in the specific past.

PAST CONTINUOUS:

This is the past form of present continuous. It denotes:

- a) an action that was happening in the past. An example could be 'He was playing'.
- b) an action when direct narration is converted to indirect narration or reported speech. Here, the present continuous in direct narration becomes past continuous in indirect narration or reported speech. Let us see an example.

Direct narration: He said, 'I am not coming'.

Indirect or reported speech: He said that he was not coming.

PAST PERFECT:

This is a tense form that needs careful use. It denotes:

- a) the earlier of the two actions in the past. An example could be, 'When I reached the station, the train had left'. (There are two past actions here- 'had left' and 'reached'. But 'had left' is deemed to have happened earlier.)
- b) an action when direct narration is converted to indirect narration or reported speech. Here, the present perfect becomes past perfect. Let us see an example.

Direct narration: He said, 'They have come'

Indirect or reported speech: He said that they had come.

It should be noted that an action in simple past in the direct narration is converted to past perfect in indirect or reported speech. Let us see an example.

Direct narration: He said, 'I arrived there on time'.

Indirect narration: He said that he had arrived on time.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS:

It is basically the past form of present perfect continuous. It denotes:

a) an action that took place at a certain point in the past and it was still continuing at a certain point in the past. An example could be "In 2015, I had been working there for 15 years".

b) an action when direct narration is converted to indirect narration or reported speech. Here the present perfect continuous in the direct narration becomes past perfect continuous in the indirect or reported speech. Let us see an example.

Direct narration: He said, "I have been waiting"

Indirect or reported speech: He said that he had been waiting.

FUTURE SIMPLE OR SIMPLE FUTURE:

This form of future tense is quite simple to use. It denotes:

an action likely to take place in future. An example could be, "He will visit us tomorrow."

FUTURE CONTINUOUS:

This form of future tense is not difficult to use either. It denotes:

an action that is likely to take place in future. It is at times, used in place of simple future, too. An example could be, "He will be visiting us tomorrow". As mentioned earlier, simple future could replace future continuous in some places. Hence, "He will visit us tomorrow" is also fine as an example if we are to interchangeably use both the forms.

FUTURE PERFECT:

The use of this tense form requires careful attention. It denotes:

an action that will just have completed sometime in future. An example could be "Tomorrow, by this time, I will have completed two lessons".

It is important to understand the context clearly so as to use this tense form.

FUTURE PERFECT CONTINUOUS:

The use of this tense requires minute attention. It denotes:

a) an action that happens at a point of time in future and still be continuing at another point of time in future. An example could be, "Next year, by this time, I will have been serving Oxford University". The sentence implies that the speaker is likely to join the university and is likely to continue his service at some point in time in future.

b)an action that may have happened in the past and will be continuing at some point in time in future.An example could be, ”Next month,by this time I will have been teaching you Shakespeare” .Here,the implication is that the lesson from Shakespeare has started in the past and it is likely to continue at a certain point in time in future.

Beware! One needs an absolute understanding of the context to use this tense form.

FINALITY OF THE RULES:

Are the above rules final? They are just an outline. They could perhaps serve as a ready reference but not a gospel. One has to look for a substantial number of contexts in which tenses have been used. A dictionary gives us the meaning of every word. However, to use a word in a context requires real understanding of different contexts!

WHERE TO LOOK FOR CONTEXTS?

Reading short stories,novels,essays and newspaper articles will help us abundantly in this regard. Listening to speakers who have excellent command in the language is going to be helpful, too. These pieces of literature have tenses and expressions used in different contexts.

HOME WORK WHILE READING:

It is recommended that while reading, one can spot a tense form, underline it and look up the text to find out how it has been used in a context. Stories are the best companions to understand and learn tenses. A story may be written in either present or past tense or perhaps,there could be the use of both the tenses. Stories beginning in the present tense have the liberty to switch over to other tenses. However, stories beginning in the past tense could rarely take a liberty of switching over to other tenses except on rarest of circumstances.

A REQUEST TO ALL LEARNERS:

I would recommend that all of you first make a chart of the tenses and its forms. It is also highly necessary to have the rules of their use in hand. Then the learners can pick up a piece of literature (story, novel or article) for reading. As they move along, they could mark the tense forms they come across in these pieces of literature. The chart and the rules of use (already in hand) will help the learners quickly identify a tense and the context in which it is used!

CONCLUSION:

This article is suggestive in character. I have interacted with diplomats, professors and a few

others from different walks of the society. I have unobtrusively evaluated their abilities to use tenses in speaking and writing. (It may be noted that many official communications from diplomats, educationists, students and teachers have been checked by me to create samples to evaluate the problem and its causes). It would be disrespectful or inappropriate to place the details of this research on record. However, the research has helped me conclude that knowledge of tenses evolves over a period of time. A learner has to make painstaking efforts to understand the basic rules, read pieces of literature to gain contextual understanding as also read different genres of literature to evaluate how the best users of language use tenses. This is a laborious endeavour and it requires patience and perseverance for its success!

References:

- 1) Essential English Grammar-Raymond Murphy(Second Edition)
- 2) Intermediate English Grammar-Raymond Murphy(Second Edition)
- 3) Common Errors In The Use Of Tenses(Www.Englishgrammar.Org/Common-Errors-Tenses)
- 4) High School English Grammar&Composition-Wren&Martin(Revised By Dr.Ndv.Prasada Rao)
- 5) Lectures Of Dr.Joseph Dunston(Former Hod-St.Jude's College,Thoothoor)
- 6) Conversations With Dr.Saviour Das(Former Professor,Dept Of English,St.Jude's College,Thoothoor)
- 7) Circulars From Cbse/Inspectorate Of Matriculation Schools,Tamil Nadu
- 8) The Times Of India/Hindustan Times
- 9) Conversations With Shri.Bss.Prasada Rao(Late) Director.Lfs,Andhra Pradesh
- 10) Conversations With Spring Mount Public School,Tirupur,Tamil Nadu