

# Categories of the English Verb

An Overview, compiled by Philipp Kneis<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Preliminaries

### 1.1. Tense

Tense signifies a relation (R) between the time of speaking (S) and the time of the event (E): Tense = R (S,E)

<b>PAST TENSE:</b>	$S > E$
<b>PRESENT TENSE:</b>	$S = E$ (unmarked member)
<b>FUTURE TENSE:</b>	$S < E$

### 1.2. Correlation

Correlation signifies a relation (R) between the moment of speaking (S) and the speaker's orientation (O) towards a specified event: Correlation = R (S,O)

<b>RETROSPECTIVE CORR. (PERFECT):</b>	$S > O$ , orientation in the respective past
<b>COINCIDENT CORRELATION:</b>	$S = O$ (unmarked member)
<b>PROSPECTIVE CORRELATION:</b>	$S < O$ , orientation in the respective future

### 1.3. Aspect

Aspect signifies the scope of the focus on the event.

<b>SIMPLE ASPECT:</b>	the event as such is narrated (unmarked member)
<b>EXPANDED ASPECT:</b>	the event is seen in its widest possible surroundings and connotations

### 1.4. Voice

Voice signifies the agent of a specific action.

<b>ACTIVE VOICE:</b>	the subject of the action is the agent (unmarked member)
<b>PASSIVE VOICE:</b>	the subject of the action is not the agent

### 1.5. Number

Number signifies how many participants are involved in an action.

<b>SINGULAR NUMBER:</b>	one agent
<b>PLURAL NUMBER:</b>	more than one agent

### 1.6. Person

Person signifies the relation of the speaker to the agent of a specified action.

<b>SAME PERSON:</b>	forms of I (singular) / we (plural)
<b>DIRECT ADDRESSEE:</b>	forms of you
<b>INDIRECT ADDRESSEE:</b>	forms of he, she, it (singular) / they (plural)

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<sup>1</sup> This overview is the result of a handout in the context of a seminar on English Verb Grammar by Prof. Dr. Peter Lucko, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

## 2. Formation & Examples: Tense–Aspect–Correlation, Active Voice

### 2.1. Present Tense, Active Voice

**Simple Present Coincident:** present action with no special focus

Usually expresses regular activities, habits, common knowledge and general truths.

Formation: **unmarked form of the verb (infinitive), 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular: -s**

I go, he goes

- I **am** a professor of English. I **teach** at a University in Berlin.
- I **like** coffee. I'**m** very fond of reading novels.
- Two times two **equals** four. A table **has** four legs. A cat **has** two eyes.

**Expanded Present Coincident:** present action with a special focus on the event

Usually expresses a one-time event, or stresses the surroundings of the situation, strong focus on the now.

Formation: **form of “be” + present participle of the verb (infinitive + -ing)**

I am going, he is going

- Right now, I'**m sitting** at the computer.
- Our cats **are lying** on my sofa.
- He **isn't telling** the truth, he's **lying**. (from “to lie”, “lügen”)

**Simple Present Retrospective (= Simple Present Perfect):** past action, speaker's orientation towards the now.

Usually expresses past events with a result in the present. This result can be material or ideal, concrete or abstract.

Formation: **form of “have” + past participle of the verb (infinitive + -ed; or irregular forms: 3<sup>rd</sup> base form)**

I have gone, he has gone

- I'**ve begun** reading a novel, and I am still reading. (the action is still going on)
- Ten years ago, I'**ve read** *Faust*. I still know it by heart. (the result of the reading is that the book is still known).
- I'**ve lived** in Berlin for ten years. (This can mean two things: 1.: I still live here. 2: I live somewhere else now, yet I still have lots of memories and connections.)

**Expanded Present Retrospective (=Expanded Present Perfect):** expanded form of the Simple Present Retrospective.

The difference to the simple form lies in the stronger focus on the event, the connection to the present is more vivid.

Formation: **form of “have” + been + present participle of the verb (infinitive + -ing)**

I have been going, he has been going

- I'**ve been reading** a horror novel during the weekend, it was so frightening that I still cannot sleep.
- I'**ve been living** in Berlin for ten years. (I still live here.)

**Present Prospective:** future action, speaker's orientation towards the now.

Usually expresses future events resulting from a present incentive. It's not that often used.

- I'**m going to buy** a car very soon. (this has developed into the future tense)
- The train **is about to leave**.

## 2.2. Past Tense, Active Voice

**Simple Past Coincident:** past action with no special focus

Usually describes an event in the past which has been completed by now.

Formation: **infinitive+ed (or irregular form: 2<sup>nd</sup> base form)**

I went, I lived

- I **was** ten years old when it happened. World War II **took** place between 1939 and 1945.
- I **spent** many years at university. (If you want to stress that this was important for the conversation now, e.g. if you want to express that you have learnt something, use the retrospective form.)

**Expanded Past Coincident:** past action with a special focus on the event

Stresses the surroundings of the situation. Can deliver the **background situation** to another action in the simple past.

Formation: **past form of “be” (was or were) + present participle of the verb (infinitive + -ing)**

I was going, you were going

- I **was reading** a book when my parents *came* home. (the action in the simple past **interrupts** the background situation given in the expanded past).
- When we **were having** dinner, the police *knocked* at the door.

**Simple Past Retrospective (= Simple Past Perfect):** past action, speaker’s orientation towards a more recent past.

Usually expresses past events occurring before another past event. The relation of the past perfect to the past coincident is similar to that of the present perfect to the present coincident. It is mostly important for literary narratives.

Formation: **“had” + past participle of the verb (infinitive + -ed; or irregular forms)**

I had gone, he had gone

- I already **had had** my breakfast when they *asked* me to eat with them. (the action in the past perfect predates that in the past coincident, there is a result from that past action)
- It **had been** some time when I finally *saw* her.

**Expanded Past Retrospective (= Expanded Past Perfect):** see Expanded Present Perfect. This is very rarely used, but grammatically possible.

Formation: **“had” + “been” + past participle of the verb (infinitive + -ed; or irregular forms)**

I had been gone, he had been gone

- I **had been seeing** her for five months when she suddenly *moved* away.

**Past Prospective:** an action in the relative future of the past event, speaker’s orientation towards the past event.

Usually expresses future past events resulting from a past incentive. It’s not that often used in daily conversation, but has its importance in literature.

- I **was going to buy** a car very soon. (this is, so to say, the future of the past)
- The train **was about to leave**.

### 2.3. Future Tense, Active Voice

**Future Coincident:** future action with no special focus

Formation: There are several ways in English to form the future, see the examples.

- I **will** go to school tomorrow. (**will + infinitive**, “will-future”, definite intention on the part of the speaker)
- The train **leaves** at eight. (**S. Pres. Coinc.**, “timetable” future, there is no doubt the event will take place)
- I **am going** to school tomorrow. (**E. Pres. Coinc.**)
- I **am going to go** to school tomorrow. I **am going to read** the book. (**E. Pres. Prosp.**)
- I **shall see** you tomorrow. (**shall + infinitive**, “modal future”)

**Future Retrospective (= Future Perfect):** future action, speaker’s orientation towards the respective past. Expresses future events occurring before another future event, with relation to the future. Very rarely used.

Formation: **“will” + have/has + past participle of the verb (infinitive + -ed; or irregular forms)**

I will have gone, he will have gone

- I **will have read** the book by tomorrow. (“Ich werde das Buch bis morgen gelesen haben”)

**Future Prospective:** an action in the future of the future event, speaker’s orientation towards the future event. Usually expresses future events resulting from a future incentive. It’s not that often used.

- I **will be going to buy** a car. (this is, so to say, the future of the future)