

An easy naming of English tenses

Tense is an important aspect of the English language but many languages do not have tense and so, initially, it can be a major hurdle for multilingual students. The problem for these students is that there are many tense choices available and using traditional terms to name each one, such as present perfect, past perfect, and pluperfect, makes it an impossibility. However, we do have another choice for naming the tenses and even if we make use of it for the most basic secondary tenses, it would be worthwhile, I think.

Michael Halliday, in his model of language, has a naming system which uses only three words. These are the words for the primary tenses: past, present and future. All other secondary tenses are combinations of these words. In this overview, we will look at the primary ones first so we have a foundation, and then we will look at secondary tenses.

The important thing to be mindful of with tense is that it is relative to the speaker and the time of speaking. That means we can draw visuals to represent the various tenses, especially for the secondary tenses — see the image below.

PRIMARY TENSES

Present tense

The simple present tense is used to express habitual actions, eg:

She **plays** tennis and mahjong on Tuesdays.

It is referred to as ‘timeless’ where it expresses generalised statements, eg:

Water **freezes** at 0°C.

Past tense

The past tense is used to express action completed at a definite time and usually the time is stated, eg:

I **caught up** with her last night.
I **bought** this car in Sydney.

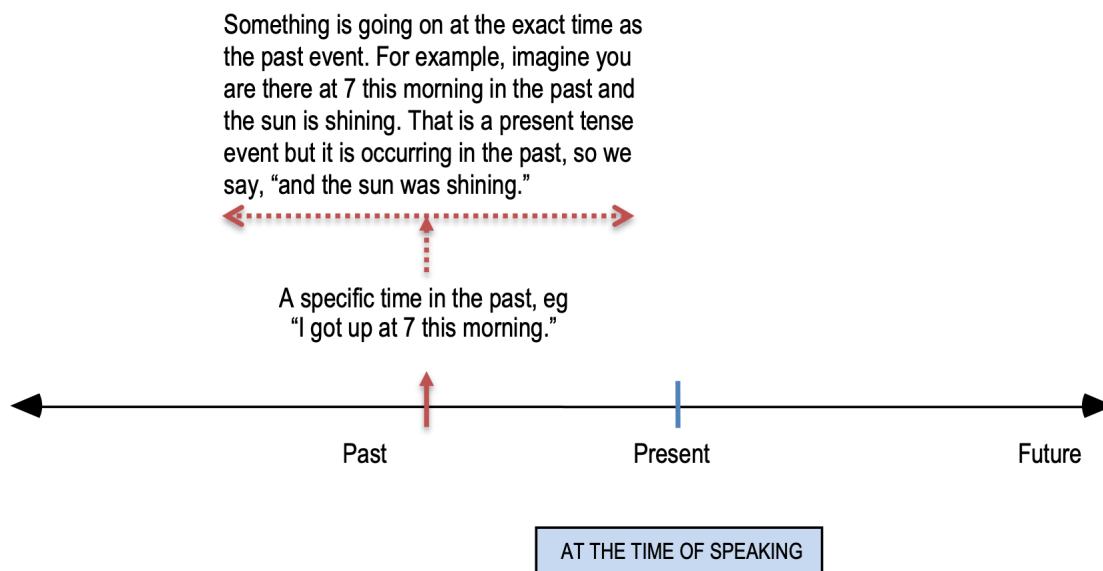
Future tense

The future tense is identified by the use of auxiliaries such as “will”.

I **will do** it next week.

SECONDARY TENSES

These are combinations of the primary tenses. The image below explains the tense meanings of “When I got up at 7 this morning, the sun was shining” and showing that, in the first clause, we have the past tense and, in the second clause, we have a secondary tense.



The idea with tense is that one transposes oneself to a specific time. In ‘was shining’, we are transposed to the past and an ongoing event at that time is construed as the present. Hence, ‘was shining’ is called the ‘present in past’ tense. The naming goes from right to left.

was	shining
PAST	PRESENT

Present in Present tense

The present in present is typically used with actions and it is in a sense ‘more present’ than the simple present because it is happening at the time of speaking, eg:

What **are** they **doing**? ... They’re **playing** soccer.

It expresses an action happening around this time period but not necessarily at the moment of speaking, eg:

I’m **reading** a book by Halliday and I’m **studying** German at TAFE.

It expresses a definite arrangement typically in the near future (the usual way of expressing immediate plans), eg:

I **am graduating** next week.

Present in Past tense

The present in past is often used together with the past tense. When this happens, the **past** usually refers to a shorter action or event that happened in the middle of or interrupted a larger ‘background’ action or situation, ie the **present in past** eg:

When I **got** up this morning, // the sun **was shining** // and the birds **were singing**.

Future in Past tense

Some meanings are expressed as if the speaker were in the past talking about the future, eg
I **was going to sit** for my pilot's exam // but I changed my mind.

Present in Future tense

Some meanings are expressed as if the speaker is already present in the future event, eg:
I **will be sitting** for my pilot's exam next week.