

# 11

## VERBS, TENSE AND ASPECT

- 1 Choose between the progressive and the non-progressive verb form in each of these sentences. In case both alternatives seem acceptable, explain any difference in meaning between them.
  - a. That evening Mr. Peterson came / ~~was coming~~ home to his bachelor house in sombre spirits. (The progressive *was coming* would imply that he was on his way home, which is not a likely interpretation here.)
  - b. He sat / ~~was sitting~~ down to dinner without relish. (The simple past form *sat* implies completed action, that is, he took a seat.)
  - c. Six o'clock struck / was striking on the bells of the church, and still he ~~dug~~ / was digging at the problem. (In the first case both the simple past and the past progressive are possible. *Struck* implies that the action is seen as completed, while *was striking* implies that the church bells had not finished ringing yet at the time we are looking at. In the second case the progressive is natural as the process of digging at the problem is still ongoing.)
  - d. "I see you ~~go~~ / are going in," said the lawyer. (The progressive must be used because the action is ongoing at the moment of speaking.)
  - e. "How did you know / ~~were you knowing~~ me?" he asked. (Only the non-progressive form can be used with a stative verb like *know*.)
  - f. The problem he debated / was debating as he walked / was walking was one of a class that is rarely solved. (Both verb forms are possible in both cases, but the progressive

is more likely, since the sentence describes ongoing activities. The simple past would indicate that the actions of debating and walking are seen as completed. Note that the same verb form must be chosen for both verb phrases here.)

2 Describe the structure of the italicized verb phrase in each of the sentences below in terms of auxiliaries, tense, aspect and voice.

- a. For my generation, the word “austerity” *is associated* (simple present + passive voice + lexical verb; passive auxiliary *be* in the present tense + past participle) with the rationing regulations that *were introduced* (simple past + passive voice + lexical verb; passive auxiliary *be* in the past tense + past participle) during World War II.
- b. Sweet rationing *did not end* (simple past; grammatical auxiliary *do* + negative + lexical verb) until 1953.
- c. My mother *used to count out* (marginal modal in past tense + infinitive marker + lexical verb) our scanty sweet allocation once a week.
- d. In 1942 the Making of Civilian Clothing (restriction order) *was passed* (simple past + passive voice + lexical verb; passive auxiliary *be* in the past tense + past participle).
- e. Dresses *could have* (modal + lexical verb) no more than two pockets and five buttons.
- f. The recent financial crisis *has brought on* (present perfect; present tense + past participle form of lexical verb) a new sense of austerity.
- g. We *are all feeling* (present progressive; present tense + progressive aspect + lexical verb) a little bit less well off.
- h. Things *have been going* (present perfect progressive; present tense + perfect aspect + progressive aspect + lexical verb) in the wrong direction.
- i. Let’s hope that the situation *will have improved* (modal perfect; modal auxiliary + perfect aspect + lexical verb in past participle form) by next year.

3 Explain the difference in form and meaning between the members of each pair.

- a. 1 She walks the dog every night.  
2 She is walking the dog tonight.

Sentence (a1) has the simple present tense and sentence (a2) has the present progressive. In addition the time adverbials are different: in (a1), *every night* describes how often the action takes place, while in (a2) *tonight* refers to “this evening”. Similarly, the simple present tense is used to describe habitual activity, while the present progressive describes ongoing, incomplete activity. Sentence (a1) thus means that

it is her habit to walk the dog every night. Sentence (a2) indicates that she is not at home at the moment because she is walking the dog.

b. 1 Do you speak Chinese?

2 Are you speaking Chinese?

Sentence (b1) is a question about the addressee's ability to speak Chinese. Sentence (b2) is a question about what language the addressee is speaking at the moment. The reason for the difference is that the simple present tense refers to permanent states and habitual actions, while the progressive refers to ongoing activity.

c. 1 Mr Jones has been to New York.

2 Mr Jones was in New York.

Sentence (c1) means that Mr Jones has visited New York at some point, and this is relevant at the moment of speaking. Sentence (c2) means that Mr Jones was in New York at some specific time in the past. The meaning difference is due to the verb phrases: Sentence (c1) uses the present perfect, which refers to a past event at some unspecified time, while (c2) has the simple past tense, which refers to an event at a specific (or specifiable) time.

d. 1 I was going for a walk when the sun came out.

2 I went for a walk when the sun came out.

Sentence (d1) contains a verb phrase with the past progressive (*was going*). This refers to incomplete action. So the person was just about to go out when the sun started shining. He or she may or may not have taken the walk in the end. In (d2) the simple past tense has been used (*went*). The combination of a simple past verb phrase in the main clause with a simple past verb phrase in the dependent clause is interpreted as two actions following each other, in this case: then sun came out and so I went for a walk.

e. 1 Sue was starting up a business.

2 Sue had started up a business.

As in sentence (d1), the past progressive in (e1) contains a past progressive verb phrase which refers to an incomplete action. Sue was in the process of starting up a new business. The verb phrase in (e2) combines past tense with the perfect aspect (past perfect) and thus refers to an action that was completed in the past, before the time of the "main story". So Sue had already started up a business, and maybe she was now ready to take on a new project.

4 Read the following text and answer the questions below:

In a village near Lyon in south-east France, a couple *have become* local celebrities by virtue of their adopted “child”. Digit, as she is known, *has been living* in the same room as Pierre and Elaine Thivillon for nearly 13 years. Their relationship *began* in 1999, when the young primate *came* into the care of the couple, who *manage* the zoo at Saint Martin la Plaine where she *was born*. Within three days of her birth, it was clear that Digit’s mother Pamela *was refusing* to feed her. The Thivillons took her into their care, bottle-feeding her during the day and returning her to her enclosure at night.

By 18 months old, the baby gorilla had begun to show a deep attachment to her foster parents. After an illness left her requiring 24-hour care, Pierre and Elaine took her into their bedroom at night, where she has slept ever since. For the first 10 years, she *snuggled* up between the couple, but now at 130 kg she *has to have* a bed of her own. (From [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk))

- a. *Have become* is in the present perfect form. The past tense form *became* would be possible if the sentence was taken out of its context. But since the following sentence has the present tense, the present perfect is a much better choice. The notion of present relevance associated with the present perfect gives the first two sentences of the text a sense of news value.
- b. *Has been living* consists of a grammatical auxiliary in the present tense, which marks the perfect aspect together with the following past participle. *Been* is the past participle form of the progressive auxiliary *be*, which is followed by an *-ing* participle. The verb phrase can be characterized as present perfect progressive. The meaning of this verb form is that the action started in the past, but continues into the present. That is, Digit still lives with Pierre and Elaine.
- c. The text switches to the past tense to recount events that are further back in time.
- d. Since *refuse* denotes an action that cannot stretch out in time, the past progressive aspect (*was refusing*) implies that the event was repeated over a period of time. The simple past (*refused*) would indicate that it was a one-time event.
- e. The perfect aspect (present or past) would not have been appropriate in this context because *snuggled* refers to an activity that took place over a specific period of time in the past.
- f. There is a comparison between the past and the present. The shift to the present time reference is marked by the time adverb *now*, which makes the use of the present tense natural.

5 Findings from the Corpus of Contemporary American English at <http://corpus.byu.edu/>:

- a. The first ten hits that come up for *was being* in the COCA corpus will vary (because the corpus keeps being added to), so you may not get the same hits as we did. However, many of our examples of *was being* are part of a passive construction (for instance *was being done*), indicating duration over time in the past. Sentences where *being* is the main verb (for instance *he was being grumpy*) indicate that the subject was behaving in a certain way (in this case being grumpy on purpose) over a limited period of time. That is, in contrast to *he was grumpy*, the progressive form of *be* refers to a situation which is not permanent.
- b. One corpus example of the framing effect of the progressive is the following: ***As they were leaving***, *Teo spoke to Furad*. ...The leaving was in progress, and the speaking occurred in the middle of it.
- c. We found (at least) two examples of *had left* which was not a past perfect verb phrase, namely *It was the only thing of monetary value he **had left** from his past* and *...he'd clung to them as all he **had left** of his brother*. In both cases *left* is part of the phrase “to have something left”, meaning “to still have something that has not disappeared or been used (yet)”. Two examples that illustrate how the past perfect refers to a time prior to another point of time in the past are the following: (i) *Mom motioned to the young Amish woman who **had left** their table after filling the glasses with fresh iced tea*. (ii) *...he turned and looked once more at the bridge and the figure they **had left** there...*
- d. In our hits, most examples of *she works* occur in sentences that contain an adverbial referring to “her workplace”, for example, *She works in a restaurant*, or to her employer, as in *And she works for the company now*. Some sentences describe the way in which she works as a rule (the habitual simple present), for example, *She works hard* is a manner adverbial. Some of the examples of the present progressive, such as *she is working on a new book...*, refer to ongoing activity (rather than regular activity). Another example that suggests activity that is not habitual or permanent is *Seven months before the Summer Olympics, she is working hard to find her stride*. This is due to the time adverbial, which limits the period in which she is working hard.