



**ASPECT – TENSE – MOOD  
IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR**

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## 1. THE CATEGORY OF ASPECT

### 1. Introductory remarks

- Aspect and tense are functional categories which are tightly related as they both are connected with time. They are verbal categories.
- Aspect indicates the size of an action (as a whole or as parts of it).
- Tense locates an action in time with respect to the moment of speech (the present tense, the past tense and the future tense).

- Progressive aspect is signaled by distinct morphological marking:

*be + ing.*

e.g. *He is/was speaking.*

- Simple aspect is rendered by the simple temporal form of the verb with no distinct morphological marking.

e.g. *He speaks/spoke.*

## 2. Aspectual classification of verbs

The aspectual classification of verbs is made up of three aspectual situations:

- **States:** believe, desire, have, own, resemble, love, live in Bucharest, be smart
- **Activities:** sing, play, swim, breathe
- **Accomplishments:** make a snowman, deliver a letter, draw a rainbow

The temporal structure, the duration and the endpoint of the activity indicate the aspectual category of the verb.

## States

### 2.1. States

- State verbs indicate a state and do not contain endpoints. The change of a state is determined by an external agent.

e.g. *Tom is smart. / He lives in Bucharest.*

Both situations hold over an undifferentiated period of time.

## 2.2. Activities

- **Activity** verbs (swim, drink, write, dig, talk, run) consist of *successive stages* that unfold in time over an interval.
- **Activities** contain arbitrary endpoints.  
e.g. *She is swimming.*  
She may arbitrarily end her swimming when she is tired.

## 2.3 Accomplishments

**2.3 Accomplishments** (*build a house, drink a cup of tea, run a mile*) consist of:

- *a processual part* (with successive stages)
- *a natural endpoint* (a result)  
e.g. *They built a house.*

(the result signals a change of state as the house changes from being under construction into a finished house)

### 3. The Perfective – Imperfective Aspectual Opposition

- The *perfective aspect* focuses the entire situation as completed, including both its initial and final endpoints. The situation is described as closed, completed at a time prior to “now”. In English, perfective aspect is identical in form with the past tense of the verb.

e.g. *He wrote a report.*

- The *imperfective/progressive aspect* presents only some internal stages of the event, neither the beginning nor its end. Only part of the situation is visible with no information about its endpoints. Sentences in the progressive form are open.

e.g. *He was writing a report.*

#### 4. Aspect shift

- The aspectual meaning of a predication is given by the aspectual value of the verb in conjunction with the aspectual contribution brought in by the other lexical items present in the sentence.

e.g. *She ate a bag of chips in an hour.* (accomplishment, perfective)

*She ate chips for an hour.* (activity, perfective)

*The boy built the kite in an hour.* (accomplishment, perfective)

*The boy built kites for an hour.* (activity, perfective)

- 'in an hour' – for events / accomplishments
- 'for an hour' – for activities

- Shifts in aspectual situation types are predictable as they are based on:

- The inherent lexical meaning of the verbs
- The properties of the linguistic contextual elements that induce the shift

e.g. *He discovered the treasure in the attic.* (achievement)

*He discovered ants in his room for one week.* (activity)

- Aspectual situation types do not occur independently from grammatical aspect.
- State, activity & event situation types conveyed by the lexical elements present in the predication co-exist with the grammatical aspect (the perfective / imperfective aspectual opposition) conveyed by grammatical morphemes.

### **5. Jespersen's (1933) view on the properties of the English progressive**

- Progressive shows a durative action
- Progressive is temporary
- Progressive shows an incomplete action