Tense and Aspect
In Arabic and English
A Contrastive Study

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Section One

INTRODUCTION

To know the English Language, one must know the grammar of it. There are many ways of thinking about grammar. Many senses in which the term is used. One Way is that grammar is something that produces the sentences of a Language. Then we may ask what we mean by something. An English grammar would be a set of rules for making English sentences, thus something might mean the rules or we can have another meaning for something, we can simply mean a speaker of English. Aitchison (1999:181) quotes Roger's Bacon view about the importance of grammar as far as the essential properties of grammar are concerned. Nunan (1999:96) affirms that for most people who speak a language, the essence of that language lies in grammar. The object of grammar is to teach people to express their thoughts correctly, either in speech or writing.

Gleason (1969:11) points out that a generation or two ago, the place of grammar in the curriculum differed from school to school, and even from classroom to classroom. In most school, it was he who thinks that in the teaching of a foreign Language grammar, it should be taught in such really strong and it remained so. In some schools, "grammar" was the dominant element in the English curriculum receiving more attention that either literature or composition. Coombe et al (2001:93).

The purpose of learning English grammar is to enable the college students to know that "through grammar the learner can make words acquire the competence and performance in using the foreign language as Rutherford (1987:1) stresses this fact in real communication ". Each grammatical class has its own feature, linguistic complexities and
difficulties so the quantity and quality of leaner's mistakes differ from one category to another. Among those complexities is the interpretation and familiarization of the English tense and aspect. Throughout my college experience in teaching grammar at the university level, I feel that the problem has embodied empirically and after long period of teaching. I seems that the students are incapable of using those terms properly. They are unable to distinguish between them. Dawood (1948:20) diagnosed this weakness in the recognition and the production of English tense and aspect and concluded that this due to the differences in English and Arabic and this idea is confirmed by the notion of the contrastive analysis theory indicates that similar items in two languages are the most difficult among the total different or very similar items (Brown, 1987:30). These similar items in English and Arabic have caused big and perilous problems for Iraq-Arabic learners of English when handling them in their real use of the language. The fact is always found in syntax. The forms of the present and the present continuous tenses are the same. For example;

\[ يقرأ الولد في الحديقة \]
\[ (jāqrū du  alwēlēdu fil al hadiqā) \]

Could possibly mean either
1-The boy reads in the garden. (it indicates present simple) or
2-The boy reading in the garden. (it indicates present progressive)

Teachers and educators in Iraq definitely notice such errors practically either when learner write composition or when they sit for conversations tests. They produce ungrammatical sentences in English as in:

The boy reads in the garden. Or
The boy is reading in the garden now.

Begg (1997:2) stresses this phenomenon by arguing; "jumping from present tense to present progressive or to past tense or to future with in one and the same piece of a discourse is precisely what many non-native speakers of English when they speak and write in English. Some difficulties may be attributed to the interference of the students mother tongue which is perfectly stressed by Lado (1957:7). The students suffer a lot in grasping and applying the rules with little emphasis on the practical side make them feel with this problem. Gleason (1969:11) points out that a
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A generation or two ago, the place of grammar in curriculum differed from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. It was he who thinks that in the teaching of a foreign language grammar, it should be taught in such Really strong and it remained so. In some schools, grammar was the dominant element in the English curriculum receiving more attention than either literature or composition. Coombe (2001:93) emphasizes that studying grammar should create in the learner motivation to learn and deduce and generalize rules which make up the language. Educators believe that grammatical awareness takes contribut to the development of a sound basis in language leaning.

Ur (984), Lado (1964), and Fries (945), all agree on the vital role of grammar in language leaning. The researcher believes that the students or the learners have to learn the grammar rules to complete understanding. If the speaker is abide by the rules of grammar, he will produce ungrammatical utterances and incorrect conception of the language. This idea is confirmed by Rutherford (1987:1) who states that "in the recognition and the production level of grammar, the learner can make words effective and finally become efficient in his own communication".

Each grammatical class has its own feature, linguistic complexities difficulties, so the quality and the quality of learner's mistakes differ from one category to another. Among those complexities is the interpretation and familiarization of the English Tense and Aspect. Before going deep in the problem area, we have to introduction about Tense and Aspect in Arabic and English to let the reader have additional knowledge to be familiar with those terms that always cause difficulties.

Tense and Aspect in English and Arabic

Tense is a grammatical device used by a language to denote time by means of contrast in verb forms. Thus in English the contrast between the form "go(es)" and "went" points to time, it expresses tense. The first from basically refers to the present simple and the second to the past simple. In Arabic, the from يذهب [jʊðhɒbʊ] and ذهب [dɒðhɒbʊ] denote time and is therefore tense. The first from is connected with the present time whereas the second is with the past time. (Aziz, 1989:p.39).

In determining how a verb from refers to time we must know the point of reference which indicates what is means by past, present and future.
Division of Time
Past ———— present ———— future

In this figure which is quoted from (Quirk et, al 1985,p.75). The point of reference is the moment of speaking which determines the present as the moment identical with the point of reference, the past as the time which precedes the point of reference, and the future as the time which follows the point of reference. Tenses using the moment of speaking as the point of reference are termed "absolute"; those using the moments as point of reference are termed "relative". English tenses are basically "absolute". They take the moment of speaking as their reference.

Arabic tenses are usually relative, they may take other moments in the sentences as their point of reference (السامراتي 1991:8).

**Tense in English**

If we look at the five forms of the English verb: go, gose, went, going and gone, we find that only the contrast between "go", "gose", "went" expresses time (Leech, 1975, p.83). The contrast between "go", and "gose" denotes person, but no time.

I go, She gose

Both forms refer to the present. The form "went", on the other hand, refers to the past. The other two forms (-ing) and (-edz), (the present and past participle)" going " and "gone" are non-finite. They do not normally refer to time but to aspect. On the basis of the two verb forms (go)(es): went, we have two tenses in English: the present tense (go, gose) and the past tense (went).

**The present Tense**

The present tense has its point of reference the present moment of speaking. It is an absolute tense: but it refers to present time in general. This tense expresses repeated actions, habits, customs and even mere ability in the present. It may refer to future time. e.g. Ali leaves for Paris next month.
The past Tense
It refers to the moment before the time of speaking: it is an absolute tense. The time is the definite past, expressed or implied. There are three less basic uses of the past tense which refer to the present. They are found in:

a- indirect speech
b- polite attitude
c- unreal situation

Tense in Arabic
In Arabic there are two verb forms (the perfect الماضي 2 (al-mādhi) and the imperfect المضارع [dilmudhri] which express, among other things, time reference. The perfect كتاب [kātāb] and the imperfect حرف [jāktu]. Express present/past contrast when they are used as absolute tenses, i.e. taking the moment of speaking as their reference point. It should be noted however that the same two forms may be used for relative tenses, in which case the point of reference is not the present moment of speaking but other points in the sentence. Here are two examples which illustrate absolute relative tense of the imperfect يذهب (gose) [jādhābu] (Farqhal and Shunnaq.1999,63-66)

يذهب اخي الى هناك كل يوم My brother gose there every day [jādhābu dki ela hunā kūl jāwām]
(Absolute: point of reference the moment of speaking (now)
 علمت ان اخي يذهب الى هناك كل يوم – Then I knew that my brother went there every day.
[dilmu dnd dkk jādhābu ela hunak kul jāwn]
(Relative: point of reference past the past)

The present Tense
The verb form called the imperfect (المضارع) basically refers to present time. If the point of reference is the moment of speaking

a- As in English, the present tense may refer to the general present, namely a repeated action, a fact or an ability in the present.
I go to the market once a week. اذهب الى السوق مرة كل أسبوع [dāhabu ela dlsuq mār kul isbuā]
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Ali rarely comes to the Meeting,قلما يحضر على الاجتماعات.

b- Unlike the English present tenses, the Arabic present tense may often refer to the present moment.

He is writing along poem,انه يكتب قصيدة طويلة.

Layla is working in the kitchen، ليلى تعمل في المطبخ.

The past Tense

The perfect from,الماضي, basically refers to action,states, situations, before the present (absolute tense). This tense has the following uses:

a- All types of acts completed before the present moment: long acts, which indicate definite past time.

Huda lived in Paris last year, عاشت هدى في باريس السنة الماضية.

The train arrived a short time ago، وصل القطار قبل قليل.

b- past actions in the indefinite past. They may be with present by means of their effect or result. Such action are usually expressed in English by the perfect aspect and the present tense,قد Is occasionally used with the perfect form, but its use is restricted to affirmative statements.

The plane has arrived، وصلت الطائرة.

I have lost my book، فقدت كتابي.

I have not done this، مافعل بها.

Comparison of Tenses in English and Arabic

a- In absolute tenses, the present tense in English and Arabic refer to general present time, which includes the present moment. This may express facts, habits, customs, repeated, but not necessarily actions happening at the present moment.

b- The Arabic present tense often refers to an action taking place at the moment of speaking (now). In English, this use of the present tense is confined to a limited number of verb notably verbs of sensation, The English equivalent is expressed by the progressive aspect.

Layla is preparing the tea، تعد ليلى الشاي الآن.
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Ali is working in the garden now. [ألي يعمل في الحديقة الآن]

c- Both in English and Arabic, the present tense may refer to future time, usually with the help of an adverbial of futurity.

My brother leaves for Cairo tomorrow. [يغادر أخي إلى القاهرة غدا]

d- Definite English past tense refers to a definite past which excludes the present moment. The Arabic past tense may refer to definite past.

I saw this man last year. [رأي هذا الرجل في العام الماضي]

e- The Arabic past tense in contrast with the English past tense may also refer to an indefinite past time normally connected with the present in one way or another.

I have seen this man twice: his face is familiar to me. [رأيت هذا الرجل مرتين: وجهه مألوف عندي]

The English equivalent is normally expressed by means of the present tense and the perfect aspect.

I have not finished the story yet.[لم انته من القصة بعد]

f- Often Arabic uses the past tense, where English uses the present tense. This is found in the proverbs, maxims, and what is in print. It is also true of certain verbs of emotion.

Shakespeare says. [قال شكسبير]

I love this girl. [أنا أحب هذه الفتاة]

g- probably the most important difference between the English and the Arabic tenses is that the English tenses are absolute: the relative tenses are expressed by means of different forms. The non-finite forms. The Arabic tenses uses the same forms in absolute and relative constructions.

The following examples of transformation from direct to indirect speech illustrate this point.

He said "Ali likes jazz music." (direct speech).

He said that Ali liked jazz music." (indirect speech).

In the indirect speech "likes" becomes "liked" because the action is now in the past, and the tense is absolute; it uses two different forms. In Arabic the is not necessary because the same form may be used in absolute tenses (direct speech here) and relative tenses (as in the direct
speech below). In both the direct and the indirect speech in the above examples, the imperfect ِيَحَب [ ] is used first absolutely, then relative.

**Aspect**

As Crystal (2000;36) puts it as it "acategor used in the grammatical description of verb (along with tense and mood , referring primarily to the way the grammar marks the duration or type of temporal activity denoted by the verb )". It differs from tense in that it dose not place an event befor, simultaneous with or after apoint of reference as tense dose; it is not a deictic (pointing ) category .It only expresses the manner of action or event whether it is along. Short, continuous, incomplete, etc. Aspect denotes how the speaker views an event , or an action . The same event may be viewed by aspeaker as a non- durative, short event as in :
I went to the door and opened it, Or a long durative one as in :
As I was opening the door ,I heard some music

**English Aspects**

English has two aspects expressed in its grammer by means of combination of verb forms : the progressive and the perfective .The progressive aspect is expressed by means of the verb Be+ing form. Further , this aspect is combined with the two tenses, the past and the present ,resulting in the following combination :

- (a) present Tense, progressive Aspect: I am writing , you are writing, he is writing…etc.
- (b) past Tense, progressive Aspect: I was writing,you Were writing he was writing..tc

The perfective aspects is expressed by the verb have +the past participle Here too the perfective aspects is combined with the two tenses to yeld these constructions:

- (c) present Tense, perfective Aspect:I have written , you have written, he has written…etc.
- (d) past Tense, perfective Aspect:I had written , you had written , he had written… etc.

The two aspects may be combined yielding perfective progressive aspect in the present or past.

- (e) I have been writing, you have been writing, he
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had been writing… etc.

(f) I had been writing, you have been writing, he had been writing… etc.

There is also a contrast between these combinations the absence of the two aspects (often termed Simple aspect); e.g.

I am writing (progressive): I write (Simple).

The progressive Aspect
The progressive aspect in English basically a durative event.
The Three are growing fast in this place.
The houses were becoming old.
This aspect is therefore not normally used with stative verbs such as know be, seem contain, etc.
He is being seeming adoctor.
I am seeing you now.
The box was containing gold.
The main uses of the progressive aspect are the following.
(a) It is used for an event happening at the moment of speaking. The present tense is combined with this aspect.
He is resting now.
This use may be contrasted with the simple present tens, which does not express an actual event but a repeated action or a habit.
He rests every two hours.
(b) The progressive aspect may refer to a temporary temporary action. The simple aspect usually refer to a more permanent event. The tenses is present or past, depending on the time of the event.
He lived in a fashionable hotel. (temporary, during his visit only)
He lived in a fashionable house. (his permanent place of living).
It may express an incomplete event, in The present or past (with present or past respectively).
She is was crossing the street. (incomplete action, the end of it is not envisaged).
The simple aspect, on the other hand may express a completed action She crossed the street. (completed action in the past CF.
She crossed the street as this point express her habit).
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c- Since the progressive aspect expresses durative event, it often provides a frame for another short event, expressed by a simple aspect.

The perfect aspect present tense may imply the subject exists, the past simple, on the other hand, indicates that the subject dose not exist.

Mr Hill has written an epic poem .( Mr Hill is still alive).

Milton wrote along epic poem .( Milton is dead ).

The perfect aspect past tense relates a past event to a point in the past. It indicates that an event is completed before a point in the past. The point of reference here is not the moment of speaking but a moment in the past: the is relative tense combined with aspect.

When they arrived everybody had left.

He was living in an old house which had bought the year before.

In these examples the second action expressed by the perfect aspect is completed before a point in the past denoted by the verb in the simple aspect in the past. It serves as a bridge between two point in the past.

He had been reaching a novel when the guests arrived.

We had been waiting for six hours when the guest opened and a big black car come in.

The perfect aspect, past tense is used in the indirect speech as a backshet of the perfect aspect present tense and simple aspect past tense.

She said that She seen him (before) indirect (two days before).

She said, I have seen him before.

She said, I saw him to days ago.

For more detailson direct and indirect speech, see chapter 18.

Finally, the perfect aspect, past tense is used to indicate a rejected condition (unlikely, unreal) in the past.

If they had come to the meeting I would have seen them.( They did not come)

(For more details on conditional sentences, see chapter 14.

As states before, the imperfect aspect is used to convey the idea that an event or an action is not completed yet. It may therefore denote a durative (progressive) event.

(He is working in the orchard now).
In the sense that something is taking place now, probably the pattern where the subject precedes the verb is more common, as in (32).

علي يعمل في البستان

This aspect may also express a habit, a custom or a repeated action (see, 3.7).

يعمل علي في البستان كل يوم (Ali works in the orchard every day).

Only the context will show whether the durative or the habitual sense is meant. Unlike English, in Arabic this distinction is not drawn by means of aspect.

When combined with a relative tense taking its reference from a point in the past, this aspect may express a durative or a habitual action in the past.

التقيذ بذه فذي المقهذن وبذو يقذرأ جريذد (I met him in the café he was reading a newspaper) (durative).

قال انه يسافر الى الريف مرة كل شهر (He said that he traveled to the country once a month).

To render the past more explicitly, the verb كان is used with the imperfect aspect.

كانت زوجته تعمل في مخزن كبير (His wife was working in a large store).

**The perfect Aspect**

The perfect aspect is expressed by the perfect form, which also expresses the absolute and the relative past tenses. These meaning will be explored here.

The perfect aspect with the absolute past tense may express a completed action with present relevance (e.g. present result)

وصل الطائر الآن (The plane has now arrived)

انتهيت من كتابة القصيدة (I have finished writing the poem)

To render this sense more explicit, the particle قد is often used with the perfect form, usually with the additional meaning of 'already' or 'just'.

قد شرحت هذا (I have already explained this).

قد غادرت المكان (She had just left the place).

The particle قد however restricted to positive statements.

قد جاء (He has not come).

Combined with a relative tense taking its reference point from the past, this aspect expresses an event completed before a point to the past, and is usually rendered into English by the perfect aspect, past tense.
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(He arrived after the party had started).

She sat where her mother had sat.

Subject to the restrictions mentioned in the previous paragraph, the particle, قد, is sometimes used with the perfect to express this sense.

(I visited him in his village; he had bought a new car).

It is to be noted that the second verb "اشترى" قد is interpreted relatively, taking its reference point from the first verb.

There is however another possibility, the second verb may be interpreted absolutely taking its reference from the moment of speaking, the sentence may then be rendered into English as.

I visit him in his village; he has bought anew car.

The verb "كان" is also used with the perfect to express this sense more explicitly. This construction may be used with "قد" or without it. The restrictions on "قد" seem to be connected with the verb after it, not before it.

(He lived in an old house which he had bought from his uncle).

(The prince was impressed by what he saw; he had not been to that country before)

The perfect to aspect may combine with a relative tense taking its reference from a point in the future. In this case it would be interpreted as expressing an event which will be completed before the point in the future. The particle قد, subject to the same or the imperfect, يكون, may be used.

(I will leave this place when I have finished my work)

The company will have fulfilled the conditions of all the contracts by the end of 1990.
Comparison of Aspect in English and Arabic

(a) The aspects in English are formed by combination of verbal elements. Future, separate forms are used for the tenses whose aspects are considered simple. Thus in English we have:

- I go (simple aspect – mainly tense).
- I went (simple aspect – mainly tense).
- I have gone (perfect aspect + tense (present))
- I had gone ((perfect aspect + tense (past))
- I am going (progressive aspect + tense (present))
- I was going (progressive aspect + tense (past))
- I have been going (perfect progressive aspect + tense (present))
- I had been going (perfect progressive aspect + tense (past))

Arabic on the other hand used one form each of the two tenses and aspects.

Thus the eight combinations above correspond to two simple forms in Arabic: "يذهب" and "اذهب".
- Absolute tenses present. I go
- Relative tense, I will go, I went every day etc.
- Aspect, imperfect, combined with absolute and relative
- Tenses: I am going, I shall be going, I was going...
- Absolute tense, past: I went.
- Relative tense, I will have gone, I had gone.
- Aspect, perfect (combined with the absolute and the relative).
- Tenses: I have gone, I will have gone, I had gone...etc.

(b) There are one restrictions on the use of the aspect in Arabic. Two forms are used with all kinds of verbs including those having a stative sense:

- English progressive aspect, on the other hand, is not used with stative verbs: is containing, is knowing. It is confined to dynamic verbs: I am reading; she is playing.

(c) The progressive aspect in English and the imperfect aspect in Arabic are used for durative action, incomplete events, temporary actions and what is happening (continuous) at a certain moment.

(d) The perfect aspect in English and the Arabic are used

For completed actions in relation to the present moment,
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a moment in the past or a moment in the future : e.g.
I have come; جئت
He will have finished: سيكون قد انتهى

References


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