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Papiere zum Spracherwerb und zur Grammatik  
**ENGLISCH**  
II

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**The Past and Present Tenses in English**

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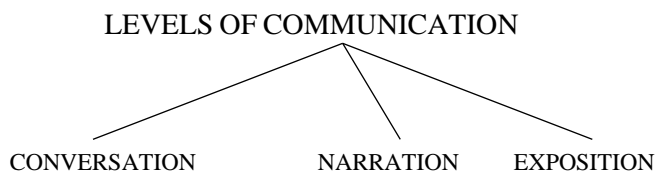
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The use of tense in English has to do with time to a certain extent, with how events and actions relate to the time line; however, more importantly it also involves other aspects that do not relate directly to time, such as a) the types of communication involved and b) forms of generalisation.

We start by looking at the three basic levels of communication which are central factors in determining what tenses are to be used in each case:

**FIGURE 1: LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION**



These three categories can be characterised as follows:

- *conversation* involves the **description of singular events** from the point of view of the present, e.g. *I've just been working in the library...*
- *narration* involves **telling a story involving a sequence of singular events**, usually in the past, from a point of view in the past, e.g. *Last week I was sitting in the tram when suddenly a drunkard came and sat down beside me...*
- *exposition*, or explanation, involves **generalisation concerning the relationships between states of affairs**, i.e. it deals with facts and the relationships between facts, e.g. *water boils at 100°C...*

The important point about these three categories of text or discourse is that there are certain tenses typically associated with each category and other tenses are excluded. Thus *past progressive* is typically used with a specific function in narratives, while *present perfect* cannot be used in narratives. Also, exposition generally excludes the use of the progressive tenses.

The tenses we are talking about are the following:

**FIGURE 2: SUMMARY OF THE TENSES**

	SIMPLE	PROGRESSIVE
PRESENT	John writes...	John is writing...
PAST	John wrote...	John was writing...
PRESENT PERFECT	John has written...	John has been writing...
PAST PERFECT	John had written...	John had been writing...

Note the following:

- the progressive is formed with the verb *to be* and the present participle (-ing form);
- in the present simple the third person singular (in the affirmative) takes the -s ending;
- the present simple and the past simple use the auxiliary verb *to do* to form negative sentences and questions: *does he write...?/John didn't write...*
- the past simple tense is formed by adding -ed to regular verbs (e.g. *worked*) – with irregular verbs we use the second form: *to write – wrote – written*;
- the -ed ending is pronounced as /t/ or /d/, depending on whether it is preceded by a voiceless or voiced consonant: if it follows /t/ or /d/ it is pronounced as /ɒd/, e.g. *started* /sta:tɒd/
- present perfect and past perfect are always formed in English using the auxiliary *to have*, in contrast to other languages;
- third person singular in the present perfect is differently formed, with *has* instead of *have*.

Now let us look at how these tenses are used in communication. We start with conversation.

## 2 CONVERSATION

We can distinguish two cases with regard to conversation:

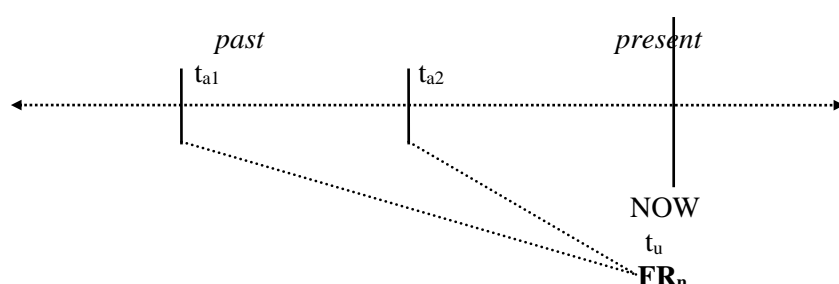
- 1) the point of view lies inside the time of utterance;
- 2) the point of view lies outside the time of utterance.

These two cases affect the use of the tenses in conversation.

### 2.1 Point of view inside time of utterance

The following diagram illustrates how a sequence of events is perceived when the point of view lies inside the time of utterance:

**FIGURE 3: FRAME OF REFERENCE**



*John has arrived...he has had a bath and now...*

(ta1) (ta2)

$t_a$  = time of action/event,  $t_u$  = time of utterance,  $FR_n$  = frame of reference (now)

We can see that we need three “times” in order to understand what is going on. The time of action/event tells you when something happened in the past. The time of utterance means the time when you make the statement, now in this case. And finally we need the frame of reference (“Bezugszeit” in German). As you can see from the diagram, there is no reference to a specific time in the past, but the frame of reference which is implied has its origin, its zero point, in the present and not in the past. The typical tense used in conversation to describe events in the past is the **present perfect (simple and progressive)**:

- 1) I have just come back from town.
- 2) I’ve been writing a letter.

We can see from this diagram that the basic use of the **present perfect** provides a particular perspective on actions and events, from the point of view of “now”, that is inside the time of utterance. Here are some examples of various uses of the present perfect in conversation:

- 3) I have met him this morning.
- 4) Where have you been? I have been to the opera.
- 5) I have known him for a long time.
- 6) We have lived in London for ten years.
- 7) She has been here since six o’ clock.
- 8) I have already been to the cinema three times this week.
- 9) I have written five short stories this year.
- 10) This is the worst book I have ever read.
- 11) I have lived here all my life.
- 12) I have always written with my left hand.
- 13) I haven’t seen you for ages.

14) This is the only good idea you have ever had.

15) He has just gone out.

16) I have read the instructions but I don't understand them.

Note that in these examples the present perfect does not specify the relationship between events and time: it does not in itself specify:

- the time when an action or event happened
- whether the event happened recently or a long time ago
- whether an event happened only once or several times
- whether an event was punctual or had duration

The present perfect in itself indicates solely that the frame of reference has its origin in the present. All other information is deduced from the meaning of the sentence, the type of verb, and from the context generally.

### 2.1.1 Sense effects

Note that there is one specific difference between English and other languages. Let us look at some of the examples above in more detail:

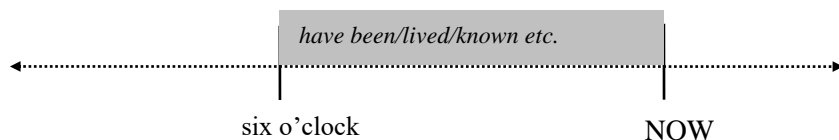
14) I have known him for a long time.

15) We have lived in London for ten years.

16) She has been here since six o'clock.

In other languages the present tense is used in these cases. In English, one of the uses of the present perfect is to express the fact that an action or event lasted continuously from a point in the past up to the present. In other words, the events fills the entire period up to the present. This is because the verb that is used expresses an event that has *duration* (as opposed to *punctual* verbs, see the later section on different types of verb). We can visualise this:

FIGURE 4: DURATION



With a punctual verb, that is a verb that expresses a completed action that can be viewed as a point on the timescale, this meaning is not possible:

17) \*I have written a letter for ten days.

The beginning of the period can be marked with two different prepositions:

- *since* six o'clock: *since* is followed by the **beginning** of the period, e.g. the time, year etc. It can also be followed by a clause: *since I was a boy*. When we say *since*, the period is automatically up to the present.
- *for* ten years: *for* introduces the **length** of the period. This may also be a period in the past but not up to the present: *for ten years* in other cases could be for example from 1985 to 1995. In example 15), because of the use of the present perfect, it means the period of ten years up to the present. Compare with:

18) We lived in London for ten years.

This could mean any period – but not up to the present.

One basic point relates to examples like the following:

17) I have written five short stories this year.

This is a kind of *globalisation* (see p. 9) where the predicate *have written five short stories* actually includes a number of individual events, that is the writing of each short story. Globalisation is expressed in English using the simple and not by the progressive, in this case the present perfect simple.

## 2.2 Point of view outside time of utterance

However, when a time-position adverbial is used which refers to the past, like *yesterday*, *last week*, *in 1965*, then we can say that the point of view is now outside the time of utterance and the tense used is not present perfect but past simple, as in the following examples:

18) I saw John yesterday.

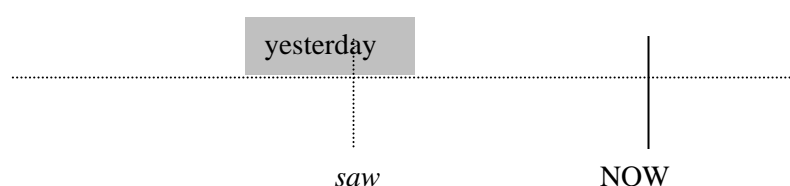
19) We landed at twelve o'clock and took a taxi to the hotel.

This rule may be referred to as a **blocking rule**, i.e. it blocks the use of the present perfect and forces the use of the past simple tense when there is an adverb of time, as in 18), which:

- refers to a period of time separated from the present;
- or when the period of time in the past is *implied* by the context, as in 19).

The following diagram visualises example 18):

**FIGURE 5: BLOCKING RULE**

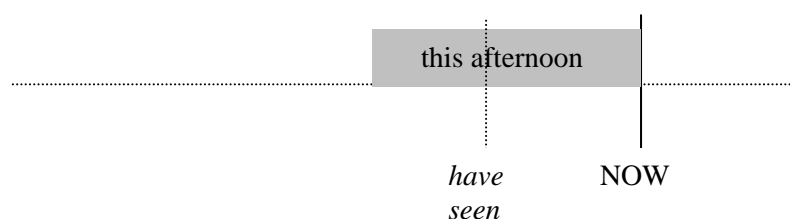


As we can see, the adverb of time “yesterday” does not include the moment of speaking (NOW) and therefore we have to switch to the past tense in English. If, however, the adverb of time, or more generally the *period of time referred to*, does include the moment of speaking, then we use the present perfect, as in the example:

20) I have seen John this afternoon.

The following diagram illustrates this:

**FIGURE 6: UTTERANCE TIME**



The period of time “this afternoon” includes the moment of speaking and thus we use the present perfect.

Here are some further examples of the use of the past tense in conversation:

21) I met him yesterday.

22) Have you been to the opera? Yes, I went to the opera last week.

23) I stayed with him for a long time.

24) We lived in London for ten years and in Birmingham for only five years.

25) When we arrived, she had been there for two hours. (→ *narration*)

26) Last year, I went to the pictures three times a week.

27) I wrote five short stories three years ago.

28) Did you lock the front door?

In 22) we see the switch from present perfect to past simple as a result of the use of the adverb of time referring to a period of time which does not include the moment of utterance: *last week*, 23) and 24) show the use of *durative* verbs (see p. 11) plus *for* + **period of time** in the past. 26) and 27) are globalisations as discussed previously, and finally 28) shows that the reference to a period of time in the

past may be implicit and can be reconstructed from the context, e.g. *when you left the house this morning*.

### EXERCISE I. PUT IN THE CORRECT VERBS:

- (1) Peter (write) the report – it's finished, here it is.
- (2) I (see) John this morning. We're going to lunch together later.
- (3) I (see) John last week.
- (4) You (see) the new James Bond film that's showing in the cinemas at the moment?
- (5) You (go) to the lecture last Monday?
- (6) I (live) for a year in Birmingham before I (move) to London two years ago.
- (7) I (live) in Berlin for three years. I (come) here three years ago.
- (8) I (go) to the cinema twice this month.
- (9) I (sit) four exams last semester.

#### 2.2.1 Basic meaning of the progressive

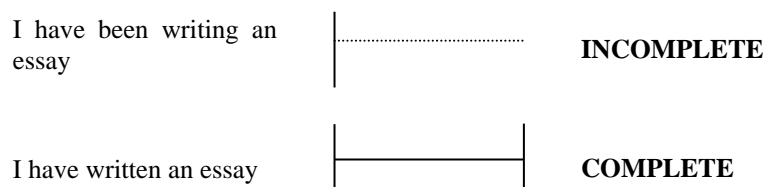
One important tense used in conversation is the *present perfect progressive*. Before we go any further, we need to look at the basic meaning of this tense. Compare:

29) I have been writing an essay. (PRESENT PERFECT PROGRESSIVE)

30) I have written an essay. (PRESENT PERFECT SIMPLE)

The basic difference between these two sentences has nothing to do with time, but with the completeness or not of an action. Example 29) tells us that the action of writing an essay is incomplete, while 30) says that is complete. More specifically, 29) tells us that a) an action has begun, and that b) this action is in complete, while 30) indicates that the action has a beginning and an end. We can visualise this as follows:

**FIGURE 7: COMPLETENESS AND INCOMPLETENESS**



This is perhaps the basic distinction between progressive and simple tenses. We look at a further difference below in the section on Globalisation.

#### 2.2.2 Past and present simple and progressive

What we have said about the difference between present perfect simple and progressive also applies to the past and present tenses, which are also used in conversation. Look at the difference between:

31) He was drowning.

32) He drowned.

The first sentence describes an incomplete process: in other words the man is still alive. In the second sentence, the process is complete, i.e. the person is dead – we see here that grammar is sometimes a matter of life and death! We return to this problem below in our discussion of telic verbs (p. 11) and look at important uses of past simple and past progressive in the section on narration (p. 13).

We also find the present progressive in conversation:

33) I'm writing a letter.

The basic meaning of the present progressive is that **an action or event is incomplete at the moment of speaking**. Thus the process of writing the letter is not complete. Note that there is no basically no



indication of the relationship between the event and time, i.e. it could have started recently or a long time ago:

34) The Earth's atmosphere is gradually warming up.

The present simple by contrast expresses a complete event. This can be seen from football commentaries:

35) Jones passes the ball to Smith.

Other uses of the present simple involve globalising and expressing the typical and the general:

36) The plane lands twice a week.

37) My dog barks.

38) Dogs bark.

We return to the present simple in the context of exposition (p. 17).

### 2.2.3 Globalisation

Now we look at further uses of the present perfect progressive and present perfect simple and the differences between them. Here are some examples:

39) I've been thinking it over.

40) Thank you so much for the binoculars. I've been wanting a pair for ages.

41) I've been feeling some pains in my leg recently.

42) He has lived here/has been living here for six years.

43) I've written six letters since breakfast.

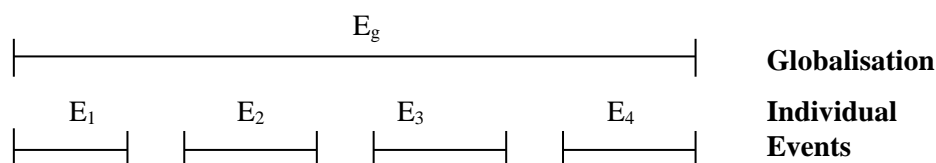
44) I've been writing since breakfast.

45) I've put coal on the fire.

46) I've been putting coal on the fire.

One further important distinction between the *present perfect simple* and the *present perfect progressive* can be seen from examples 45) and 46). We discussed the basic difference between the simple and progressive previously as being the distinction between complete and incomplete actions. One important further difference in use has to do with **globalisation**: a globalisation is the sum of or contains a number of individual events or actions. We can see this distinction from these two examples. 46) uses the *present perfect progressive* to refer to the individual events as **an incomplete series of individual events**, i.e. the speaker put coal on the fire a number of times. 45) on the other hand globalises, i.e. the individual actions of putting coal on the fire are included in the overall action expressed by "have put". This is shown by the following diagram:

**FIGURE 8: GLOBALISATION**



From this figure we see that *I have put coal on the fire* is a globalisation ( $E_g$ ) from individual events, while *I have been putting coal on the fire* represents an incomplete series of individual events, here with an **iterative** sense. We can thus say that the essential difference between the simple and the progressive here is that we use the progressive for a series of individual actions, and we use the simple for globalisations. Conversely, globalisation excludes the use of the progressive. This applies to all forms of the simple and progressive, including the present, as we can see if we compare the following:

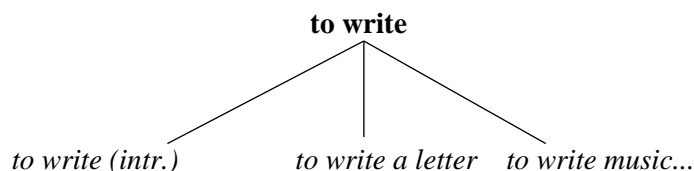
47) The plane is landing.

48) The plane lands twice a week.

We can see that in 47) the use of the present progressive implies that this is a single action which is incomplete at the moment of speaking. In 48), on the other hand, we have a globalisation from individual events.

The same is true of examples 43) and 44), where the different uses of the verb *to write* are involved, or more precisely, this is a case of **polysemy**, where a word has different though related meanings:

**FIGURE 9: POLYSEMY OF “TO WRITE”**



The uses of the verb *to write* are:

- without an object (intransitive, e.g. *I am writing*, which is then an activity which can continue endlessly);
- it can be used with the object *a letter*, in which case the activity has a **goal** and is completed at some point (this type of verb is called *telic* and will be discussed in the next section);
- it can be used with other objects like *music*, except that here no goal is involved.

Thus we cannot say

49) \*I've been writing six letters since breakfast.

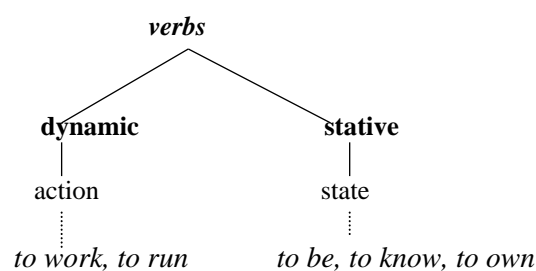
because the use of the object 'six letters' implies completeness, which is then contradicted by the use of the present perfect progressive. We have to say:

50) I've written six letters since breakfast.

## 2.2.4 Sense effects: types of verb

Now we look at different types of verb. With different types of verb the use of the simple or progressive produces certain sense effects. But first of all, let us look at a type of verb that cannot be used with the progressive. The progressive can only be used with certain types of verb called *dynamic* verbs; it cannot be used with *stative* verbs:

**FIGURE 10: STATIVE VS. DYNAMIC VERBS**



Thus we cannot say \**I am knowing* or \**he has been owning*, since the notion of an incomplete action is incompatible with the meaning of these verbs. There are certain cases where stative verbs can be used with the progressive, but this usually involves a change in meaning. Compare:

51) The neighbours are friendly.

52) The neighbours are being friendly.

In example 51) the friendliness of the neighbours is asserted as a fact. We interpret the second sentence with the present progressive as meaning that “being friendly” is an incomplete activity which will be complete at some point, in other words we infer that it is something temporary and that they are not really friendly, but are just pretending to be friendly. The same distinction applies to the following, which is not the same as asserting that someone is stupid:

53) You're being stupid!

We already mentioned the *punctual/durative* distinction earlier. If we take as an example of the punctual type the verb *to cough*, then we have some interesting sense effects:

54) I have been coughing all morning.

Here the use of the present perfect progressive automatically generates **iterative** sense, i.e. an incomplete series of individual events. Compare that with:

55) Someone has just coughed.

This would normally be interpreted as just one cough. But:

56) I coughed all morning.

This is a globalisation of the individual events.

A further important distinction is that between *telic* and *atelic* verbs. An example of a telic verb would be *to make a chair*: this is a process and at some point the chair is complete. In other words there is a process with a terminal point when the goal is accomplished. This leads to a substantial difference between the uses of the present perfect progressive and present perfect simple:

57) John has been making a chair.

58) John has made a chair.

The verb *to drown* is also telic, which explains the enormous difference we discussed earlier:

59) He was drowning.

60) He drowned.

With atelic verbs such as *to live* the difference between progressive and simple forms is not the same:

61) I have been living in Berlin for five years.

62) I have lived in Berlin for five years.

The first form would be more typical of conversation, while the second is presented as a **fact**. This is discussed further in the section on exposition.

### 2.2.5 Special cases

What we have said above concerning the blocking rule which blocks the use of the present perfect when the time is outside the time of utterance applies only to *accidental* predicates, i.e. predicates which do not express an essential quality of the person or object. If we turn to essential predicates, we can see that the blocking rule does not apply. Consider a situation where candidates for a post are being selected for interview:

63) This applicant has worked in a bank for five years.

This may mean that the candidate worked in a bank from say 1985 to 1990, and not necessarily up to the present. The predicate “working in a bank” in this context expresses something essential about the *candidate’s* suitability (or non-suitability) for the post. This phenomenon is called typification, when we express something typical or essential. When the predicate is typical or essential, we can override the blocking rule and use the present perfect.

Also interesting is the following example:

64) You’re always complaining!

This sense effect of the present progressive expresses irritation at someone’s habitual behaviour.

## 2.3 Switching

When speaking we are not compelled to stay in one level of communication, but are free to switch from one to the other at will. We can also switch from one temporal frame of reference to another. Here are some examples:

65) A: Where have you been? – B: I have been to the theatre.

A: What was the play? – B: It was Shakespeare’s King Lear.

A: Did you like it? – B: The acting was...

66) My colleagues and I have carefully considered the important issues raised in the report which you sent me on April 26 and we have decided to take the following action...

- 67) Have you seen the French Art Exhibition (yet)?  
68) Did you see the French Art exhibition (when it was here)?  
69) The plane has just landed.  
70) The plane landed twice a week last year.  
71) They have decided to close down the factory. It took us completely by surprise.

**EXERCISE II.****PUT THE FOLLOWING VERBS IN BRACKETS INTO THE CORRECT TENSE:**

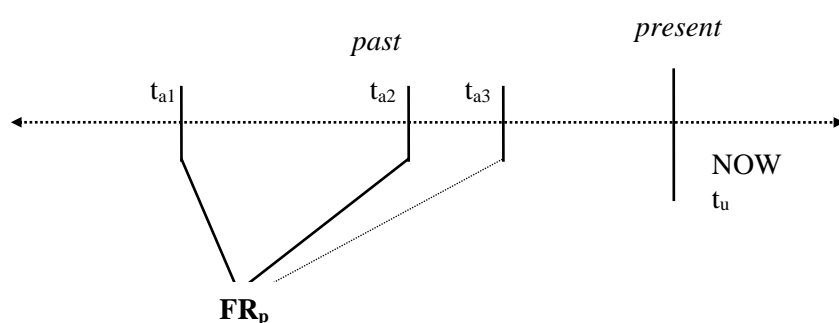
- A: Hello. I (not see) you for a long time. Where (be) you?  
B: Hi. I (be) very busy writing an essay. I (work) day and night since the beginning of the month to get it finished. I hope to be finished next week.  
A: You (to hand in) the other assignment yet?  
B: No, I (not hand in) it yet. I plan to hand it in next week. What about you?  
A: I (to write up) my Master's thesis. I expect to be finished by the end of term.  
B: You (see) the new Woody Allen film?  
A: Yes, I (go) last Saturday with my girlfriend.

### 3 NARRATION

Narration always deals with a *sequence of singular events in the past*. The point of view of narration is always outside the time of utterance.

The first important point is that in English the *past* tense always occurs within a temporal frame of reference which has its origin in the past and clearly separated from the present. Look at the following diagram:

**FIGURE 11: FRAME OF REFERENCE**



*That morning, John arrived at the railway station,*

( $t_{a1}$ )

*he took a taxi to the office,...*

( $t_{a2}$ )

$t_a$  = time of action/event     $t_u$  = time of utterance     $FR_p$  = frame of reference (past)

Here we can see that the origin of the frame of reference is located in the past and that the actions or events in the past take place within that frame of reference.

The first main characteristic of narration is the use of *adverbs of time* to shift the frame of reference to a time frame within events in the past occurred. By this we mean that a narrative is a story about the past which has to be situated in a particular period of time in the past which forms the temporal framework for events. All the events refer to this framework. Adverbs of time that signal this shift in reference from the present to a particular period in the past can take different forms, such as *yesterday*, *last week/month/year*, *in 1996*, *that morning*:

72) *That morning* I was sleeping in and I received a phone call downstairs at about 11 o'clock...

There are a number of tenses used in English to talk about the past:

- the past simple;
- the past progressive;
- the past perfect simple;
- the past perfect progressive.

Note that in contrast to other languages the present perfect is excluded in narration:

73) \**That morning, John has arrived...*

#### 3.1 Standard uses

Here are some examples of narration:

74) It rained yesterday afternoon.

75) It was raining yesterday afternoon.

76) Last year I lived in London.

77) Last year I was living in London.

78) (Yesterday), when I arrived, John was talking on the telephone.

- 79) (That evening), a wood fire was burning on the hearth, and a cat was sleeping in front of it. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. The cat woke up...
- 80) My grandmother once saw Queen Victoria...
- 81) Between one and two I was doing the shopping.
- 82) Between one and two I did the shopping.
- 83) Once upon a time there was a girl called Little Red Riding Hood...As she was skipping through the wood, Little Red Riding Hood met a wolf.

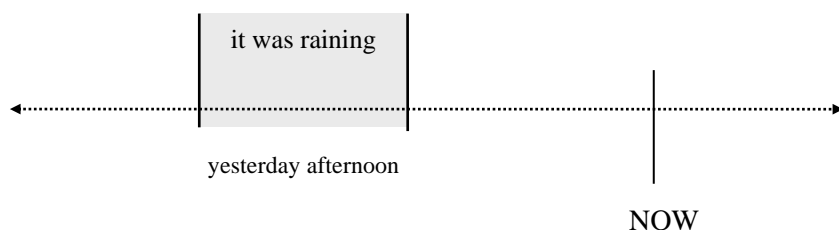
### 3.1.1 Progressive and time

The first pair of examples, 74) and 75), show that the basic meaning of the past progressive in contrast to the simple past tense is to indicate that an event or activity is **incomplete**, it has no end. 74) can of course have more than one meaning:

- it can mean a single complete event, i.e. one period of rain
- it can be a complete series of events, a globalisation

Combined with an adverb of time we have a secondary *sense effect*, that the event referred to by the present progressive – by the fact that it indicates incompleteness – fills the period of time referred to in the adverb of time. Thus 74) may mean that it only rained once during the afternoon, while 75) means that it rained all afternoon. We can visualise the latter as:

FIGURE 12: PROGRESSIVE FILLS THE PERIOD OF TIME

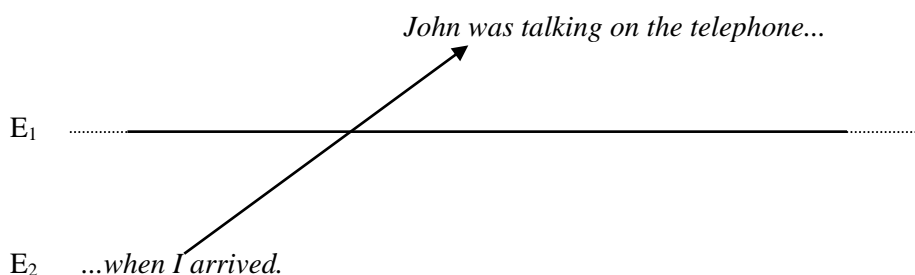


This also explains examples 81) and 82).

### 3.1.2 Background and foreground in narratives

Other examples like 78) show that past progressive and past simple have a further function in narratives. This example can be visualised using the incidence schema:

FIGURE 13: INCIDENCE SCHEMA

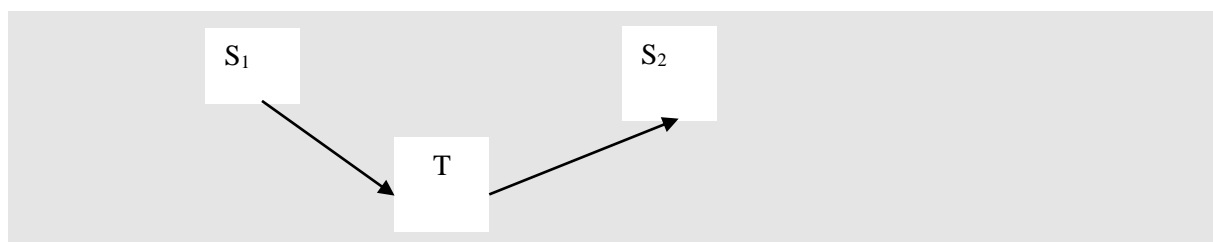


The *past progressive* represents a state or event  $E_1$  which is “in progress”. Event  $E_2$ , with the past simple, impinges on  $E_1$ . Another way of looking at it is that the *past progressive* provides the **background**, and the simple past the **foreground**, giving the narrative **relief**. The *past progressive* implies that part of the event or action is over, and another part is still to come. In fact, this is characteristic of narratives, which must contain at least one event which transforms reality in such a way as to make it worth telling:

- 84) I was sitting in the bus ( $S_1$ ) when along came a drunken man and sat down beside me ( $T_1$ ). He got so unpleasant that I got out at the next stop ( $T_2$ ).

These events  $T_1...T_n$  transform the original state  $S_1$ . We can represent this generally as follows:

**FIGURE 14: TRANSFORMATION**



The transforming events  $T$  transform state 1 into state 2, the initial state into the final state. They are typically expressed using the past simple.

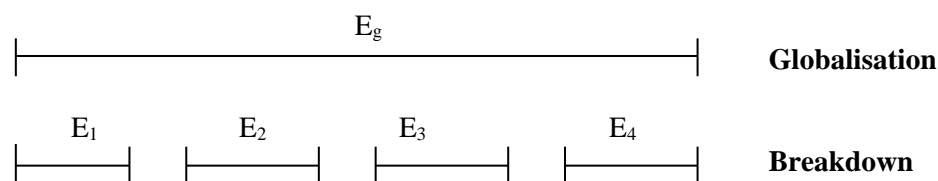
### 3.2 Globalisation

We have talked about globalisation previously. Here is a typical example of how globalisation is used in narratives:

- 85) Last Sunday we ( $E_g$ ) went to the zoo. We got up ( $E_1$ ) at seven o' clock and had ( $E_2$ ) breakfast. After breakfast, we went ( $E_3$ ) to the bus station and caught ( $E_4$ ) the bus to the city centre.

This phenomenon of globalisation can be illustrated as follows:

**FIGURE 15: GLOBALISATION**



Here the globalisation  $E_g$  can be broken down into separate events  $E_1$  to  $E_n$ , or conversely these separate events are contained in  $E_g$ . The following are further examples of globalisation:

- 86) We got up/used to get up at 5 am every morning all through the summer.  
 87) When the police arrived, the thieves had run away.  
 88) I talked to John several times.  
 89) Peter rang three times this morning.  
 90) From one to two I did the shopping and walked the dog.

We can see that the *past simple* tense is the primary tense used for globalisations; the *progressive* can never be used for this purpose. Further ways of globalising are: using the construction with *used to*, as in 86), and using the *past perfect*, as in 87). This use of the *past perfect* is in addition to its basic meaning indicating that one event had happened before another event, the latter event being indicated by the *past simple*.

### 3.3 Past perfect simple and progressive

The normal sequence of events in the past can be expressed using the past tenses, especially past simple:

- 91) I went home, had dinner and watched TV.  
 92) After I had dinner, I watched TV.

Here, the sequence of events in the sentence reflects the actual sequence in reality. However, when this is not the case, it must be signalled in some way:

- 93) When I got home, I saw that the postman *had left* a parcel for me.

Here, the past perfect simple is used to signal that the event it refers to – leaving the parcel – happened prior to the speaker's arrival at home. The past perfect always involves a **reference point**. Note the following:

94) When I arrived, John made coffee. SEQUENCE

95) When I arrived, John was making coffee. BACKGROUND – FOREGROUND

96) *When I arrived*, John had made coffee. REFERENCE POINT = *When I arrived*.

97) *At 10 am*, John had already made coffee. REFERENCE POINT = *At 10 am*.

Past perfect simple is also used for globalisations (i.e. complete sequences), as we saw in example 87). Here is a further example:

98) By the time John answered the phone, it had already rung six times.

The *past perfect progressive* can be used to express a singular event or state forming a background to a single event expressed by the simple past, as was the case with the past progressive:

99) When I met him in 2014, I had been living in Berlin for several years already.

The use of the past perfect progressive signals not only the sequence but also the incompleteness of the event or action at the time of the reference point. The reference point is *when I met him in 2014*.

### 3.4 A special case

The sense effect discussed previously with the present progressive (p. 11) is also found in narratives with the past progressive:

54) (Last year), he was always ringing me up.

In this sentence, the use of the *past progressive* signals the fact that the behaviour of this person was habitual and was by implication irritating.

#### EXERCISE III. PUT IN THE CORRECT VERB FORM.

1. It (to rain) \_\_\_\_\_ last Sunday afternoon so we (to stay) \_\_\_\_\_ at home.
2. The phone (to ring) \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday morning while I (to have) \_\_\_\_\_ a shower.
3. What you (to do) \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday evening at eight? I (to watch) \_\_\_\_\_ TV.
4. When I (arrive) \_\_\_\_\_ at the party last Saturday, John (to leave) \_\_\_\_\_ already and (to go) \_\_\_\_\_ home.
5. She (to work) \_\_\_\_\_ at that company for three years when it (to go out) \_\_\_\_\_ of business.

#### EXERCISE IV. FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH THE CORRECT FORM OF THE VERBS IN BRACKETS.

That Saturday...By the time Tom (to notice) \_\_\_\_\_ the doorbell, it already (to ring) \_\_\_\_\_ three times. As usual, he (listen) \_\_\_\_\_ to loud music on his stereo. He (to turn) \_\_\_\_\_ the stereo down and (to stand up) \_\_\_\_\_ to answer the door. An old man (to stand) \_\_\_\_\_ on the steps. The man (to begin) \_\_\_\_\_ to speak slowly, asking for directions.

#### EXERCISE V. FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH THE CORRECT FORM OF THE VERBS IN PARENTHESES.

##### THE DISCOVERY OF PENICILLIN

- 1 Alexander Fleming, a Scottish research bacteriologist, (study) \_\_\_\_\_ the deadly staphylococcus when he (make) \_\_\_\_\_ his famous discovery in 1928.



- 2 For examination purposes, Fleming (remove) \_\_\_\_\_ the cover of the bacteria culture with which he (work) \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3 A mould (form) \_\_\_\_\_ on the exposed culture.
- 4 Fleming (notice) \_\_\_\_\_ that in the area surrounding the mould, the staphylococci (disappear) \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5 He (keep) \_\_\_\_\_ a strain of the mould alive and (begin) \_\_\_\_\_ testing it on laboratory animals.

## 4 EXPOSITION

Exposition deals with **facts** and with the **relationships** between facts. It contains *globalisations* and *generalisations*, which are used for example to express general laws and principles. Here are some examples:

- 100) We go to Germany every year.
- 101) Water boils at 100°C.
- 102) Peter has written a number of short stories.
- 103) The earthquake caused the building to collapse.
- 104) He was once a heavy smoker.
- 105) He lived and died in his native city of Cork.
- 106) England was a great sea power.
- 107) Byron died in Greece.
- 108) I have a friend who was at school with Clinton.
- 109) Rome was not built in a day.
- 110) The eruption of Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii.

We can see that in each case we are dealing with facts and the relationships between them. Exposition is typically found in technical and scientific writing, historical treatises, works in popular science, newspaper articles and so on.

### 4.1 Lack of temporality

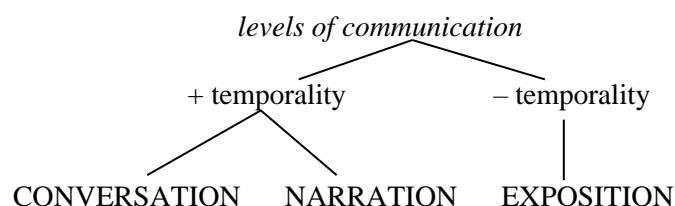
Particularly important is the lack of **temporality** – action causing change over time – which is missing in exposition but is an essential part of conversation and narration. If we look at example 101) we can see that this sentence has no connection with time or space, it is **generic**. If we compare it with a sentence using the present progressive, we can see the difference:

- 111) Water boils at 100°C.
- 112) The water is boiling.

The latter example deals with a real event happening in space and time – we can point to the water – and which is incomplete at the moment of speaking. The generic sentence expresses a typical property of water. Note that the present progressive cannot be used to express generic meaning.

We can classify the three levels of communication on the basis of whether they express temporality or not:

FIGURE 16: TEMPORALITY



As exposition lacks temporality, mentions of time do not have a referential function, which they do in narration or in conversation. The following example from a textbook on motor vehicle technology illustrates this:

- 113) The first commercially successful internal combustion engine was made by a Frenchman, Etienne Lenoir, in 1860. It ran on coal gas, but worked on a cycle of operations which did not include compression of the gas before ignition: as a result it was not very efficient.

The adverb of time *in 1860* is simply one of a number of facts relating to the first combustion engine, and so the paragraph is expository in nature.

## 4.2 Tenses in exposition

The most typical tense used in exposition is *present simple* tense (and to a lesser extent *future*), as can be seen from the first examples in this section, and also from the following passage from a legal textbook:

- 114) The Rule of Law is a vital idea in both political and legal debate in the Western world. Its direct technical meaning is fairly simple, but its application often leads to considerable problems. What the rule of law means, strictly, is that the political decision-makers of a society express their decisions in terms of general rules or principles, which are then applied automatically and indiscriminately by courts, police and administrators to anyone who comes within their ambit.

As in previous examples, there is no mention of individuals or singular events or actions, as is also the case in the following sentences from an economics text:

- 115) A private company is a type of business organization that permits a limited number of shareholders to enjoy limited liability and to be taxed as a company. Unlike the public company, a private company is not allowed to offer shares for public subscription, but unlike a partnership, it is obliged to file accounts.

This is in fact a definition of what a private company is. The following example shows that other tenses are also possible:

- 116) Until well into this century, air pollution *was* for most people synonymous with suspended particulate matter (soot, smoke) and sulphur dioxide. These are waste products produced mainly by domestic heating equipment, a wide range of industrial plants, and power plants. As the twentieth century *has progressed*, concern for pollution of the atmosphere *has ranged* across a large number of pollutants.

Here we can see that other tenses are also possible: past simple and present perfect simple. The same rules apply as discussed for conversation. Note that as in conversation/description, the use of the present perfect simple is based on viewing actions in the past from the point of view of the present. Where the period of time referred to includes the moment of speaking, we use the present perfect simple, where it does not we switch to the past simple. One of the previous examples illustrates the past simple:

- 117) Queen Victoria died in 1901.

The adverb of time *in 1901* automatically triggers the use of the past simple. Remember that this sentence is not narrative: it expresses a fact and the adverb of time is part of this fact. In a narrative, in contrast, the adverb of time has a different function: it situates the narrative and signals a time frame. The following could be the start of a narrative:

- 118) *In 1890*, Queen Victoria was on holiday in Balmoral when....

Note that certain tenses are normally excluded: any of the *progressive* forms, as the *progressive* always implies singular incomplete events and not generalisations. Thus we do not find the *present progressive* or the *past progressive* in expository texts.

### 4.3 Switching

In conclusion, we can see that the distinction between conversation, narrative and exposition allows us explain the uses of the tense more easily. Two final points: these language modes are not the same as types of text – a text may contain sections which are narrative and sections which are expository, for example. As we said above, we can switch between these different levels of communication, as in example, which one sentence further on becomes narrative:

119) In 1862 Lenoir made a horseless carriage powered by his engine and possibly drove it on the roads, but he lost interest in this venture and nothing came of it.

This is narrative, because the author is talking about individual people and events, plus there are transformations of the type illustrated in Figure 14. Also, conversation can shift easily to narrative and back again.

In general, the following are important aspects of expository texts:

- ⇒ they deal with facts, not with individual events
- ⇒ they deal with the relationships between these facts
- ⇒ they deal with the methods for establishing these facts
- ⇒ they have no relationship to space or time
- ⇒ they contain definitions and classifications

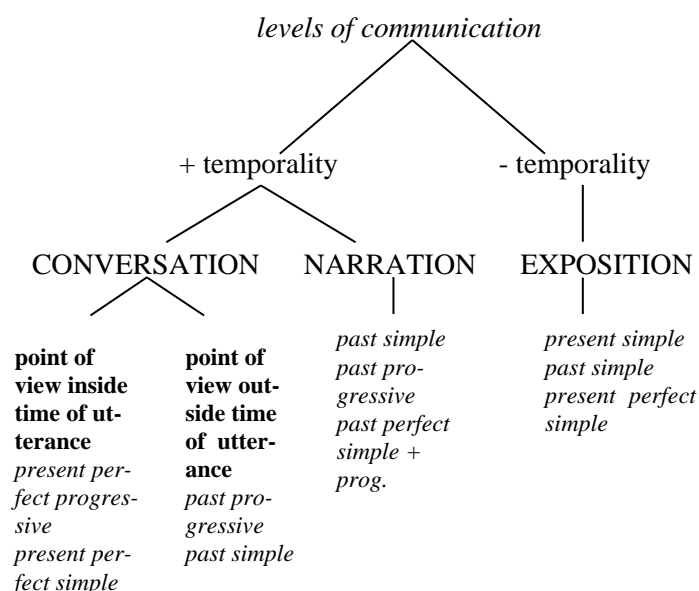
This explains their language characteristics:

- ⇒ they normally use the present simple (plus the present perfect simple and the past simple)
- ⇒ the combinations of article and noun are often generic
- ⇒ descriptive connectors are often used which express cause, effect/result, objectives, concession, contrast

## 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the typical tenses used in the different levels of communication are as follows:

**FIGURE 17: TENSES AND LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION**



Remember:

- in conversation we switch to past tenses when the point of view lies outside the time of utterance;
- in narratives we never use the present perfect;
- in exposition we do not normally use the progressive forms.

**EXERCISE VI.**

**LOOK AT THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE, DETERMINE WHICH SECTIONS ARE CONVERSATION, NARRATIVE OR EXPOSITION, AND PUT THE VERBS INTO THE APPROPRIATE TENSES CORRESPONDINGLY:**

- A: First of all I'd like you to tell me a bit about what you (do) in the past few years.
- B: Well, I (leave) school after I (do) my A levels.
- A: What subjects you (take)?
- B: French, German and Art.
- A: Art?
- B: Well, I really (want) to study art. But a friend of my father's (offer) me a job. He (be) an accountant in the City. I (talk) to him one evening when he (mention) that his firm (look) for trainees.
- A: I see. In your application, you (say) that you only (spend) nine months with this firm of accountants. Why (be) that?
- B: Well, to be quite honest, I (not like) it. I (do) the same thing every day – so I (decide) to leave and get a place at the Art College.
- A: Your father (mind)?
- B: Well, he (be) quite disappointed at first, but then he (get) used to the idea.
- A: You (like) Art?
- B: Yes, I (love) it. It (be) a subject that really (involve) the whole person. So much (be written and said) about it down the centuries and there (be) so many different schools and directions.