

# GLIMPSES OF ENGLISH TEMPOASPECTUAL BLENDS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present contribution investigates in a first section what its author took the liberty to call 'transposition of temporal reference', including: Simple Present for past/future time, Present Progressive for future time, Past Simple/Progressive for present time, Past Perfect Simple/Progressive for hypothetical past, hypothetical Simple Past for future time, and Past Progressive for future time in the past.

The second and final section submits to the reader four types of extended structure featuring tempoaspectual blends – with two, three, four and five modal and/or passive and/or lexical auxiliaries – , some of them bona fide ill-conceived lexematic monstrosities.

## Rezumat

În prima parte a articolului, autoarea cercetează așa-numita „transpunere a referinței temporale”. Dânsa analizează prezentul simplu cu sens de trecut sau viitor, prezentul continuu cu sens de viitor, trecutul simplu sau continuu cu sens de prezent, mai-mult-ca-perfectul sau perfectul continuu cu sens de trecut ipotetic, trecutul simplu ipotetic cu sens de viitor și trecutul continuu cu sens de viitor în trecut.

A partea a doua și cea finală a articolului, autoarea analizează patru tipuri de structuri verbale extinse cu două, trei, patru și chiar cinci verbe modale și/sau verbe la diateza pasivă și/sau unități auxiliare.

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

With a plethora of factors at work blurring the notoriously tenuous distinction between 'time-correlated' Tense (*cf* the grammatical category "which correlates most directly with distinctions of time"<sup>2</sup>), and 'temporal-structure' featuring Aspect (*cf* the grammatical category "representing distinctions in the temporal structure of an event"<sup>3</sup>), one might with good reason express doubt whether establishing hard and fast principles for differentiating them is at all a sensible task. English, the highly regarded Professor of Linguistics claims, "exhibits a minimal tense system with a two-way contrast between past and non-past forms"<sup>4</sup>, more precisely it has only two tenses (past and present) marked morphologically, all other time characteristics being expressed by aspect.

And indeed, with both aspect and tense referring to time – though in clearly different ways – and, furthermore, with distinctions within each category marked mostly on verbs, the two grammatical categories are so closely knit together in English that, in time, the bond between them has been rendered, so to say, shatter-proof. Which facts induced me to dwell on the semantics of such tempoaspectual<sup>5</sup> blends in this particular unit.

### 1. Transposition of Temporal Reference

#### 2.1. Non-Past Tempoaspectual Blends Relating to Past Time

##### 2.1.1. Simple Present for Past Time

###### 2.1.1.1. The *historic SP*

The historic SP is used as a stylistically marked device to refer to past time mainly in casual conversation, when relating incidents or recounting plots of books or films (also called 'popular narrative style'). Its major discourse effect is conveying dramatic immediacy by foregrounding the key event in a narrative, a strategy optionally reinforced by prefixing a signal-adjunct to the subject-verb string, e.g.:

"Grandfather was dozing in front of the television, when all of a sudden the encyclopedia on the shelf above his head *falls* to the floor with a thud and the table *starts wobbling*."

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<sup>2</sup>Trask, 1993, p. 276.

<sup>3</sup>Trask, 2007, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>*idem*, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup>I am more than willing to take both the blame and the credit – if any – for this label I took the liberty to coin.

The historic present can in addition be employed in fictional narrative for imaginary events in the past, in stage directions, captions to photographs and newspaper headlines, e.g.:

"Teacher *Strikes* Idle Kids.  
Doctor *Testifies* in Horse Suit"<sup>6</sup>.

A subtype closely related to the historic present is the use of SP for more vivid commentaries on no longer living artists and their work, e.g.:

"Van Gogh *is* at his best in bright colours and circular patterns."

#### **2.1.1.2. The reporting present**

The reporting present is used for communication, or reception thereof, in recent past time, to suggest that the reported information is still valid, e.g.:

"She *tells* me he desperately needs the job.  
I *hear* you're leaving".

The SP is also preferred for reports originating with no longer living world authorities on certain subjects, as well as highly revered books such as the Bible, e.g.:

"The Bible *says* that the love of money is the root of all evil."

#### **2.1.2. The Historic PsPg**

(s. general discussion of the 'historic' subtype in II.1.1.1 above).

Unlike SP, which can be stylistically deployed in fictional narrative, PsPg is confined to the popular type, e.g.:

"Just when we finally got all dressed up for the party and ready for the cab, ... our telephone *isn't working!*"

### **2.2. Non-Past Tempoaspectual Blends Relating to Future**

#### **2.2.1. SP for Future**

SP for Future can be used in both main and subordinate clauses. In matrix clauses recourse to SP is a stylistically marked device typically connoting a degree of certainty attributed to the future, which only semantico-pragmatic descriptions of present and past tense boast as a rule. For instance, it is used to refer to immutable events, with futurity additionally signalled by insertion of time position adjuncts, e.g.:

"Full moon *is* in two days",

or programmed events, particularly with certain dynamic transitional verbs or stative ones, e.g.:

"The train *arrives* in Munich at 6 a.m. tomorrow.  
She's on leave next week."

SP for future time is more commonly employed in subclauses, open conditionals and temporals in particular, e.g.:

"We'll have the party in the garden if the weather's good."

#### **2.2.2. PsPg for Future**

PsPg for Future is used to refer to intended events, more precisely future events, the occurrence of which is already now taken for granted, usually with a time adjunct acting as semantic chaperone, e.g.:

"He's *flying* to Japan next week."

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<sup>6</sup>Unfortunately, discussion of the humour-generating ambiguity underlying both these headlines falls outside the scope of the present book.

### 2.3. Past Tempoaspectual Blends Relating to Present Time

#### 2.3.1. PS/PPg for Present Time

##### 2.3.1.1. PS/PPg as means of conveying reported speech or thought

As prescriptive grammar has it, a PT in the reporting verb is bound to induce a corresponding temporal backshift<sup>7</sup> in the subclause verb as well, except when the time-reference of the original utterance is still operative at the time of reporting, in which case recourse to present tense is viewed as a more felicitous strategy, e.g.:

“My brother told the police officer he *knew* none of the suspects.  
She told me just yesterday that she *is* now a regular BA.”

Compare now:

“They didn't realise the danger they *were* in” and “They didn't realise she *is* the headmistress”.

The use of PS is also possible in the last sentence, if most likely to give rise to a rather undesirable ambiguity in terms of strictly temporal validity of subclause predication.

##### 2.3.1.2. The attitudinal PS/PPg

The attitudinal PS/PPg is optionally used to render enquiries and requests more tentative – hence more polite –, in other words to make the imposition on the hearer less direct, e.g.:

“*Did you want* to see me now?  
I *wondered* whether I could have a word with you in private.”

Addition of the progressive is apt to enhance tentativeness, and politeness of the utterance as a result, e.g.:

“I *was wondering* whether I could have a word with you in private.”

##### 2.3.1.3. The hypothetical PS/PPg

The hypothetical PS/PPg is used in the subclauses of ‘remote’ as ‘counterfactual’ conditional sentences to indicate that the fulfilment of the condition is regarded as impossible, contrary to fact or unlikely at best, e.g.:

“If she really *loved* him, she would stand by him during his trial” (but I assume she does not love him enough to be able to do that).

A further use akin to the one exemplified above is that which occurs in hypothetical subclauses immediately dominated by *wish*, as in:

“I *wish you were coming* with me” (which you obviously aren't)  
“I *wish I were* a bit taller” (which unfortunately I'm not).

The form *were* – as employed in the last sentence for all persons of *be* – is the only relic still in use of the subjunctive which was originally required by the semantico-pragmatic conditions described above<sup>8</sup>. Informal English tends to regard this use of *were* as rather ‘stilted’ and prefers *was* instead (for 1st and 3rd person singular).

#### 2.3.2. PPfS/PPfPg for Present Time

##### 2.3.2.1. PPfS/PPfPg as a means of conveying reported speech or thought

As with PS (s. 3.3.1.1. above), recourse to PPfS shifts the predication, but this time even further back into the past, e.g.:

“He told me he *had been waiting* for half an hour” (direct speech: I *have been waiting* for half an hour).

##### 2.3.2.2. The Attitudinal PPfS/PPfPg for Present Time

With PPfS/PPfPg the predication is viewed even more tentatively than with PS/PPg (s. discussion of the subtype 2.3.1.2. above), e.g.:

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<sup>7</sup>The verbs in the reported speech are thereby related to the time of the reporting, with the resulting relationship indicating the by now notorious ‘sequence of tenses’.

<sup>8</sup>cf Downing & Locke, 1992, p. 361.

"I had wondered/been wondering whether you are/were available to help with the show on the 4th of July."

#### 2.4. The Hypothetical Ppfs/Ppfp $\neq$ 'Past in the Past'

Whereas with present reference the hypothetical implication is generally confined to negative expectation or assumption – with the positive still waiting in the wings (s. 3.3.1.3. above) –, with past reference it is tantamount to a poorly disguised rejection of the condition, e.g.:

"If he *hadn't been driving* his car round that bend at breakneck speed, the accident wouldn't have happened" (but he unfortunately was driving at breakneck speed when the accident happened).

#### 2.5. Past Tempoaspectual Blends Relating to Future

##### 2.5.1. The Hypothetical PT with Future Reference

(see previous discussion of hypothetical meanings of PS and PPg in 2.3.1.3.) e.g.:

"If you really *applied* yourself/*were* to apply yourself, you could do the next assignment."

The hypothetical implication is: 'but I expect you won't'.

##### 2.5.2. PPg for Future Time in the Past

PPg can be used to express future arising from arrangement predetermined in the past, e.g.:

"She *was going* on vacation the next day."

## 2. Types of Extended Structure. Featuring Tempoaspectual Blends

Though not infrequently fairly long word strings themselves, tempoaspectual blends can further combine with up to three auxiliaries – modal, passive and lexical ones – to form a so-called 'extended' verbal group structure<sup>9</sup>. The main types and subtypes of such extended structures are being illustrated below, with the lexical verb *leave* at the head, and *may* and *be due to* standing for modal and lexical auxiliaries respectively. Marking of the tense – which will be the canonical present, 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular all through the series of examples – is on the 'leading' auxiliary (also called 'operator').

### 3.1. Extended Structures with Two Auxiliaries:

- 1) modal + progressive: *may be leaving*
- 2) modal + perfect: *may have left*
- 3) lexical + progressive: *is due to be leaving*
- 4) perfect + lexical: *has been due to leave*
- 5) perfect + passive: *has been left*

### 3.2. Extended Structures with Three Auxiliaries:

- 1) modal + perfect + progressive: *may have been leaving*
- 2) perfect + progressive + passive: *has been being left*
- 3) perfect + lexical + progressive: *has been due to be leaving*
- 4) modal + lexical + progressive: *may be due to be leaving*
- 5) modal + progressive + passive: *may be being left*
- 6) modal + perfect + passive: *may have been left*
- 7) modal + perfect + lexical: *may have been due to leave*
- 8) lexical + progressive + passive: *is due to be being left*
- 9) perfect + lexical + passive: *has been due to be left*

### 3.3. Extended Structures with Four Auxiliaries:

- 1) modal + perfect + lexical + progressive: *may have been due to be leaving*
- 2) modal + perfect + progressive + passive: *may have been being left*
- 3) perfect + lexical + progressive + passive: *has been due to be being left*
- 4) modal + perfect + lexical + passive: *may have been due to be left*

### 3.4. Extended Structures with Five Auxiliaries

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<sup>9</sup>cf Downing & Locke, 1992, p. 320.

- 1) modal + perfect + lexical + progressive + passive: *may have been due to be being left*

Except for set V.1, where all examples are perfectly acceptable – from a semantico-pragmatic viewpoint, to be more precise –, one third of the examples in set V.2 – 2, 5 and 8, all of them simultaneously marked for progressive aspect and passive voice, associated with the perfect, a modal or a lexical –, half of those in set V.3 – 2 and 3 in particular, featuring the ‘eternal triangle’ perfect-progressive-passive, plus a lexical or a modal auxiliary – and, to a certain extent, the one illustrating Extended Structure V.4 sound rather awkward – to say the least –, both as they stand and when appropriately contextualized. However, general opinion on discarding such hyperextended structures as verbal infelicities varies considerably. Unfortunately, neither scope limit nor space availability allow me to address the issue in more detail in the present chapter, so I shall have to confine my references to the extreme views.

Thus, Downing & Locke, for instance, cite “must have been about to be being driven” as exemplifying the “only meaningful structure [...] possible with this combination of grammatical elements and semantic features”<sup>10</sup>. Sitting at the opposite end of the ‘negotiating’ table is Trask, who informs readers that some English speakers find “ill-formed” even such more benign extended structures with only three auxiliaries as exemplified by “My house has been being painted for two weeks now”<sup>11</sup>.

To be perfectly candid about it, the examples I singled out above as awkward sounding look indeed more like ill-conceived lexematic monstrosities, the product of a logician’s mind set on working out the combination possibilities of the five variables involved: progressive, perfect, passive, modal and lexical. And even if one were to go out of her/his way to make them look less ill-assorted and sound more context-friendly, they still would grate on the average native speaker, who, as a rule, is sensible and resourceful enough to circumvent such hyperextended structures and resort instead to more pragmatically-oriented language devices for conveying the rather tortuous semantics underlying the former.

## References

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<sup>10</sup>Downing & Locke, 1992, p. 323.

<sup>11</sup>cf Downing & Locke, 1993, p. 205.