

THE ENGLISH FINITE VERB SYSTEM

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1.0. The number of works on the verb system and on specific categories within that system in contemporary English that have appeared within the last 10 years suggests that the solutions proposed by different authors are far from satisfactory. There is a tendency to make such a description as simple as possible, but science requires that it be exhaustive. It is not often that the two requirements can be fulfilled.

The present paper is not meant just to increase the number of works on the subject. Neither is it meant to be exhaustive. This is impossible in so short a paper. It is based on the critical approach to the most important of the previous discussions on this subject. The system proposed here is an essential modification of the system proposed by Martin Joos (1964a) and Akira Ota (1965).

Two problems must be discussed in connection with the finite verb forms:

- a. the semantics of the individual forms,
- b. the arrangement of these forms into a system.

Since the latter results from the former to some extent, the two points will be discussed in the order given above.

1.1. The number of verb categories varies from language to language, and within one language from period to period.

In contemporary English there are five basic verb forms. One is obligatory in every predication, the other four are optional. The obligatory one is the so-called Simple Present Tense, the four optional are: the Unactual Tense, the Perfect Phase, the Temporary Aspect, and the Passive Voice.

1.2. *The Simple Present Tense* has always been found neither 'simple' nor 'present'. Thus, for example, O. Jespersen finds several meanings (future, present and past time reference) that the Simple Present may have (Jespersen 1931 : 16, 19, 21). He also finds that "We have a peculiar kind of the generic or 'omnipresent' tense in statements of what may be found at all times by readers:..." (Jespersen 1931 : 18) and "On the other hand *I come* also may mean 'am come' and thus equals the perfect tense:..." (Jespersen 1931 : 27).

F. Twaddell (1960) formulates the same idea more generally: "Most com-

monly, a predicate with zero modification is simply timeless — pure description implicitly justified by a past record and a presumption of future continuation" (Twaddell 1960 : 6 - 7).

Also R. Quirk finds that the Simple Present "is often used without reference to time as in 'Penguins live in the Antarctic'" (Quirk 1962 : 188) and that it "is 'unmarked' and as such may be much more widely used than merely a present..." (Quirk 1962 : 130).

F. Twaddell is the only one, as far as I know, to state explicitly that "This unmodified construction conveys the semantic content of the lexical verb alone, with no grammatical meaning beyond that of 'VERB'. It is compatible with any chronological meaning overtly signalled elsewhere in the sentence or situation:..." (Twaddell 1960 : 6).

The form and meaning of the Simple Present may be described in the following way:

- a. It is a structure of S+V.
- b. It is obligatory in every finite predication.
- c. It "conveys the semantic content of the lexical verb alone, with no grammatical meaning beyond that of 'VERB'" (Twaddell 1960 : 6).
- d. Since the meanings are conveyed by the semantic content of the lexical verbs and may be signalled elsewhere in the sentence or situation they are lexical meanings. Thus the number of meanings that this structure may convey is practically infinite.

1.3. *The Unactual Tense* is formally signalled by D (-d, -t, alternative form of stem, zero).

There is broad agreement among linguists as to the functions and meaning of the Unactual Tense. It was described as being used to refer "to some time in the past without telling anything about its connection with the present moment" (Jespersen 1931 : 60) and to express denial of "the reality or possibility of certain suppositions; ..." (Jespersen 1931 : 113).

F. Twaddell describes the Past modification as having "either a limitation to the chronological past, or a focus upon non-reality" (Twaddell 1960 : 7) (He was the first to use the term 'Unactual Tense').

It should be explained additionally that when the D marker is used to express time the only time it indicates is past, while there is no such restriction on the use of D expressing non-reality.

M. Joos (1964a : 121) finds that the common meaning of both the uses is that "the referent (what is specified by the subject-verb partnership) is absent from that part of the real world where the verb is being spoken". Futurity, however, is excluded: "...for English treats future time as not remote from the present occasion, and remoteness in time in English is always categorically past time".

And that is all that can be said about the meaning signalled by D, although

some linguists interpret it differently. R. L. Allen (1966), for example, tries to convince us that the time signalled by D is 'identified past', as opposed to 'non-identified past' time signalled by HAVE -N, though it need not be 'identified' at all: "A past time-field, for example, may be signalled [...] even by "introducing" an unidentified time in the past and then assuming that that time has been satisfactorily identified (e.g., *I've tasted it once, but I didn't like it*)" (Allen 1966 : 218). That is Allen wants us to believe that a mere assumption is enough for the past time signalled by D to become identified.

1.4. *The Perfect Phase*. The meaning of the HAVE -N structure has been defined in various ways. Here I shall concentrate on the most recent interpretations.

Although, on the whole, the meaning of HAVE -N is no longer described in terms of time, some linguists still try to do so and treat HAVE -N forms as tense. Among such attempts are the recent analyses of R. L. Allen (1966) and W. Diver (1963).

Allen says that "the opposition between past verb forms and the so-called present perfect verb forms is primarily one of 'identified'/'non-identified' time. Both kinds of forms refer to time(s) prior to the moment of coding, but past verb-clusters are used to refer to identified time(s) in the past, while present perfect verb-clusters are used to refer to non-identified time(s) in the past" (Allen 1966 : 157).

Diver holds that "The signal 31 consists of the form 31, *have -ed*, and represents the meaning AR, 'past, indefinite'; example: *he has walked*. The meaning, freely rendered: The event indicated by the attached verb took place on an indefinite occasion in the past" (Diver 1963 : 153 - 156).

Simple examples contradicting this point of view may be given. The time in *I've seen him today* is as much identified as the time in *I saw him yesterday*. The time is definite in sentences of the type "You haven't sent me any money for fifteen days" (W. S. Allen 1962: ex. 63, sentence 11).

This approach is strongly criticized by F. R. Palmer (1967): "The example he [Diver] quotes is *my family has lived in this town, but not since 1638*, which he says, 'may not deny current relevance, but does, one supposes, deny an explicit link with the current situation'. What Diver means by 'an explicit link' is presumably continuity, but that is not what is meant by current relevance... We are talking about our present-day family or the present-day town. This is shown quite clearly by the fact that if we say *John has lived in this town* then it is quite clear that John is still alive — we are talking about the present-day John; if he were dead we would only be able to say *John lived in this town*... The exact nature of the current relevance may vary as shown by Twaddell — 'It signals a significant persistence of results, a continued truth value, a valid present relevance of the effects of earlier events, the continued reliability of conclusions based on earlier behavior' [...] — but there is little

doubt that current relevance and not indefiniteness is the main meaning of the perfect" (Palmer 1967 : 190).

'Indefiniteness' of the time of the action may seem to be the main meaning because the action is only as much important in the meaning of HAVE -N as it is the cause of the present state and as such need not be identified in time.

M. Joos (1964a) saying that "The name *perfect* is traditional and entirely misleading" (140) gives the following description of the meaning of HAVE -N: "...the essential point here is that the meaning of perfect phase is that *the principal effects of the event are out of phase with it*, which of course can only be true if they are delayed [...] the perfect phase means that the event is *not mentioned for its own sake* but for the sake of its consequences" (ibid.). And further he adds: "The perfect phase has removed our attention from the event which it itself presents, and has relocated our attention on the subsequent opportunities for events, now that they have been prepared for" (ibid.).

1.5. *The Temporary Aspect.* To describe the meaning of the verb category signalled by BE -ING I shall quote M. Joos's (1964a) words: "One tradition calls this 'progressive' and holds that the specifying done by the marker BE -ING adds the meaning that the action is making headway; but that is preposterous in the face of *209 standing* and others. Another name, more recent and especially in use in Great Britain, is 'continuous'; this emphasizes the point that the other verbs (lacking BE -ING) are apt to refer to isolated acts occurring again and again: *114-120*. There is a grain of truth in this, but there are too many counter-examples: *9, 172*, and many others here" (Joos 1964a: 106).

Joos's proposition is to call the meaning of BE -ING 'temporary aspect' and that the use of the temporary aspect means: "Assuming that the predication is completely valid for the time principally referred to, then it is 99 percent probably valid [a 99-to-1 wager in favor of its validity would be a fair wager] for certain slightly earlier and later times, it is 96 percent probably valid for times earlier and later by somewhat more than that, and so on until the probability of its validity has diminished to zero [the actor then is doing nothing, or doing something other...] for times sufficiently earlier and later [...] The temporary aspect does not necessarily signify anything about the nature of the event, which can be essentially progressive or static, continuous or interrupted, and so on; [...] it says that the probability of its validity diminishes smoothly from a maximum of perfect validity, both ways into the past and the future towards perfect irrelevance or falsity" (Joos 1964a: 107 - 108).

This is by no means the only approach to the subject. W. Diver, for example, describes the meaning of BE -ING in the following way: "The indefinite-definite opposition is indicated on the present axis by the signals —O and *is -ing*; example: *He is a night watchman and sleeps on mornings. He is sleeping now.* The meanings of the two forms, freely rendered, are: The meaning indicated

by the attached verb takes place on an indefinite (or a definite) occasion in the present [...] The difference in meaning between 'past' and 'present' in this system is that 'past' means that the occasion indicated by the verb took place prior to the moment of speaking and 'present' means the occasion includes the moment of speaking" (Diver 1963 : 173).

The question immediately arises as to what Diver means by 'present' if 'past' means "that the occasion indicated by the verb took place *prior to the moment of speaking*" (italics mine). It would seem that 'present', according to Diver, is the moment of speaking (since everything prior to it is 'past') and then there is no place for 'indefinite' and 'definite' occasions in the present. Even if we distinguished between 'indefinite' and 'definite' occasions in the present then the 'definite' occasion would be the moment of speaking. Thus BE -ING would convey the meaning of simultaneity of the action (indicated by the attached verb) and the moment of speaking which is not always true; for example, talking to a friend in the street and saying *I am walking* while standing.

It seems, therefore, that Joos is right in his description of the meaning of the temporary aspect: "For the single meaning of *be -ing* my answer is something which we have been approaching, groping, tentatively, almost blindly, for many years. The second-last step gave us Twaddell's 'limited duration' or 'limitation of duration' for a better way of saying this. The last step is the recognition that the duration in question is not duration of the event, the action, the deed; that instead it is duration of the VALIDITY OF THE PREDICATION" (Joos 1964b : 489).

1.6. *The Passive Voice* has been described adequately in many grammars. Here I shall adopt Joos's description, perhaps the simplest of all: "The English Passive is a word-order device. It is marked by BE -N to show that its subject is not the actor, and that is all the device 'means'" (Joos 1964a : 96).

1.7. A few words must be said about the so-called *Future Tense* as signalled by WILL and SHALL. Here I shall only quote F. R. Palmer's words concerning a general criticism of the approach to the modal verbs as a part of the grammatical verb system. With respect to WILL he says: "But WILL has not merely two meanings; can we really say that it has the same meaning (or only two meanings) in *I'll let you know, He'll sit there for hours, That'll be John, and Oil will float on water?* To preserve his notion of a consistent meaning Joos has to do two things. First, he has to give a vague, almost 'meaningless' meaning; for WILL it is 'adequate assurance'" (Palmer 1967 : 181) and "Lexical items even less appear to have consistent meaning, yet I can see no more reason for assuming that WILL has a single meaning than that FAIR has a single meaning and this seems to be refuted by *a fair trial* (just), *fair weather* (fine), *fair hair* (light coloured), *in fair condition* (not very good), and *fair of face* (handsome)" (Palmer 1967 : 183).

I totally agree with Palmer, if I understand him rightly, that the modal verbs should be treated as lexical items whose meanings and grammar should be described separately.

2. The first who applied the theory of binary oppositions to describe verb forms was R. Jakobson (1932). The main points of his theory are:

- a. In the opposition one member is marked, the other is unmarked.
- b. The two members of an opposition are not equal in their meanings.
- c. The (smaller) member A of an opposition has a definite, single, positive categorial meaning.
- d. The other member (unmarked) of the opposition does not signal whether the categorial meaning of the marked member is present or not.
- e. The categorial meaning of the marked member is described as real in the marked structure and as possible in the unmarked structure.
- f. The whole categorial meaning of the unmarked member, in comparison with the marked member, is narrowed by not signalling A.
- g. The meaning of the unmarked category depends on the context and/or situation.

This approach has been adopted in two recent works. R. L. Allen (1966), however, does not seem to know, among others, what the marked-unmarked opposition consists in. According to him the BE -ING structure, for example, may sometimes be marked, sometimes unmarked. It becomes evident when we compare two of his statements: "...it appears that — perhaps as a result of repeated use in oppositions where they contrasted with expanded verb-clusters — THE NON-EXPANDED VERB-CLUSTERS HAVE IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH A MARKED MEANING OR FUNCTION" (184) and "In the present perfect tenses, the expanded form rather than the non-expanded form, appears to be the 'marked form'" (205).

M. Joos (1964a) sets up a system of six verb categories: tense, aspect, assertion, phase, voice, and function. Within each of these categories there is an opposition one member of which is marked, the other unmarked. This may be shown in the following table:

Marked category	Example	Unmarked category	Example
D	I showed	0	I show
BE -ING	I am showing	0	I show
HAVE -N	I have shown	0	I show
BE -N	I am shown	0	I show
WILL, etc.	I shall show	0	I show

Joos failed to see that, formally, for all the marked categories there is only one unmarked category. This is confirmed when we analyse the meanings of

the unmarked and marked categories. As has been said (1.2.) the meaning of the Unmarked category (the Simple Present Tense) is lexical and depends on the context (including the lexical meaning of the verb) and/or situation. That means that it has no grammatical meaning of the type the marked categories have. As Joos himself pointed out, for example, "... the generic aspect [the unmarked member of the category of aspect] has no meaning of its own. It gets its meaning entirely from the context; and for our purposes the 'context' includes the lexical meaning of the verb-base" (Joos 1964a:112).

The question arises whether, in this light, we can speak of oppositions at all? Formally there is no verb form among those discussed here that could be called 'unmarked'. Strictly speaking the absence of a marker (as in the plural of the Unmarked category) is also a signal in comparison with the presence of a marker. Thus if we would like to base the oppositions on formal criteria we would find the idea completely wrong. Unless for some reasons (utility, for example) we choose to call the structure 'unmarked' because in most forms it has 0 suffix (except 3sg with the syntagmatic marker of agreement). Of course it is only convention, however practical it may be.

Also semantically the problem presents itself differently. The nature of the meaning of the marked category is different from the nature of the meaning of the unmarked category. The Unmarked category gets its meaning from the context and/or situation, which means that it is a lexical meaning. The marked categories have one marker each, signalling one basic meaning. How can we set up a system of semantic oppositions where there are no oppositions (lexical versus grammatical meanings)? The five basic verb-forms co-occur and their meanings must be non-contrastive.

Here is how I suggest arranging the verb forms:

Unmarked category	Marked categories (optional)				
	S+V	D	HAVE -N	BE -ING	BE -N
Finitude (+verb base function)	Tense unactual	Phase perfect	Aspect temporary	Voice passive	

In all finite constructions only one structure is obligatory—the Unmarked structure, i.e. the subject-verb structure. All the other structures (modifications) are optional and their presence reduces the number of the possible meanings to only those which they represent.

I would like to stress again the most important points of the discussion:

- a. The subject-verb structure is a signal of finitude only.
- b. The syntagmatic signals of subject agreement may occur without any modifications, in which case they indicate the Unmarked category.

- c. A marked category has a definite, single, categorical meaning.
- d. The meaning of the Unmarked category depends on the context and/or situation and as such is not a grammatical meaning.

3. Conclusions

a. First of all the results of the above analysis may be used in teaching English tenses. We may stop frightening learners with 32 tenses in English. If we teach the basic forms properly then the rest should be easy. The so-called mixed categories (structures) are formally and semantically relatively simple. The basic categories, when mixed, give consequently regular combinations of their meanings.

b. I find a striking similarity between the Unmarked category in English and the Present Tense in Polish. This may make the teaching of the English 'Simple Present' (and consequently other tenses) easier. The marked categories are of course different. Further studies in this direction are necessary.

c. The above analysis suggests that at least in some European languages the so-called 'Present Tense' has similar (if not identical) form and functions. That may mean that the structure S+V signals finitude of the predication only. Other (marked) categories are the result of the "grammaticalisation de certains traits sémantiques du verbe" (Kuryłowicz 1953: 531).

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