

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING THE TENSE CARRIER IN SIMPLE AFFIRMATIVE SENTENCES

by Yao Shen

There are two tenses in English and two only. They are the present tense and the past tense. Tense refers to the present or past form of the word. For example.

WORD	PRESENT	PAST
be	am, is are	was were
have	have, has	had
do	do, does	did
will	will	would
will	will, wills	willed
can	can	could
can	can, cans	canned

Tense and time are not the same. There are three references to time: present, past, and future. Tense and time in the same sentence do not always have a one-to-one relationship. For example.

	TENSE		TIME	TENSE	TIME
1.	Is	he there	right now?	present	present
2.	Was	he there	yesterday?	past	past
3.	Is	he there	all the time?	present	pres
	TENSE		TIME	TENSE	TIME
1.	Is	he there	right now?	present	present
2.	Was	he there	yesterday?	past	past
3.	Is	he there	all the time?	present	present, past, future
4.	Is	he leaving	this moment?	present	present
5.	Is	he leaving	tomorrow?	present	future
6.	Was	he leaving	tomorrow?	past	future
7.	Was	he leaving	today?	past	present
8.	Was	he leaving	yesterday?	past	past
9.	Has	he patience	all the time?	present	present, past, future
10.	Does	he have patience	all the time?	present	present, past, future

The purpose here is not to take up the relation between tense and time but to demonstrate the importance of identifying the word which carries tense in a sentence. The word which carries tense will be referred to as the tense carrier. Two kinds of sentences are dealt with here. They are the simple affirmative yes-no questions and the simple affirmative statements.

Grammar books frequently divide yes-no questions such as the first eight sentences

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given above into two groups. In sentences 1-3, *be* is the verb (V) with the subject (S) of the sentence following it: V+S. In questions 4-8, *be* is the auxiliary (Aux), followed by the subject: Aux+S. This dual label of *be* as the verb in V+S and the auxiliary in Aux+S is troublesome not only to the non-native speaker learning English but also to the native speaker of English attempting to understand the operations of the grammar in his own language. And teachers of English as a second language have the added burden of choosing to teach *Has he patience?* (9) in V+S or *Does he have patience?* (10) in Aux+S.

The entire problem perhaps can be simplified by remembering that in simple yes-no questions; the tense carrier, whether it is the verb in V+S or the auxiliary in Aux+S, precedes the subject: T+S. For example.

V + S ---	T	+	S
Is	he		there?
Was	he		there?
Has	he		patience?
Aux + S --	T	+	S
Is	he		leaving?
Was	he		leaving?
Does	he		have patience?

In fact, this T+S extends to simple yes-no questions that begin with a modal.

Modal + S --	T	+	S
Can	you		do it?
Could	you		do it?
Will	he		come?
Would	he		come?

T+S also operates in yes-no questions in other expanded predicates, since an expanded predicate begins with either an auxiliary or a modal. A few examples are as follows.

Aux+S --	T	+	S
Are	they		done?
Were	they		done?
Are	they		being done?
Were	they		being done?
Has	he		done it?
Had	he		done it?
Has	it		been done?
Had	it		been done?
Does	he		do it?
Did	he		do it?
Modal+S --	T	+	S
Will	it		be done?
Could	it		have been done?

T+S also applies to elliptical yes-no questions. In elliptical questions, the tense carrier which is the verb precedes the subject.

V + S ---	T	+	S
Is	he		?
Was	he		?
Has	he		?
Had	he		?
Does	he		?
Did	he		?
Can	he		?
Could	he		?
Will	he		?
Would	he		?

There is a similarity among V+S, Aux+S, and Modal+S. It is that the verb, the auxiliary, or the modal is the tense carrier.

V + S			
Aux + S		T + S	
Modal + S			

The importance of identifying the tense carrier in statements is of equal significance. In statements, the tense carrier, whether it is a verb, an auxiliary, or a modal, follows the subject: S+T.

S + V ---S + T

He is.

He has.

He does.

He is there.

He was there.

He has patience.

He had patience.

S + Aux --S + T

He is leaving.

He was leaving.

It is gone.

It was gone.

He has come.

He had come.

It has been done.

It had been done.

He does have patience.

He did have patience.

S + Modal -S-+ T

You can do it.

You could do it.

He will come.

He would come.

It could be coming.

It would have been done.

The similarity among S+V, S+Aux, and S+Modal is that the verb, the auxiliary or the modal carries the tense in the sentence.

S + V

S + Aux S + T

S + Modal

Rather than teaching students to distinguish verbs, auxiliaries, and modals, it might be more profitable to make them pay attention to the word which carries the tense in the sentence. If the sentence is a yes-no question, the tense carrier precedes the subject; if the sentence is a statement, the tense carrier follows the subject.

Question T + S

Statement S + T

In this way a student can be guided by the deep grammar of T+S for yes-no questions and S+T for statements. The student's language would have not only the necessary tense carrier but also the tense carrier in its relation to the position of the subject of the sentence. An understanding of the necessity of the tense carrier in its positional relation to the subject of the sentence could help him produce simple affirmative yes-no questions and simple affirmative statements in acceptable grammar.

References:

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