

4 The semantics of the verb phrase

Time, tense, and the verb

4.1

In abstraction from any given language, we can think of time as a line on which is located, as a continuously moving point, the present moment. Anything ahead of the present moment is in the future, and anything behind it is in the past (see Fig 4.1a):

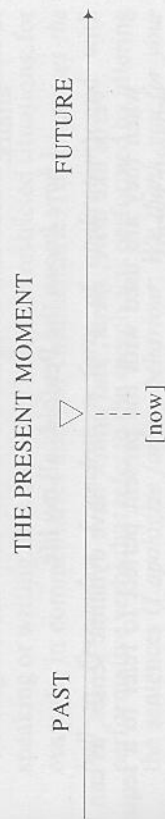


Fig 4.1a

Semantic: 3

In relating this REFERENTIAL view of time to the meaning of verbs, it is useful to reformulate it so that on the SEMANTIC level of interpretation something is defined as 'present' if it exists at the present moment and may also exist in the past and in the future. Hence *Paris stands on the River Seine* may be correctly said to describe a 'present' situation, even though this situation has existed for many centuries in the past and may well exist for an indefinitely long period in the future. The same is true for sentences of more limited time span: *John boasts a lot* applies to past and present, and carries the implication that it will apply to an indefinite period in the future (see Fig 4.1b):

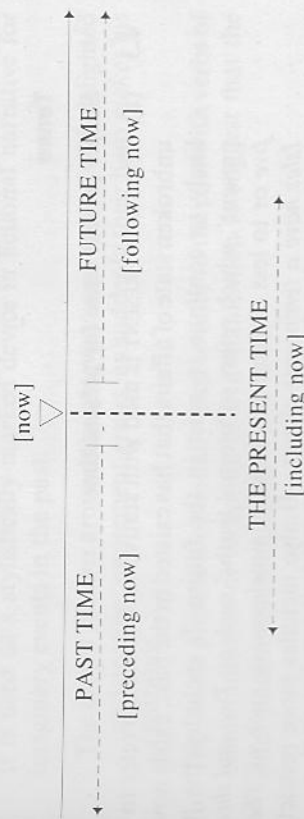


Fig 4.1b

TENSE is a grammatical category that is realized by verb inflection. Since English has no future inflected form of the verb, the threefold semantic

- 1 They do not know the identity of the agent of the action.
Many lifeboats were *launched* from the Titanic only partly filled.
 - 2 They want to avoid identifying the agent because they do not want to assign or accept responsibility.
My letter *has not yet been answered*.
A mistake *has been made* in calculating your change.
 - 3 They feel that there is no reason for mention of the agent because the identification is unimportant or obvious from the context.
The small thin pieces of metal at the sides are to protect the appliance during handling and *may be discarded*.
Nowadays sleeping sickness *can usually be cured* if it is *detected* early enough.
 - 4 In scientific and technical writing, writers often use the passive to avoid the constant repetition of the subject *I* or *we* and to put the emphasis on processes and experimental procedures. This use of the passive helps to give the writing the objective tone that the writers wish to convey.
The subject *was blindfolded* and a pencil *was placed* in the left hand.
 - 5 To put emphasis on the agent of the action;
 - 6 To avoid what would otherwise be a long active subject;
 - 7 To retain the same subject throughout a long sentence.
- The following sentence exemplifies a combination of these last three reasons for using the passive (cf 18.22):

As a cat moves, it *is kept informed* of its movements not only by its eyes, but also by messages from its pads and elsewhere in its skin, its organs of balance, and its sense organs of joints and muscles.

Bibliographical note

For general treatments of the English verb, see Palmer (1988); Allen (1966); Joos (1964); Huddleston (1976).

On the passive see Granger (1983); Stein (1979); Svartvik (1966). For studies relating more particularly to meaning in the verb phrase, consult the Bibliographical note to Chapter 4.