

# TENSE

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October 22, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *TENSE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=54256>

## TENSE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Linguistics, Grammar, Psycholinguistics, Affective Science

### 1. Core Definition and Multidisciplinary Context

The term **Tense** operates across multiple disciplinary boundaries, exhibiting distinct but related definitions in both linguistics and general psychology. Linguistically, tense is a fundamental grammatical category of verbs used to express the relationship between the time of an event (the purported action) and some reference point, most commonly the moment of speaking (the time of the utterance). This function is crucial for establishing temporal coherence in discourse, allowing speakers to locate actions precisely along a timeline. In contrast, the psychological and somatic application of **tense** describes an internal state--either an adjective characterizing an individual who is in a state of nervous behavior or emotional distress, or describing an object or muscle that is stretched taut or strained, reflecting physical or mental pressure.

While the linguistic definition focuses on formal structure and temporal reference, it intrinsically links to human cognition and communication, making it a critical area of study in psycholinguistics. The accurate deployment of tense requires complex cognitive mechanisms to manage temporal indexing, memory of events, and adherence to shared grammatical rules. The ability to shift between past, present, and future viewpoints using established verbal morphology is a cornerstone of sophisticated language use. Failures in this system, such as inconsistent temporal references or **tense mixing**, often interfere with comprehension and can indicate either developmental challenges or, as observed in general social contexts, a lack of formal training in grammatical conventions.

Therefore, any comprehensive understanding of the concept of **tense** must reconcile these two divergent meanings. The linguistic sense is a technical classification system governing verbal forms, while the psychological sense is a descriptive measure of arousal, anxiety, or physical strain. Although they seem unrelated, both definitions involve a state of being relative to a baseline: the linguistic tense relates an action's time relative to the baseline of utterance, and the psychological state relates an individual's emotional or physical strain relative to a baseline of relaxation or calm. The richness of the term thus necessitates an exploration within both structural linguistics and affective neuroscience.

### 2. Linguistic Tense: Correlating Action and Utterance

In linguistics, **tense** is primarily defined by its role in identifying the correlation between the time of the action described by the verb and the time the speaker produces the statement. This function is often realized through specific morphological markers attached to the verb stem, which conjugate

the verb according to established paradigms. For instance, in English, the addition of the suffix '-ed' typically shifts the verb into the simple past tense, signaling that the action was completed before the moment of utterance. This foundational function distinguishes tense from related temporal concepts like **aspect** (which relates to the internal temporal structure of the event, such as completion or ongoing nature) and **mood** (which relates to the speaker's attitude towards the event, such as certainty or obligation).

The primary axes along which linguistic tense operates are the Past, Present, and Future. The **Present Tense**, while seemingly straightforward, is highly complex; it can refer to the immediate moment, habitual actions, eternal truths, or even be used journalistically to narrate past events (the historical present). The **Past Tense** definitively places an action prior to the utterance time, but languages vary significantly in how many degrees of pastness they encode (e.g., immediate past, recent past, remote past). The **Future Tense**, often marked not just by morphology but by auxiliary verbs (like 'will' or 'shall' in English), fundamentally expresses predictions or intentions regarding events that have not yet occurred relative to the time of speech, often carrying elements of modality or certainty.

The system of tense allows for temporal disambiguation that is essential for narrative flow and logical communication. Without consistent tense marking, a listener or reader would struggle to sequence events correctly, leading to ambiguity regarding cause, effect, and simultaneity. This is particularly relevant in complex sentences involving subordination, where the tense of the subordinate clause often must align logically with the tense of the main clause, a constraint known as the sequence of tenses. Mastering these rules is a key metric of fluency and grammatical competence in any language, reflecting the speaker's control over temporal mapping.

Furthermore, the grammatical marking of tense is not universal. While many Indo-European languages rely heavily on inflectional morphology to mark tense, other languages may use particles, auxiliary verbs, or purely lexical means (time-specific adverbs) to locate events temporally. This variation underscores that while the cognitive necessity to locate events in time is universal, the specific grammatical mechanism used (i.e., whether a language truly possesses a dedicated tense category) is subject to linguistic typology. For example, Mandarin Chinese often relies on aspect markers and temporal phrases rather than strict verbal inflection for tense.

### 3. Grammaticalization and Morphological Expression

The evolution of tense markers, a process studied within historical linguistics, often follows the trajectory of grammaticalization. This involves full lexical items, such as verbs denoting movement or necessity, gradually losing their independent meaning and becoming standardized, obligatory grammatical markers. For example, the English future marker 'will' developed from the Old English verb 'willan' meaning 'to want' or 'to intend,' demonstrating a shift from expressing desire to merely

marking a future temporal prediction. This process transforms optional lexical choices into mandatory structural elements of the language.

Morphological expression of tense can be broadly categorized into synthetic and analytic forms. Synthetic tense relies on inflectional changes to the root verb (e.g., Latin or highly inflected languages), where a single morpheme carries tense, person, and number information. Analytic tense, characteristic of languages like English, relies on separate auxiliary verbs combined with non-finite forms of the main verb (e.g., "I have gone," "I am going"). This analytic structure allows for the complex integration of tense and aspect, resulting in compound tenses like the **Perfect Tense** (combining present, past, or future reference with completed aspect) and the **Progressive Tense** (combining temporal reference with ongoing aspect).

The robustness of a language's tense system is often measured by the regularity and productivity of its morphological markers. Irregular verbs, which resist standard inflectional patterns (e.g., 'go' becoming 'went' instead of 'goed'), represent historical remnants that complicate the acquisition process for learners. Despite these irregularities, the systematic nature of tense morphology across the majority of verbs ensures that speakers can consistently signal temporal shifts, maintaining a high degree of predictability in communication, which is vital for maintaining linguistic efficiency.

#### 4. Primary Tense Systems: Absolute and Relative

Tense systems are typically analyzed based on their reference point. The most common form is **Absolute Tense**, which fixes the time of the event directly relative to the moment of utterance (S - Speech Time). For example, the simple Past, Present, and Future tenses are absolute because they use the speaker's immediate temporal location as the pivot point for all other references. If an event happened yesterday, it is past relative to the time the word "yesterday" is spoken.

A more complex system is **Relative Tense**, or secondary tense, which fixes the time of the event relative to another point in time established in the discourse (R - Reference Time), rather than the moment of speaking. This system is essential for complex narrative structures. The Perfect tenses are the most recognizable examples of relative tense. For instance, in the sentence "She said she **had gone** to the store," the action 'had gone' is past relative to the reference time 'said,' which itself is past relative to the speech time. This complex layering of temporal reference allows for precise ordering of sequential and simultaneous events within a narrative framework.

The interaction between absolute and relative tense is critical for the concept of Sequence of Tenses (SOT), particularly in languages that enforce strict rules on how tenses must shift when embedded in clauses governed by a past-tense matrix clause. For example, reported speech often mandates a 'backshift' of tense. If the original utterance was present tense ("I am happy"), reporting it later requires a shift to past tense ("He said he **was** happy"). This backshifting

mechanism ensures that the temporal relationship between the reporting verb and the reported event remains logically sound, demonstrating the systematic complexity required for advanced grammatical competence.

Beyond the standard Absolute/Relative dichotomy, some languages utilize specialized tense forms, such as the **Remote Past Tense** (signaling an event far removed in time, often beyond living memory) or the **Immediate Future Tense**. These distinctions highlight how culture and communicative necessity influence the fine-grained grammatical divisions of time, showing that the linguistic mapping of temporal reality is not simply a direct reflection of physical clock time but a structured, codified interpretation of it.

## 5. The Adjectival Context: Affective and Somatic States

While the primary academic focus of "tense" is linguistic, the term is widely used adjectivally to describe psychological and physiological states. In this context, **tense** means being "in a state of nervous behavior" or "stretched taut or strained." This usage is central to affective science, stress management, and clinical psychology. A person described as **tense** is exhibiting elevated levels of physical or psychological arousal, often associated with anxiety, fear, or anticipatory stress. Physiologically, this state involves muscle contraction, heightened heart rate, and an increased readiness for action or avoidance, reflecting the body's fight-or-flight response.

The feeling of being **strained** or taut is the physical manifestation of this mental state. Chronic psychological stress often leads to somatic symptoms, where muscles--particularly in the neck, shoulders, and back--remain chronically contracted, leading to pain and physical fatigue. Techniques like Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) explicitly address this physical tension by teaching individuals to recognize and release the tautness, thereby alleviating both physical discomfort and the underlying psychological anxiety.

In this non-linguistic sense, the concept of **tension** is often contrasted with relaxation or composure. It represents a deviation from a homeostatic or balanced state. Whether describing a fraught social situation, a tightly wound spring, or an anxious individual, the term always implies a capacity for sudden, forceful release or potential breakage due to excessive internal pressure. This shared semantic root--the idea of being stretched beyond a comfortable limit--provides a subtle conceptual bridge between the linguistic and psychological definitions, where both involve a pressure to correlate or resolve a state (temporal correlation in grammar, or emotional resolution in affect).

## 6. Tense Mixing, Cohesion, and Educational Implications

The source content specifically highlights that a "poor education is often visible in the incorrect grammar of individuals, such as when mixing tenses in one statement." This points to the practical

and prescriptive issues surrounding grammatical competence. **Tense mixing**, or inconsistent temporal sequencing within a single discourse unit, is a major barrier to communication clarity. For example, shifting arbitrarily between past and present tense when narrating a sequential story ("He runs quickly, and then he fell down") disrupts the listener's ability to maintain a coherent timeline, forcing them to expend cognitive effort re-establishing the intended temporal frame.

While prescriptive grammar traditionally labels tense mixing as an error indicative of poor formal education, sociolinguistic perspectives recognize that certain forms of temporal variation might be dialectal or register-specific. However, in formal written and academic contexts, maintaining **cohesion** through consistent tense usage (especially within paragraphs or sections dedicated to a specific timeframe) is mandatory. Lack of skill in managing the sequence of tenses often impedes clear academic writing, where precise temporal indexing is required to cite research chronologically or describe methodologies accurately.

The challenge of tense consistency is particularly acute for second language learners (L2 learners), who must map the temporal system of their native language onto the often different and complex system of the target language. This requires not only memorizing morphological forms but also mastering pragmatic rules for tense shifting (e.g., when to use the historical present, or how to implement backshifting in reported speech). Educational programs therefore heavily emphasize exercises designed to enforce proper tense agreement and sequencing as fundamental steps toward achieving grammatical proficiency and communicative effectiveness in standard registers.

## 7. The Philosophical Dimensions of Time and Tense

Beyond its grammatical function, **tense** touches upon deep philosophical questions regarding the nature of time itself. The division of time into Past, Present, and Future--as codified by grammatical tense--reflects a human, subjective experience of time that is fundamentally different from the objective, tenseless flow of time often described in physics. Philosophers of language, such as J. M. E. McTaggart, have distinguished between the A-series (tensed time: past, present, future) and the B-series (tenseless time: earlier than, later than). Linguistic tense is the primary mechanism through which humans organize and communicate the A-series, emphasizing the unique status of the 'Now' (the moment of utterance) as a dynamic reference point.

The very existence of tense in language implies a conscious awareness of temporality and the ability to project oneself mentally into non-present realities. This cognitive capacity is considered crucial for planning, memory, and narrative construction. The ability to use the future tense is inextricably linked to the ability to plan future actions and to model potential outcomes, a complex cognitive skill that distinguishes human language use. Conversely, the past tense facilitates the construction of collective memory and historical accounts, allowing societies to maintain temporal continuity.

Ultimately, grammatical tense serves as a linguistic frame imposed upon the objective continuum of time. While time exists independently of language, the way we structure, sequence, and communicate events is almost entirely dependent upon the tense and aspect systems available in our native language. This relationship highlights the profound influence of grammar on human thought, demonstrating that **tense** is not merely an arbitrary set of verb endings, but a core architectural element of human temporal cognition.

### Further Reading

[Tense \(Linguistics\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Sequence of Tenses - Wikipedia](#)

[Psycholinguistics - Wikipedia](#)

[Progressive Muscle Relaxation \(PMR\) - Wikipedia](#)

[J. M. E. McTaggart - Wikipedia](#)

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