

UNIT 3: TENSE & FINITENESS

Verbs are the class of words in English (and in other European languages) which have the greatest number of different forms. That's because verbs carry more extra 'information' than other words, having to show finiteness/non-finiteness, tense (present/past), number (singular/plural), aspect (progressive/perfect), and voice (active/passive). But consider yourself lucky. Verbs in some other European languages have to carry even more information than in English!

By comparison, verbs in Chinese are far simpler. That's because Chinese has other ways of conveying these types of information – by using additional words (like *now* and *before*), rather than by attaching 'bits' of words (inflections like *-s* and *-ed*) to the main verb. The important thing is to know what these inflections do, and how to use them.

We have already seen how the form of a verb indicates number (by adding *-s* to the present tense form of a verb if the subject is singular). In Unit 3, we see that a verb has 6 forms, and 3 of these are used to indicate finiteness – i.e. the 'limiting' of a verb to the present or past time frame, and to a singular or plural subject (only in the present tense). This is one of the most important and basic points in English grammar: **The main verb of a sentence must be finite.**

We must add a note here on two points raised in the main part of Unit 3, concerning the forms of a verb.

1. Past tense vs. Past participle:

For some students, a lot of unnecessary confusion has arisen about **verb forms**. Most of it has to do with the fact that certain forms with different labels may actually be identical – in particular, (i) the **past tense** and **past participle** forms of most verbs, as in *talked* in (1-2) below:

1. They talked too much yesterday. (past tense *talked*)
2. They have talked too much already. (past participle *talked*)

And (ii) the **present tense (general)** and **infinitive** forms, as in *eat* in (3-4):

3. They eat a lot. (present tense *eat*)
4. They try to eat a lot. (infinitive *eat*)

First, let's take another look at the past tense and past participle forms. Consider the following sets of sentences:

5. They talk too much.
6. They talked too much yesterday.
7. They have talked too much already.
8. They eat too much.
9. They ate too much yesterday.
10. They have eaten too much already.

Now, just because the past participle form of *talk* is identical to the past tense form, some people mix the two together, and say that *talked* in sentences (6-7) are both the ‘past tense’ form. If you think about sentences (5-10) a little more and look at the larger picture, does this make sense? Does it really make sense to say that in ‘They have talked too much already’, the underlined verb is in the ‘past tense’ form, but in ‘They have eaten too much already’, it is in the ‘past participle’ form?

It would make more sense to say that both *talked* and *eaten*, as they are used in the above contexts (7 and 10), are in the past participle form. The fact that the past participle form of *talked* is identical to the past tense form *talked* is not a good enough reason to say that both are ‘past tense’, or at least ‘the same’ thing. By the same logic, we would not say that, just because the plural form of the noun *sheep* is also *sheep*, the two *sheep* in sentences (11-12) are the same thing, because they are clearly not:

11. The sheep is running away.
12. The sheep are running away.

2. The infinitive

Another confusion that needs to be cleared up is the present tense (general) form (e.g. *eat*) and the infinitive form (e.g. *(to) eat*), which are identical (if the *to* in the infinitive form is absent). Again, just because the two forms look the same, some people think that they are the same thing. Take the following cases:

13. They eat a lot.
14. They try to eat a lot.

It’s quite easy to find out whether the two *eat* are really the same. Suppose we change the time frame to the past, or change the subject to the singular form. What will happen?

- 13a. They ate a lot yesterday.
- 13b. He eats a lot.
- 14a. They tried to eat a lot yesterday.
- 14b. He tries to eat a lot.

The *eat* in (13) changes to the past tense form *ate* in (13a) and the present tense 3rd person singular form *eats* in (13b), but the *eat* in (14) remains unchanged in (14a) and (14b). Obviously, the two *eat* in (13) and (14) are different things – in (13) it is in the present tense form, and thus changes into past tense when the time is changed, and into the 3rd person singular form when the subject is singular, whereas the *eat* in (14) is an infinitive, and is therefore not affected by time or number or anything else.

All this may seem a lot to say about a small thing, but it is important to establish that a verb has *six* different forms, as given in (i-vi), even though some of them may *look* the same on the surface.

3. ‘Future Tense’

You may have noticed that we’ve not said anything about the so-called ‘future tense’, but only the present and past tenses. This is because we do not want to mix up **form** and

meaning. Tense is a matter of grammatical **form**: a verb takes on a different form – e.g. having a suffix like *-s* or *-ed* attached to it – when a different tense is used. In referring to future time, the verb does not undergo any change in form. You simply use an auxiliary like *will, shall, may*, etc. before the verb. So ‘future’ is not really a ‘tense’ in English. Future time is a matter of meaning, not form.

Another reason why we do not refer to *will rain* etc. as ‘future tense’ is that *will* does not specially mark future time. All the **modal auxiliaries** (*will, shall, must, may, can*) refer to future time. For example:

1. It will rain tomorrow.
2. It may rain tomorrow.
3. Anything can happen tomorrow.
4. The tenant must move out tomorrow.
5. We shall move out tomorrow.

All the above auxiliaries refer to future time, and differ among themselves only with respect to the degree of **likelihood** or force. Therefore, it is not very logical to label *will* alone as marking the ‘future tense’.

The important thing is to know how to use the above auxiliaries, plus other constructions like *be going to* (‘He is going to move out tomorrow’), and the present tense (‘The offer ends tomorrow’), to refer to future time.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

QUESTION 1:

One form only – 吃

QUESTION 2:

Eat, eats, eating, ate, eaten

QUESTION 3:

	<i>wash</i>	<i>break</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>hear</i>
Present tense (general)	<i>wash</i>	<i>break</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>hear</i>
Present tense (3 rd per sing)	<i>washes</i>	<i>breaks</i>	<i>runs</i>	<i>hears</i>
Past tense	<i>washed</i>	<i>broke</i>	<i>ran</i>	<i>heard</i>
Present participle	<i>washing</i>	<i>breaking</i>	<i>running</i>	<i>hearing</i>
Past participle	<i>washed</i>	<i>broken</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>heard</i>
Infinitive	(to) <i>wash</i>	<i>break</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>hear</i>

Non-finite forms: Just an additional note. Being non-finite, the forms *(to) eat, eating* and *eaten* are not ‘limited’ to any time frame or subject. Thus, they can refer to both past and present and both singular and plural, as shown in the following examples, where the non-finite forms don’t change even when the finite forms change their tenses:

1. I begged him to eat.

2. I'm begging you to eat.
3. I caught them eating my chocolates.
4. Don't let me catch you eating my chocolates.
5. He found the carcass eaten by crocodiles.
6. You will find all the food eaten by the kids.

QUESTION 4:

1. He lived in Hong Kong when he was a child. Now he lives in Singapore.
2. In 1950, a domestic maid earned about \$50 a month; now she earns \$3,600.
(For (1) and (2) *lived*, *earned* and *was* are limited to past time and *was* to a singular subject, and *lives* and *earns* are limited to present time and a singular subject.)
3. When he arrived home last night, he found the door broken, so he called the police.
(all the above past tense verbs are limited to past time.)
4. Whenever he has time, he swims and jogs to stay in shape.
(all the above present tense verbs are limited to present time and a singular subject.)
5. Though the last plane has left, many people are still waiting for a flight out.
(*has* is limited to present time and a singular subject, and *are* to present time and a plural subject.)
6. He did not report for work yesterday as he was not feeling well.
(- *did* and *was* are limited to past time, and *was* to a singular subject.)

QUESTION 5:

Notice that only **finite** forms of verbs can fill these blanks, as they are the main verb of the sentence.

1. He saw the new James Bond movie last week.
2. She writes/wrote letters to her parents very often.
3. He broke the door with his hands.
4. Tom heard the news on the radio.
5. He eats/ate nothing but boiled vegetables.
6. He lives/lived in Repulse Bay, but his wife lives/lived in Ma On Shan.

QUESTION 6:

1. Half of the respondents [being] **were/are** neutral with that question.
2. Millions of years ago, some of the lands [become] **became** seas, and some [becomes] **became** rivers.
3. The vegetation was covered by a layer of mud which [consist] **consisted** of sand and small rocks.
4. I went to the park and [watch] **watched** the kids play football.

QUESTION 7:

The examples clearly show that only the first verb in a verb group can be marked for tense.

QUESTION 8:

1. Would Kevin [stopped] **stop** seeing his friends?
(*would stop* is a verb group, and only the first verb *would* can have tense.)
2. She can't [tolerated] **tolerate** such an unreliable relationship.
(*can't tolerate* is a verb group, and only the first verb can have tense.)
3. More than 50% did not [agreed] **agree** with that.
(*did (not) agree* is a verb group, and only the first verb can have tense.)

4. She can't be bothered with all these details.
(This is correct. *Bothered* is the past participle form used to show **passive voice**, not tense.)
5. He did not wash the dishes last night. - Correct
6. He **is** always playing in the field.
(*playing* alone is non-finite, so we need the finite form *is playing*.)
7. The window **was** broken by someone yesterday.
(*broken* alone is non-finite, so we need the finite form *was broken*)
8. When I phoned him last night, he **was** having a shower.
(*having* alone is non-finite, and requires the finite form *was having*.)

QUESTION 9:

In (1-5), the verb is the second verb in a verb group (though separated from the first verb), and so should be in the non-finite form. In (8), *to buy* has an infinitive marker *to*.

1. Though I asked him many times, he would not **tell** me the answer.
2. When the bill came, he suddenly realised that he did not **have** enough money.
3. Do you think he should **apologise** for what he said?
4. How could he possibly **know** what we were planning?
5. I did not deliberately **step** on your toes.
6. Whenever it rains, the temperature always **drops**.
7. When the enemy advanced, they **retreated**, and when the enemy retreated, they **advanced**.
8. His wife told him to **buy** a water-melon, but he **bought** a durian instead.
9. Though he is very rich, he never **shows** it.
10. Though he was poor, he **pretended** to be rich.

QUESTION 10:

(1-4) show that the present tense ('simple present') is used for an 'activity' verb (*play, deliver, etc.*) which stands for a repeated activity in the present time frame. Notice that it does not have to be a frequent or regular activity (as some people think), as shown in (2) and (4). The point is that it is not a single event but a repeated event, whether many times or just a few times. The time frame is the general present, not the present moment (the moment of speaking).

(5-8) show that the present tense is used for 'state' verbs (like *live, know*), to indicate a stable state that extends over the present time frame. It may of course change in the future, but it is true at present and is assumed to go on for an indefinite period.

QUESTION 11:

The verbs in these examples refer to timeless facts. So they are true in the past, present and future.

QUESTION 12:

These activities are all in the future (usually near, but not necessarily) – the important thing being that they are all known in advance to happen at a chosen time, usually because it is planned that way.

QUESTION 13:

These events all happen at the precise moment of speaking. In fact, the very act of speaking makes it happen! Notice that they all involve the first person pronoun (*I*, or *we* in other cases), for obvious reasons.

QUESTION 14:

In (1, 4, 7), where the present tense is used, the condition (e.g. 'if I hear anything') is a perfectly possible one.

In (2, 5, 9), in the past tense, the condition (e.g. 'if I had a million dollars') is either impossible, or extremely unlikely. Using the past tense makes the condition more 'distant' from present reality, but it has nothing to do with past time.

In (3, 6, 8), in the past perfect, the condition is something that did not actually happen, but it was possible and could have happened by choice or by chance.

QUESTION 15:

1. Luckily it stopped raining two days ago. If the rain does not stop/did not stop/had not stopped, the town will be flooded/would be flooded/would have been flooded.

2. I'm going to the bookstore this afternoon. If I find/found/had found the book, I will get/would get/would have got it for you.

3. If I am/were/had been your father, I will spank/would spank/would have spanked you, but I'm only your teacher.

4. The police are out looking for the terrorist. If they find him, they will shoot him on sight.

5. The police surrounded the terrorists' hideout but failed to catch anyone. If they had caught some of the terrorists, the police chief would have been very proud of them.

6. Unfortunately, he doesn't exercise or play any sports. If he did, he would not be as fat as he is.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES:

Exercise 1:

The finite verbs are marked [F] and the non-finite verbs [NF]:

There is [F] something about lying [NF] on your back in a hospital bed with half a dozen needles poking [NF] out of your skin that makes [F] you really ponder [NF] your health, and how to maintain [NF] it.

The sound of the old man in the next bed snoring [NF] loudly is [F] testament to just how relaxing acupuncture really can be [F]. But being [NF] the youngest patient in the clinic by at least two generations did make [F] me wonder [NF] whether acupuncture and its associated traditional therapies are [F] strictly for the old.

Exercise 2:

Text 1:

A passenger **told** yesterday of frightening scenes aboard the holiday cruise ship SuperStar Leo when it **ran** into severe tropical storm Hagupit on Wednesday, forcing it to **change** course and **return** to Hong Kong a day late.

Passengers **were** slammed against walls, tables **overturned** and luggage **fell** from overhead lockers, the passenger said.

The vessel's operator, Star Cruises, **confirmed** the day-long delay **was** caused by the closure of Hong Kong harbour, which **forced** Leo to **seek** shelter near Dangan Island, about 30km south of Tsing Yi in mainland waters. However, the company **denied** anyone **had** been injured.

The passenger said weather conditions **deteriorated** quickly after 1pm on Wednesday and the ship **was** rocked heavily until after 5pm. Leo **was** scheduled to return to Ocean Terminal at 4pm on Wednesday but eventually **returned** to Hong Kong at 10am on Thursday.

Text 2:

Father Franco Mella **will be putting** even more weight behind the right-of-abode seekers after his return from a four-month visit home to Italy - where he **piled** on 10kg.

The 53-year-old, who **will begin** a hunger strike next Monday to promote the right-of-abode cause, **said** the home-made pasta, pizza and salami served up by his 79-year-old mother **were** behind his expanded waistline.

The priest, who now **weighs** about 95kg, **pointed** out that he **lost** about 10kg when he **staged** a 10-day hunger strike with the abode seekers last April before returning to his home in Italy.

"When my mother first **saw** me, she **asked** me never to fast again. But when she later **saw** me becoming fatter and fatter, she **said**: 'You better go back to Hong Kong'," Father Mella said.