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English Tense Expressing Verb Phrases in the Process of Teaching Polish Students

The system of verbs is one of the most complicated aspects of the structure of English. In contrast with Greek or Sanscrit which are endowed with an enormous number of inflexions, that is morphological structures, English is a language of a large repertory of verbal forms created on the syntactic level. The whole complex system of the English verb is based on only five inflexional morphemes marking the following verbal categories: the infinitive with the ending $\{-\emptyset\}$, the third person singular of the present tense indicative with the ending $\{-s\}$, the past tense with the ending $\{-ed_1\}$, the past participle with the ending $\{-ed_2\}$, and the present participle with the ending $\{-ing\}$. The complexity of the system is due to the fact that the position of the predicate in an English sentence may be occupied not only by a single verb but by a group of verbs with the main verb and one or more preceding function verbs¹.

The Polish student, who in his native tongue encounters only one group of verbs expressing a tense i.e. the Polish Future Imperfect Tense, is likely to have numerous difficulties in the process of learning English compound forms. The present article will be concerned with particular English groups of verbs expressing tenses, from the point of view of the difficulties which they may offer for the Polish student.

Structures consisting of a verb carrying lexical meaning and one or more function words determining structural meaning and preceding the main verb constitute groups of verbs in English. The main verb preceded by one or more function words may be also referred to as a verb phrase. The words that precede the main verb in a verb phrase will be referred to as function verbs².

¹ Harold Whitehall *Structural Essentials of English*. Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York 1954, p. 78.

² Cf. the terminology in W. Nelson Francis *The Structure of American English*. The Ronald Press Company, New York 1956, p. 257.

One problem needs to be made clear before we carry on our discussion. Some function verbs may appear for purely structural reasons but some others may also add to the lexical meaning of the whole utterance. In utterances like 'I was drinking', 'I had been drinking' the function verbs merely express the time relations between the speaker, his utterance and the action, whereas in an utterance like 'I might go', the function verb colours the expression in a particular way by implying the lack of decision on the part of the speaker just as 'must' in 'I must go' expresses the obligation. It will be convenient for us to adopt a traditional division of function verbs into modal verbs and auxiliary verbs and concentrate on the latter as on those which do not carry any lexical meaning in a particular verb phrase and whose sole function is to take part in forming analytical forms of the English verbs³.

It is thus possible to state that there are five auxiliary verbs in the English language: **BE** (am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been); **HAVE** (have, has, had, having); **DO** (do, does, did); **WILL** (will, would); **SHALL** (shall, should).

WILL and **SHALL** are also listed among modal verbs.

Auxiliary verbs followed by the main verb constitute verb phrases according to the following rules:

1. Auxiliary verbs always precede the main verb.
2. **BE** regardless of its shape is always placed in the closest proximity of the main verb.
3. **HAVE** regardless of its shape always precedes the main verb or **BE** in their base +{—ed₂} shape that is in the form of past participle which henceforth we shall refer to by means of the symbols **Ved₂** and **BEed₂** respectively⁴.
4. **BE** always precedes the main verb in its base +{—ing}⁵ shape that is in the form of present participle which we shall be indicating by means of the symbol **Ving**.
5. **SHALL** and **WILL** always precede all the other verbs and are immediately followed by an auxiliary or the main verb in its base shape which we shall be indicating by means of the symbol **V**.
6. **DO** appears with no other auxiliary verbs and is always followed by the main verb in its base shape.

² Cf. M. Ganshina, V. Vasilevskaya *English Grammar*. Foreign Language Publishing House Moscow, 1958, p. 187.

⁴ Index₂ with the -ed inflexion is used to distinguish it from the Past Tense inflexion symbolized as {-ed₁}. Cf. Francis, op. cit., pp. 254—255. Also Archibald Hill *Introduction to Linguistic Structures*. Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York 1958, p. 154.

⁵ or base +{-ed₂} in the so called Passive Voice which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

7. The verb situated in the closest proximity of the Subject carries the index of time and occasionally the index of person⁶.

The only auxiliary verb in the system of Modern Polish is employed in forming the Future Imperfect Tense and it is **BYĆ** (będę, będziesz, będzie, będziemy, będziecie, będą). In contrast with the English auxiliaries **BYĆ** does not necessarily precede the main verb. It may be placed immediately after the main verb or it may be separated from it by other words e.g.

Przypuszczam, że we wtorek będę pisać listy.

Listy pisać będę we wtorek.

Listy będę z całą pewnością pisać we wtorek.

In the above examples the main verb appears in its infinitive shape. It may also appear as Active Past Participle in which case the auxiliary verb **BYĆ** is always placed before the main verb⁷.

Generally speaking the distribution of the Polish auxiliary is much freer than the more rigorous distribution of the English auxiliaries. The Polish student learning English will therefore have a tendency to misplace the English auxiliaries by putting them after the main verb or by separating them from the main verb by other sentence elements. He will also tend to select a wrong shape of the main verb after a particular auxiliary, as for example the present participle after **HAVE** or the base form after **BE**. The latter mistake may be particularly frequent because of the similar Polish form 'będę chodzić'.

We shall now discuss in detail particular verb phrases expressing tenses in English. We may classify all such verb phrases into three groups according to the shape in which the main verb appears in them:

1. Verb phrases in which the main verb appears as **Ving**.
2. Verb phrases in which the main verb appears as **Ved₂**.
3. Verb phrases in which the main verb appears as **V**.

In the first case the main verb will always be preceded by **BE**, in the second case by **HAVE** and in the third case by **SHALL**, **WILL** or **DO**. If a verb phrase consists of more than two auxiliaries each of them determines the shape of the following verb according to the rules formulated above. Between the Subject and the main verb the auxiliaries appear in the following order: **SHALL/WILL**, **HAVE**, **BE**.

Having divided English verb phrases according to the shape of the

⁶ We are concerned only with forms in affirmative sentences. We may, however, add that in interrogative sentences the verb nearest to the Subject is inverted and in negative sentences it is followed by the negative element like *not*, *never* etc.

⁷ Stanisław Szober *Gramatyka języka polskiego*. Warszawa 1963, PWN, p. 270.

main verb we shall label them as **Ving** verb phrases, **Ved₂** verb phrases, and **V** verb phrases respectively.

Ving verb phrases distinguish themselves by the presence of the main verb as the present participle preceded with the auxiliary **BE**. The shape of **BE** is determined by whether it is preceded by another auxiliary or not. If **BE** is the only auxiliary in a verb phrase the verb phrase may be described by the following formula:

$$(1) \mathbf{S+BE}_{t, per}+\mathbf{Ving},$$

where **S** stands for the Subject, **t** for index of time, **per** for index of person. The formula covers all English continuous form in the present and in the past (The Present Continuous Tense, The Past Continuous Tense) in all the persons, singular and plural. E.g. I am asking; Mary was asking.

Whenever **BE** is preceded by **SHALL** or **WILL** the formula takes the following shape:

$$(2) \mathbf{S+SHALL/WILL}_{t}+\mathbf{BE+Ving}.$$

Formula (2) covers the English continuous forms of the future and the future in the past (The Future Continuous Tense, The Future-in-the-Past Continuous Tense) in all the persons, singular and plural. E.g. I shall be asking; Mary would be asking.

If **BE** is preceded with **HAVE** then the former takes the shape of **BEed₂** and the formula runs as follows:

$$(3) \mathbf{S+HAVE}_{t, per}+\mathbf{BEed}_{2}+\mathbf{Ving}.$$

Formula (3) covers English continuous forms in the Past Perfect Tense and the Present Perfect Tense in all the persons, singular and plural. E.g. I have been asking; Mary had been asking.

When the verb phrase contains **BE** preceded with **HAVE** which in turn follows **SHALL** or **WILL**, **BE** like in formula (3) assumes the shape **BEed₂** whereas **HAVE** remains in its base form. The formula, then, runs as follows:

$$(4) \mathbf{S+SHALL/WILL}_{t}+\mathbf{HAVE+BEed}_{2}+\mathbf{Ving}.$$

Formula (4) covers English continuous forms in the Future Perfect Tense and the Future-in-the-Past Tense. E.g. I shall have been asking; Mary would have been asking.

The formulas containing the largest number of auxiliary verbs will present the greatest difficulties for the Polish student. And thus the verb phrases formed according to formula (4) will be more difficult for the Polish student to learn than those formed according to formula (1).

The verb phrases formed according to formula (1) lend themselves to direct translation into Polish and result in 'grammatical loan translations', which may help the Polish student to a better understanding of their structure. The corresponding Polish formula will take the following shape:

$$(1 \text{ Pol}) (S) + \text{BYĆ}_{t, \text{per}, g} + \text{V}_{\text{ac } g_s}$$

where the paratheses embrace the facultative element and g is the index of gender. The following are some of the Polish 'sentences' formed according to this formula: 'jestem tańczący', 'oni są opowiadający', 'byłam tańcząca', 'byli zarabiający' etc.⁸

Formula (1 Pol) is not a language habit with the Polish student as it is not a part of the system of the Polish language. Therefore even if it does help in understanding the English structure it is useless as far as faultless use of English formula (1) is concerned. The Polish student who is not used to auxiliary verbs in his native language concentrates his attention on the main verb carrying the lexical and hence, for the speaker, the most important meaning. He naturally enough has a tendency to ignore the words carrying only the structural meaning which consequently produces the tendency to ignore auxiliaries in verb phrases.

The most important mistake made by the Polish learner in the form of verb phrases belonging to formulas (2), (3) and (4) will be omission of one of the auxiliaries. In formula (2) the auxiliary the Polish student is most likely to omit will be **BE** interpreted as a redundant addition to **SHALL** or **WILL** expressing the idea of future and to the main verb carrying the lexical meaning. In formula (3) the probability of omitting one of the auxiliaries is smaller than in formula (2). Instead, the most important mistake may manifest itself in avoiding the sentences belonging to this formula and substituting for them sentences which should be used in other situations and belonging to other formulas. In formula (4) **BE** will again be the most frequently omitted auxiliary and again a tendency to ignore verb phrases of this formula may be quite manifest.

V verb phrases distinguish themselves by the presence of the main verb in its base shape, that is as the infinitive without to⁹.

⁸ The possibility of forming such 'grammatical loan translations' will not protect the Polish student from making at least one type of mistake even in verb phrases belonging to formula (1). As we compare English formula (1) with Polish formula (1 Pol) we notice that the use of the Subject is optional in Polish and that this will result in a tendency to skip the subject also in English constructions particularly those in which a personal pronoun functions as the Subject. The above mistake is not confined to formula (1) but is universal for all finite forms in English. The problem requires a special treatment.

⁹ Francis, op. cit., p. 257.

The main verb in those phrases is preceded with **SHALL/WILL** or **DO**. The **V** verb phrases can be generalized in the following formula:

$$(5) \text{ S+SHALL/WILL+V.}$$

Formula (5) covers the Future Indefinite Tense and the Future-in-the-Past Tense in all the persons, singular and plural. E.g. I shall ask; Mary would ask.

The Polish learner will not encounter any serious difficulties learning this formula being equipped with similar verb phrases in his native tongue which may be generalized as:

$$(5 \text{ Pol}) \quad (\text{S})+\text{BY}\acute{\text{C}}_{\text{ft, per}}+\text{V}\acute{\text{C}}$$

where **ft** stands for the index of the Future Tense and **ć** is a symbol of the inflexional suffix for Polish infinitives.

If we compare Polish formula (5 Pol) with English formula (5) we shall notice that the number of elements on the Polish side exceeds the number of elements on the English side by the indices of the future tense and of the person with **BYĆ** and the ending with **VĆ**, which leads us to a conclusion that by transferring Polish habits to the English system the Polish learner is not likely to make any mistakes excluding the always present possibility of omitting the personal pronoun.

One exception is however very notable and must be discussed rather thoroughly. The use of 'to be' in the future tense may cause some trouble for the Polish student. He will have a tendency to omit the verb in question which in this particular phrase appears as the main verb. Transferring the language habit from his native tongue the Polish student recognizes 'to be' as a lexical counterpart of Polish **BYĆ** which at the same time has its functional counterpart in English **SHALL/WILL**. Interpreting **SHALL/WILL** as not only the structural but also the lexical counterparts of Polish **BYĆ** whose future tense is formed without any auxiliary, the Polish student will have a tendency to omit the main verb 'to be' having developed the habit of using **SHALL/WILL** for the Future tense. The mechanism of this typically Polish mistake will become clear when we compare the corresponding formulas:

$$(5a) \text{ S+SHALL/WILL}_t+\text{BE}$$

$$(5 \text{ Pol a}) (\text{S})+\text{BY}\acute{\text{C}}_{\text{ft, per}}$$

The number of elements in (5a) is exactly the same as in (5). In the Polish formulas, however, (5 Pol a) contains a smaller number of elements than (5 Pol). By transferring the habit of his native tongue to the English system the Polish student deprives the English formula of one

of its elements by omitting **BE** which has no functional counterpart in the Polish formula.

Ved₂ verb phrases distinguish themselves by the presence of the main verb as the past participle preceded by the auxiliary **HAVE**. If there is no other auxiliary in the verb phrase **HAVE** appears in the finite form and the corresponding verb phrases are formed according to the following formula:

$$(7)^{10} \text{ S+HAVE}_{\text{ft, per}}+\text{Ved}_2 .$$

Formula (7) covers the Past Perfect Tense and the Present Perfect Tense in all the persons, singular and plural. E.g. I have asked; Mary had asked.

If **HAVE** is preceded by **SHALL/WILL** the formula assumes the following shape:

$$(8) \text{ S+SHALL/WILL}_t+\text{HAVE}+\text{Ved}_2.$$

Formula (8) covers the Future Perfect Tense and the Future-in-the-Past Tense in all the persons, singular and plural¹¹. E.g. I shall have asked; Mary would have asked.

The Ved₂ verb phrases have no counterparts in Modern Standard Polish, which would facilitate the process of learning these forms in English¹². In addition to omitting the personal pronoun the Polish student will have a tendency to omit one or more auxiliaries and he will find formula (8) with a larger number of auxiliaries more difficult than formula (7).

¹⁰ We omit formulas (6) and (6a):

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{S+DO}_{t, \text{ per}}+\text{V} \\ & \text{S+DO}_{t, \text{ per}}+\text{not}+\text{V} \end{aligned}$$

as results of transformations of sentences in which the main verb is not a part of a verb phrase.

¹¹ We omit the verb phrases in which **SHALL/WILL** appear as modal verbs like e.g. in 'I think he should go there' or 'He would go there every day'.

¹² Weinreich quotes the Silesian Polish expression „Mam to sprzedane” stressing its formal similarity with German „Ich habe es verkauft”. Uriel Weinreich *Languages in Contact*, Publications of the Linguistic Circle of New York., 1953, pp. 39—42. The similarity may be purely accidental as the expression is often met in other dialects of Polish. It is, however, important to note that neither Polish „Mam to sprzedane” nor German “Ich habe es verkauft” have anything to do with the English causative of the type “I have it sold” or the Present Perfect “I have sold it”, and as such must be disregarded as a possible help in learning English formula (7). For the difference between “I have it sold” and “I have sold it” see Charles C. Fries “Have as a Function Word” in *Selected Articles from Language Learning*, Research Club, Ann Arbor 1953, p. 89.

In order that we may examine the functional meaning of particular elements in the distinguished formulas we shall arrange them in the following table:

(1)	S	BE _{t, per}		Ving
(2)	S	SHALL/WILL _t	BE	Ving
(3)	S	HAVE _{t, per}	BEed ₂	Ving
(4)	S	SHALL/WILL _t	HAVE BEed ₂	Ving
(5)	S	SHALL/WILL _t		V
(6)	S	DO _{t, per}		V
(7)	S	HAVE _{t, per}		Ved ₂
(8)	S	SHALL/WILL _t		Ved ₂

The first part always contains one of the seven English personal pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, they), a noun, or any other nominal structure. Since the main function of this part is to indicate the subject of what is expressed in the following parts we may call this part the *subject part*.

The second part contains one of the auxiliary verbs with the index of time, and in case of **DO**, **BE** and **HAVE** occasionally of person. We consider the index of time as primary to that of the person as the presence of the latter is determined by the use of the non-past tense. The main opposition as far as tense is concerned is the opposition of the Past Tense : the Non-Past Tense¹³. The following are the corresponding forms of the English auxiliaries:

The Non-Past Tense	The Past Tense
am	was
are	were
is	was
have	had
has	had
will/shall	would/should
do	did
does	did

With the exception of **BE** the index of person appears with all the auxiliaries in the Non-Past Tense and is thus determined by the selection of tense which in this way performs the most important role in the part under discussion. As the choice of one of the above forms immediately places the verb phrase in one of the two fundamental spheres of time in English and as it is the most important function of this part we may label it as the *tense part*. We must additionally note that

¹³ Cf. e.g. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 153. Also Edward Calver *The Uses of the Present Tense Forms in English*, Lg 22, 4, 317—25.

SHALL/WILL indicate the Non-Past Tense in a more specific way than do other auxiliaries by making an extra distinction between the present tense and the future tense, creating in this way another opposition within the Non-Past Tense:

The Present Tense	The Future Tense
am, are, is;	shall/will
have, has;	
do, does;	

Unlike the tense part, which places the action expressed in the verb phrase in one of the three spheres of time corresponding with the three fundamental spheres of time in Polish, the third part gives further specification of the action either with relation to the speaker or to the three spheres of time. The main verb performs the most important function in this part. As has already been said it may appear in one of the three possible shapes (V, Ving, Ved₂). The V shape preceded by **SHALL/WILL** or **DO** always carries only the lexical meaning. The Ving form preceded by the auxiliary **BE** places the action in a period of time in the past, present or future. The Ved₂ shape with the preceding auxiliary **HAVE** places the action in relation to the present, past, or future. Since the main verb is the most important element in this part as it carries the lexical meaning of the verb phrase we may call this part the main verb part.

The Polish student is likely to encounter numerous difficulties in the proper use of the discussed forms. The fact that the number of tense forms in English exceeds the number of such forms in Polish will result in the tendency to extend the use of several "favourite" forms to all situations. If we consider meaning as associating various language structures (morphemes and their combinations) with objects and situations, or combinations of objects and situations in the outside world, we shall understand better why a Pole, who has fewer tense forms in his native language, may have enormous difficulties in distinguishing between all the types of situational subtleties and corresponding English verb forms. All the mistakes in this respect can be generally described in terms of using forms which a native speaker of English is not likely to associate with particular situations with a marked tendency to ignore certain forms entirely.

It is impossible, in a short article, to describe the enormous number of situations which a native speaker of English associates with corresponding tense forms¹⁴. A discussion of this sort would go far beyond the

¹⁴ Ganshina distinguishes eight fundamental situations for the Present Perfect Tense alone. Cf. Ganshina, Vasilevskaya, op. cit., pp. 128—134.

limits of our paper whose main purpose was to point out certain typical mistakes on the basis of comparing English formulas with corresponding Polish formulas. Detailed descriptions of the use of these forms can be found in such works as J. Milington Ward *The Use of Tenses in English*, Longmans, London 1961; R. A. Close *English as a Foreign Language*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London 1962, p. 101—102; R. W. Zandvoort *A Handbook of English Grammar*, Longmans, London 1962 pp. 61—62, as well as in the quoted book by Ganshina.