

MORPHOLOGICAL AND SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PAST TENSES IN ENGLISH

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The past tenses in English form a cornerstone of its grammatical system, masterfully conveying actions, states, or events anchored in the past. These tenses, defined by distinct morphological structures and rich semantic roles, enable speakers to navigate temporal relationships with clarity and nuance. This thesis explores the Simple Past, Past Continuous, Past Perfect, and Past Perfect Continuous, highlighting their forms, meanings, and pragmatic versatility in communication.

1. Morphological Characteristics

English past tenses are built through inflectional suffixes, auxiliary verbs, and participle forms, reflecting both simplicity and historical complexity. Simple Past: Regular verbs append -ed (e.g., walk → walked), while irregular verbs adopt unique forms (e.g., drink → drank). Structure: Subject + V2. Example: She painted the house. Past Continuous: Combines was/were + present participle (-ing). Structure: Subject + was/were + V-ing. Example: They were laughing loudly. Past Perfect: Uses had + past participle (V3, e.g., seen, worked). Structure: Subject + had + V3. Example: He had arrived early. Past Perfect Continuous: Merges had been + -ing. Structure: Subject + had been + V-ing. Example: She had been training for months. These forms showcase English's blend of systematic regularity and irregular evolution, rooted in its Germanic and Latinate influences.

2. Semantic Characteristics

Each past tense carries distinct semantic weight, shaping how past events are conveyed. Simple Past: Expresses completed actions tied to a specific time (e.g., We traveled to Paris in 2020). It aligns with time markers like yesterday or last year. Past Continuous: Depicts ongoing actions, often as narrative background or for interruptions (e.g., She was cooking when the phone rang). It emphasizes duration or simultaneity. Past Perfect: Indicates actions completed before another past event (e.g., They had finished before the deadline). It clarifies temporal sequence. Past Perfect Continuous: Highlights prolonged actions up to a past point, often with lasting effects (e.g., He had been working all day). It underscores sustained effort and process.

3. Pragmatic and Contextual Nuances

Beyond morphology and semantics, past tenses adapt to context, serving pragmatic functions. The Simple Past suits straightforward narratives or factual

reporting (e.g., historical accounts). The Past Continuous adds dynamism, setting scenes or emphasizing parallel actions (e.g., While she was reading, he was writing). The Past Perfect ensures narrative clarity in complex timelines, vital in storytelling or formal writing. The Past Perfect Continuous conveys effort or cause, often implying consequences (e.g., She was tired because she had been running). These tenses also interact with adverbs, modals, and discourse markers, enhancing their flexibility in spoken and written English.

Conclusion

English past tenses are a harmonious blend of morphological precision and semantic richness. From the direct simplicity of the Simple Past to the layered depth of the Past Perfect Continuous, each tense offers unique tools for expressing time, sequence, and aspect. Their interplay with context and pragmatics empowers speakers to craft vivid narratives, clarify sequences, and evoke the subtleties of human experience, making them indispensable to the expressive power of English.

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