The Inflectional Morphology of English

12th lecture

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Inflection

Inflection is a morphological change by means of which a word adapts to a grammatical function without changing its lexical meaning. Examples:

- **He works to school**
- **Please, close the windows.**
- **I cleaned my father's car.**
- **This is harder than my expectation.**
- **Could could choose the biggest one?**

Inflection

So, we create different forms of nouns according to number (**wombat, wombats**); we mark the possessive form of a noun with -'s or -s' (**the wombat's eyes**).

We have different forms of verbs for present and past and for present and past participles (**sing, sang,** is **singing,** has **sung**), and we use a suffix -s to mark the third person singular of a verb (**she sings**).

The eight types of English inflection

I Inflectional suffixes used with nouns:

1. possessive group:

father's, boy's (singular), boys' (plural), children's

2. Plural group:

bags, wishes, ladies

The eight types of inflection

II Inflectional suffixes used with verbs:

3. 3rd person singular group: plays, gets, wants, watches

4. The past tense – **ed1** group: loved, wanted, studied

5. The past participle – **ed2** group: had loved, had wanted

6. The present participle – **ing** group: coming, shooting

The eight types of inflection

III Inflectional suffixes used with adjectives and adverbs

7. Comparative form – **er** group:

nicer, bigger, easier, harder

8. Superlative form – **est** group:

nicest, biggest, easies, hardest

Grammatical Categories of Verbs

1. Person

2. Tense and Aspect

3. Voice

The types of verbal inflection

1. **Person:** that is, verbs exhibit different endings depending on whether the subject of the sentence is the speaker (first person), the hearer (second person), or someone else (third person):

- **Singular**: 1st person (I play), 2nd person (you play), 3rd person (**he plays**)

- **Plural**: 1st person (we play), 2nd person (you play), 3rd person (they play)

The types of inflection

2. Tense and aspect :

Tense refers to the point of time of an event in relation to another point – generally the point at which the speaker is speaking. In present tense the point in time of speaking and of the event spoken about are the same. In past tense the time of the event is before the time of speaking. And in future tense the event time is after the time of speaking. This can be represented schematically below where S stands for the time of speaking and E for the time of the event:

- **S = E**
- **Past E before S**
- **Future S before E**

Tenses in English

In English, we mark the past tense using the inflectional suffix -ed on verbs (walked, yawned), but there is no inflectional suffix for future tense. Instead, we use a separate auxiliary verb will to form the future tense (will walk, will scream).

- Present 'I love'
- Past 'I loved'
- Future 'I will love'

The Finite element: Agreement and Tense

- The first occurring verb in a finite clause, is called the Finite verb.

- The Finite verb has to agree in number with the Subject:
  I am eating!
  We are eating!

- The Finite verb also expresses the TENSE of the clause :
  Present*: I am eating.*
  Past*: I was eating!*

Aspect

Aspect is another inflectional category that may be marked on verbs.

One of the most frequently expressed aspectual distinctions that can be found in the languages of the world is the distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect. With perfective aspect, an event is viewed as completed; we look at the event from the outside, and its internal structure is not relevant. With imperfective aspect, on the other hand, the event is viewed as on-going; we look at the event from the inside, as it were.

Aspect

In English, when we say (**I ate the apple**.), we not only place the action in the past tense, but also look at it as a completed whole.

But if we say (**I was eating the apple**.), although the action is still in the past, we focus on the event as it is progressing.

Perfect Aspect: have + -en

- **Expressed via an auxiliary 'have' with the following verb inflected with the past participle**

    I had spilt my coffee

- **Can combine with modal, perfect and passive:**

    I may have spilt my coffee.

    I have eaten my lunch.

    I have been bitten by a shark!

- Present-perfect:

    - **Meaning 1**: The consequence of the action still affect the time of speaking e.g. *I have spilt my coffee* (the coffee is still spilt).

    - **Meaning 2**: the period of the event is still open e.g., *We have sold 20,000 units this year.*

Progressive Aspect: be+ -ing

- **Expressed via an auxiliary 'be' with the following verb inflected with the present participle (-ing)**

    I am studying English.

- **Can combine with modal, progressive :**

    I may be studying English next year.

    I have been studying English for 2 years now.

- **Present-progressive**:

    - **Meaning 1**: the action described by the main verb is still ongoing (*I am eating*)

    - **Meaning 2**: alternative to future tense, when used with a temporal adjunct (*I am seeing Mary tomorrow*)

- **Past-progressive**: the action described by the main verb was ongoing at some past point of time. (*I was eating when …*)

3. Voice

Voice is a category of inflection that allows different noun phrases to be focused in sentences. In the active voice in a sentence with a subject and an object, the subject gets the focus in the sentence:

The cat chased the mouse.

But in the passive voice, the object of the sentence gets the focus in the sentence:

The mouse was chased (by the cat).

Passive Voice: be + the past participle

- **Expressed via an auxiliary 'be' with the following verb inflected with the past participle:**

    I was accepted into the course!

- **Can combine with modal, perfect and progressive:**

    I may be accepted into the course next year.

    I have been accepted into the course.

    I am being examined tomorrow.

Passive Voice Tenses

TENSES	ACTIVE VOICE	PASSIVE VOICE
Present Simple	He delivers the letters.	The letters are delivered.
Past Simple	He delivered the letters.	The letters were delivered.
Future Simple	He will deliver the letters.	The letters will be delivered.
Present Continuous	He is delivering the letters.	The letters are being delivered.
Past Continuous	He was delivering the letters.	The letters were being delivered.
Going to	He is going to deliver the letters.	The letters are going to be delivered.
Present Perfect	He has delivered the letters.	The letters have been delivered.
Past Perfect	He had delivered the letters.	The letters had been delivered.
Infinitive	He has to deliver the letters.	The letters have to be delivered.
Modals	He must deliver the letters.	The letters must be delivered.

Elements of the Verb Phrase

- **At its simplest, the verb phrase consists of a single verb, called the main verb:**
  - *I **love** Mary*
  - *She **stays** in the hotel.*
  - *She **was** here.*

- **Before the main verb, The verb phrase can consist of up to 4 elements:**
  - A modal verb*: **I must run***
  - Perfect participle : some form of 'have' (followed by a verb in a past participle form): *I **have driven** far today*
  - Progressive participle *: some form of 'be' (followed by an –ing verb): I **was driving** home.*
  - Passive voice*: some form of 'be' (followed by a verb in a past participle form : **I was driven** home.*

All combinations of these elements are possible:

subject	model	perfect	progressive	passive	verb
I	will				eat
I		have			eaten
I			am		eating
I				am	eaten
I	will	have			eaten
I		have	been		eating
I			am	being	eaten
I	will		be		eaten
I		have		been	eaten

GO

	infinitive	present	past	progressive	perfect
1.SG	I need to go	I go	I went	I am/was going	I have/had gone
2	you need to go	You go	You went	you are/were going	you have/had gone
3.SG	s/he/it need to go	s/he/it goes	s/he/it went	s/he/it is/was going	s/he/it has/had gone
1.PL	we need to go	We go	We went	we are/were going	we have/had gone
3.PL	they need to go	They go	They went	they are/were going	they have/had gone

Regular versus Irregular verb forms

The regular inflection is suffixal (**play-play****ed****-play****ed**), but irregular forms are often formed by internal stem change or by a combination of internal stem change and suffixation, like:

- **sing sang sung**

- **sit sat sat**

- **swing swung swung**

- **write wrote written**

- **hold held held**

- **tell told told**

- **bring brought brought**