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Tense, Aspect and Modality in the English Language: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract:

This study provides a critical examination of Tense, Aspect, and Modality (TAM) within the English language, exploring their individual functions and their complex intersections in discourse. While traditional grammar often treats these categories in isolation, this perspective argues that they form an integrated cognitive and functional framework essential for encoding temporal and interpersonal meaning.

Tense: It is a form of verb to express time. It analyzes not merely as a chronological marker (Past, Present and Future) but as a deictic tool that situates an utterance in relation to the "*speech moment*."

Aspect: It focuses on the internal temporal constituency of an event, distinguishing between the progressive (ongoing process) and the perfect (completed action with present relevance).

Modality: It explores through the lens of speaker subjectivity, covering epistemic modality (levels of certainty/knowledge) and deontic modality (obligation and permission)

The analysis challenges the "linear" view of time in English, highlighting how modality often "bleeds" into tense - specifically regarding the status of the future tense as a modal construct rather than a pure temporal one. By examining various registers, the study demonstrates how TAM choices are dictated by contextual pragmatics and the speaker's intent to manipulate the listener's perception of reality and necessity.

Keywords: TAM, tense, aspect, modality, pedagogy, discourse, speech moment, deontic, pragmatics, linguistic theory, grammar



Introduction

Tense, aspect, and modality constitute the core grammatical categories through which English expresses time, action, and attitude. While traditional grammar treats these as fixed structural elements, modern linguistics views them as functional, semantic, and pragmatic systems that interact dynamically within discourse. A critical study of tense, aspect, and modality (TAM) reveals how English encodes not only temporal reference but also speakers' perspectives, intentions, and judgments.

Conceptual Framework of Tense, Aspect, and Modality

According to linguistic theory, TAM is often treated as a unified system rather than three isolated categories. Scholars such as Comrie (1976) and Palmer (2001) argue that *these categories overlap in meaning and usage, shaping how events are represented in language*. Tense, aspect, and modality form the core of English verb systems, expressing time, duration or completion of actions, and the speaker's attitude toward those actions. These elements combine to create nuanced meanings in sentences. Together, they help convey when something happens, how it unfolds, and its level of certainty or obligation.

Tense: Tense locates an action or state in time, primarily using present, past, and future forms. English marks present tense with base verbs (e.g., "walk") and past with -ed endings (e.g., "walked"), while future relies on modals like "will." Only two morphological tenses exist—present and past—but combinations expand options.

Aspect: Aspect describes the internal structure of an action, such as whether it is ongoing, completed, or habitual. Key types include simple (general, e.g., "I eat"), progressive (ongoing, e.g., "I am eating"), and perfect (completed with relevance, e.g., "I have eaten"). These pair with tenses for precision, like past perfect ("had eaten").

Modality: Modality expresses attitudes like possibility, necessity, or permission via modal verbs (e.g., can, must, might). It divides into epistemic (judging truth, e.g., "She might arrive") and deontic (obligation, e.g., "You must go"). Modals often interact with tense and aspect, as in "should have been finished."

Tense in English: A Critical Perspective

To look at English tenses from a critical perspective means moving beyond simple grammar rules and examining how we actually perceive time, logic, and social context through language.

In traditional linguistics, English technically only has two morphological tenses: the present and the past. Everything else—the future, the "perfect" states, and the "continuous" actions—is constructed using auxiliary verbs and aspect.

- The "Two-Tense" Reality



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Most linguists argue that English lacks a true "future tense" because there is no way to change the ending of a verb to indicate the future (unlike Spanish or Latin). Instead, we use modal verbs (will, shall) or aspectual phrases (going to).

Past: I walked (Inflected)

Present: I walk (Base form)

Future: I will walk (Requires an extra word)

Critically, this suggests that in the English-speaking mind, the future is not a certainty or a fixed point in time, but rather a prediction, a desire, or a probability.

- Tense vs. Aspect

A critical understanding requires separating when something happens (Tense) from how it happens (Aspect).

The "Perfect" Power Dynamic

The Present Perfect (I have lost my keys) is often the most difficult for learners because it isn't about the past—it's about the present state of affairs. Critically, we use the perfect aspect to establish authority or experience. Saying "I have traveled" is a statement of current status, whereas "I traveled" is merely a historical footnote.

- The Subjectivity of the "Present"

The "Present Continuous" (I am working) is often used for the future (I am working tomorrow). This reveals a critical quirk in English: we treat planned future events as if they are already happening.

This collapses the distance between "now" and "later," reflecting a culture that often prioritizes immediate scheduling and certainty over the flow of time.

- Distance and Politeness

We often use tenses to create social distance rather than temporal distance. This is known as "*back - shifting*."

Direct: "Do you want some coffee?" (Present)

Polite/Distanced: "I was wondering if you wanted some coffee." (Past)

Critically, the past tense here doesn't mean the desire happened yesterday; it functions as a "cushion" to make the request less aggressive. We use the past to be polite because the past is "far away" and therefore less confrontational.

Aspect in English

Aspect refers to how an action unfolds over time rather than when it occurs. It is a grammatical category that expresses how an action, event, or state unfolds over time, rather than when it occurs. Unlike tense, which situates an event in past, present, or future time, aspect focuses on the internal temporal structure of the action. In English, aspect is primarily



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expressed through auxiliary verbs and verb phrases, making it an analytic system rather than an inflectional one.

Aspect refers to the way a speaker views the duration, completion, or repetition of an event.

Bernard Comrie (1976) defines aspect as “*different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.*”

English mainly recognizes two grammatical aspects:

1. Progressive (Continuous) Aspect

The progressive aspect indicates that an action is ongoing, temporary, or incomplete at a particular time.

Form: *be + present participle (-ing)*

Example: *She is reading a novel. They were playing football.*

Functions: Emphasizes duration; indicates temporary situations ; Shows incompleteness

Reflects speaker subjectivity

Example: *He is living in Delhi. (temporary); He lives in Delhi. (permanent)*

2. Perfect Aspect

The perfect aspect expresses a connection between a past event and a later point in time, often the present.

Form: *have + past participle*

Example: *She has completed her work. They had left before dawn.*

Functions: Indicates completed action & shows result or relevance; expresses experience , emphasizes continuity

Example:

I have visited Agra. (experience)

She has lived here for ten years. (continuity)

Combination of Aspects: English allows the combination of progressive and perfect aspects.

Perfect Progressive Aspect : *have + been + present participle*

Example:

He has been working all day. This form emphasizes both duration and relevance.

Aspect in English is a vital grammatical and semantic system that allows speakers to present events as ongoing, completed, temporary, or relevant. Through the progressive and perfect aspects, English offers flexibility in expressing time and meaning. Understanding aspect is essential for linguistic analysis, effective communication, and English language teaching. Aspect in English is analytic rather than inflectional, relying on auxiliary verbs. This makes aspect highly flexible but also context-dependent, leading to ambiguity in interpretation.



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Modality in English

Modality expresses necessity, possibility, obligation, permission, and probability. It reflects the speaker's stance rather than objective reality. If tenses tell us when an event happens, modality tells us how the speaker relates to that event. It is the linguistic "filter" through which we express attitude, judgment, and social power.

While tenses deal with reality (what happened/is happening), modality deals with potentiality: what might, must, or should happen.

1. The Two Pillars: Epistemic vs. Deontic

In critical linguistics, modality is split into two primary "flavors." The fascinating part is that English uses the same words for both, depending entirely on context.

Epistemic Modality (Knowledge & Belief)

This is about the speaker's assessment of truth and probability. You are looking at evidence and making a claim about reality.

Example: *"The lights are on; he must be home."*

2. Modality of a Power Dial

From a critical perspective, modality is how we navigate social distance and hierarchy. By choosing a specific modal, you are positioning yourself in relation to your listener.

- Commanding Power: *"You will do this."* (High authority or zero room for negotiation).
- Softening Power: *"You might want to do this."* (Low authority or high authority using "politeness" to avoid appearing tyrannical).
- Hedged Power: *"It could be argued that..."* (Academic modality. By using could, the writer avoids responsibility if they are proven wrong).

3. The "Pseudo-Future"

As discussed in the context of tenses, English lacks a morphological future. Therefore, our "future" is actually a modal construct.

- Will: Originally meant "want" or "desire" (volition). When we say "I will go," we are technically expressing a current intention to act later.
- Shall: Originally carried a sense of "debt" or "obligation."

Critical Insight: Because our future is modal, the English language treats the future not as a fact, but as a mental state. We cannot talk about the future without accidentally revealing our level of certainty or desire.

4. Modality and "Possible Worlds"

Linguists often use the concept of Possible Worlds to explain modality.



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- When you say "*I can swim*," you are saying that in at least one possible version of the world, the act of you swimming exists.
- When you say "*You must go*," you are saying that in all "*ideal*" worlds (defined by law or morals), the only version that exists is the one where you go.

Why Modality Matters

Modality is the "human" element of grammar. It allows us to:

- Negotiate Reality: *How sure am I that this is true?*
- Negotiate Social Space: *Do I have the right to tell you what to do?*
- Manage Risk: *If I use "might" instead of "will,"* I am protected from being 'wrong'

It is a crucial part of the English language because it allows speakers and writers to express attitude, judgment, possibility, necessity, obligation, and certainty, rather than merely stating facts. Without modality, communication would be rigid and absolute; with modality, language becomes nuanced, polite, persuasive, and context-sensitive.

1. Modality Expresses Speaker's Attitude:

Modality enables speakers to convey how strongly they believe something to be true.

Example:

- He must be at home. (strong certainty)*
- He might be at home. (weak possibility)*

This flexibility is essential for expressing doubt, inference, or confidence.

2. Modality Manages Social Relationships:

In English, modality plays a key role in politeness and power relations:

- Students must submit the form today. (authority)*
- Students could submit the form today. (polite suggestion)*

Thus, modality helps speakers avoid directness that may sound rude or authoritarian.

3. Modality Is Central to Meaning Beyond Grammar:

Modal verbs do not merely show tense; they shape the pragmatic meaning of utterances:

- They may leave now. (permission)*
- She may be late. (possibility)*

The same modal verb serves different functions depending on context.

4. Modality Enables Logical and Critical Thinking

Modality is essential in academic and critical writing, where claims must be qualified rather than absolute.

- This concept may explain the phenomenon.*
- The repercussion suggests that...*

Such modal expressions reflect intellectual honesty and caution.



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5. Modality Is Vital in Literature and Discourse

Writers use modality to reveal:

- Character psychology
- Narrative uncertainty
- Moral conflict
- Ideological stance

Example:

She could have acted differently, but she didn't.

This reflects regret and unrealized possibility.

6. Modality Supports Legal, Scientific, and Administrative Language:

Formal domains rely heavily on modality to express rules and conditions.

- Legal : The tenant shall pay the rent.
- Scientific : The substance may react under heat.

Precise modal use avoids ambiguity.

7. Modality Helps Language Learners Achieve Fluency:

Learners often know grammar but struggle with appropriate modal choice. Mastery of modality enables:

- Natural conversation
- Polite requests
- Accurate interpretation of meaning

8. Modality Reflects Cultural Values:

English modality often emphasizes indirectness and negotiation, especially in British and international contexts.

He might want to check this. (soft advice)

Understanding modality, thus, aids intercultural communication. It matters a lot in English because it transforms language from a system of rigid statements into a flexible tool for expressing attitude, judgment, and social meaning. It is indispensable in everyday communication, academic discourse, literature, and professional contexts. A sound understanding of modality leads to clearer, more effective and more sensitive communication.

Interaction of Tense, Aspect, and Modality

Tense, aspect, and modality in English interact through layered verb constructions to convey precise time, action structure, and speaker attitude. They combine in verb phrases, often using auxiliaries, creating 12 main patterns that blend past/present tenses with simple/progressive/perfect aspects and modal influences. This interplay allows nuanced expression, such as ongoing past actions with uncertainty.



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Tense provides the time anchor (past or present), while aspect modifies its nature—simple for complete/habitual, progressive for ongoing ("was eating"), perfect for completed relevance ("had eaten"). Modality overlays attitudes via verbs like "will," "could," or "must," which scope over the tense-aspect core, as in "will have been eating" (future perfect progressive). Future lacks true tense marking, relying on modals ("will"), which fuse modality with time projection and interact with aspects, like "will be working" (future progressive). Perfect aspects often carry modal implications of relevance to another time, enhancing combinations like past perfect modal "might have finished."

The Common Combination:

Base form	Simple	Progressive	Prefect	Perfect prog.
Present	go	is/am going	have /has gone	Have/has been eating
Past	went	Was/were going	had gone	had been going
Future/Modal	Will/shall go	will /shall be going	will have gone	will have been going

These forms shift meaning subtly; for instance, "*must have been sleeping*" merges past perfect progressive with necessity modality.

Pedagogical and Discourse Implications

In English linguistics, *Tense*, *Aspect*, and *Modality* (often abbreviated as TAM) are the three pillars of the verbal system. While they are often taught as "rules," their implications go far beyond simple grammar; they are the tools speakers use to manage flow, social distance, and perspective in conversation and writing.

- Discourse Implications

Discourse refers to how language is used in extended stretches of text or conversation. TAM markers act as "*signposts*" for the listener.

Foregrounding vs. Back-grounding: * Aspect is crucial here. In a story, the Simple Past (e.g., "*He ran*") usually marks the "*foreground*" or main events.

The Past Progressive (e.g., "*It was raining*") provides the "background" or the setting.

Temporal Anchoring: Tense establishes the "*Deictic Center*" - the "*now*" of the speaker. Shifts in tense signal shifts in the focus of the discourse (e.g. moving from a general truth in the Present Simple to a specific anecdote in the Simple Past).



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Stance and Social Distance: Modality allows speakers to manage their relationship with the listener.

Epistemic Modality (e.g., *"It might rain"*) shows the speaker's level of certainty.

Deontic Modality (e.g., *"You must go"*) manages authority and obligation. Using *"Could you..."* instead of *"Can you..."* increases social distance and politeness.

- Pedagogical Implications

For teachers and learners of English (ESL/EFL), TAM presents significant hurdles because it is often abstract.

The "Rule-Based" vs. "Concept-Based" Struggle: Traditional pedagogy often focuses on formulas (*Subject + will + verb*). However, research suggests Concept-Based Instruction (CBI) is more effective. Learners need to understand that the Progressive aspect is about "temporariness" or "internal view," not just an *"-ing"* ending.

The Aspect Hypothesis: Learners typically acquire TAM markers in a specific order based on the "lexical aspect" of the verb.

They use the Progressive (*-ing*) first with dynamic, "activity" verbs (*running*).

They use the Past (*-ed*) first with "achievement" verbs (*broken, fell*).

Implication: Teachers should introduce tense/aspect pairings that feel natural to learners before moving to more complex combinations (like *"I am loving it"*).

Register Awareness: Students often learn modals in isolation but struggle with their discourse functions. For example, in academic writing, the Present Perfect is used to introduce a research field (*"Studies have shown..."*), while the Simple Past is used for specific findings (*"Smith found..."*).

This study on *Tense, Aspect, and Modality* provides a deep dive into how the systems function within real-world English discourse, moving beyond basic textbook definitions.

Conclusion

This critical study of tense, aspect, and modality in English reveals that these categories are not merely grammatical devices but meaning-making systems. English relies on auxiliary constructions, contextual cues, and speaker perspective to convey time and attitude. Understanding TAM as an integrated and functional framework enhances linguistic analysis, discourse interpretation, and effective language teaching.

The critical perspective on Tense, Aspect, and Modality (TAM) moves away from viewing them as rigid grammatical "rules" and instead treats them as a semiotic system—a set of tools that speakers use to negotiate power, perspective, and social reality.



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In conclusion, a critical analysis reveals that the TAM system is not a neutral reflection of time and possibility, but a subjective framework for human interaction.

- *The Subjectivity of Temporal Choice*

From a critical standpoint, *Tense* and *Aspect* are rarely about objective time. Instead, they represent the speaker's "*psychological distance*" from the event.

The Myth of Truth: We often teach the Present Simple for "*universal truths*" (e.g., "*The sun rises*"). Critically, this is a rhetorical move to present information as unchallengeable. By using the Present Simple, a speaker "*colonizes*" the future and past, suggesting that what they say is an eternal fact.

Aspect as Manipulation: The choice between "*I wrote the report*" (Perfective) and "*I was writing the report*" (Imperfective/Progressive) can be used to deflect accountability. The Progressive aspect allows a speaker to dwell on the process while subtly obscuring the outcome or the lack thereof.

- *Modality as a Tool of Power*

Modality is the most politically and socially charged element of the verbal system. It functions as the "gatekeeper" of certainty and authority.

Epistemic Hegemony: When a person in power uses high-certainty modals (e.g., "*This will happen*" vs. "*This might happen*"), they are exercising epistemic authority. Critically, the omission of a modal (the "*bare assertion*") is the strongest modal position of all, as it implies the speaker's view is the only possible reality.

Deontic Control: Modals of obligation (*must*, *should*, *ought to*) are the primary vehicles for expressing social hierarchy. A critical perspective examines who has the right to use must in a given discourse and how could or may are used to "soften" commands to maintain a veneer of politeness in unequal power structures.

- *Pedagogical Decolonization*

It addresses how TAM is taught. Traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) has often prioritized "Standard English" TAM structures, which can marginalize non-native varieties (like Indian English or African American Vernacular English) that use aspect differently (e.g., the "*habitual be*").

Shifting the Focus: Pedagogy moves toward *Functional Competence*. Instead of asking "Is this tense right?", the question should be "*What is this speaker trying to achieve socially by using this aspect?*"

Agency in Learning: It recognizes that TAM is a system of choice gives learners agency. They are no longer just memorizing a timeline; they are learning how to position themselves within a global conversation.



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The TAM system is the "control room" of English discourse. To master it is not just to speak "correctly," but to understand how to navigate the nuances of human intent, authority, and perspective

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