Lecture 9

Tense and Aspect in English

Verb forms in English are distinguished according to the following:

1. Tense (present vs. past)
2. Aspect (simple vs. progressive, perfect vs. non-perfect)
3. Use of auxiliaries and modals

The topic today is tense and aspect in English. Tense and aspect in English actually is a very difficult topic. Because the way in which tense and aspect is structured in English, it is in fact in many ways quite peculiar to English, even in comparison with other European languages, especially the aspect system, namely the so-called progressive aspect. If you look at other neighboring European languages which are of course very closely related to English, German and Dutch, even French and Spanish—the major Western European languages—their aspect system is quite different from that of English, and you see, even within Western Europe, English speakers find it extraordinarily difficult to learn the French imperfect and whatever. French and German learners find it very difficult to get their heads around the English aspect system, so there is something funny about the English aspect system, the use of the progressive. So it’s quite a challenge, besides, because it’s so language specific.

So what I want to do is bring some tools of cognitive linguistics, which is actually semantic conceptual analysis. OK, what is cognitive linguistics, well, in this particular aspect, it means looking at the distributional aspects of the verb phrase, the distributional, the structural aspects, if you like, and to ask what are the meanings which are symbolized by these various contrasts which you have. I won’t be specifically addressing applied linguistic issues, language teaching issues, but I would take it as rather obvious that if you are teaching English, whether as a classroom teacher, whether you are preparing your All original audio-recordings and other supplementary material, such as any hand-outs and powerpoint presentations for the lecture series, have been made available online and are referenced via unique DOI numbers on the website www.figshare.com. They may be accessed via this QR code and the following dynamic link: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.5550010.
writing teaching materials or designing a syllabus or whatever, if you are engaged in this sort of activities, it will help if you understand what it is that you are teaching. You don't necessarily have to teach all the terminology and so on. But clearly if you are teaching something like this, it's clearly a good idea if you understand the logic of the system. But I will leave to other people the actual implementation of this in pedagogical materials or in pedagogical grammar.

Now characteristics of the English verb phrase, verb forms, there are a couple of distinctions which are characteristic of the verb phrase in English. One is the tense. English verbs inflect for tenses, present tense versus past tense as we all know. Second is the question of aspect which is basically simple. Well, two aspects, well, are often recognized. I'll be focusing on the first one, I simple versus progressive. This is the I talk, I am talking, I talked, I was talking, I have talked, I have been talking. That's sort of distinction. Second, which is sometimes recognized, whether it's an aspect or tense, it's a bit unclear, but this is the have form, I spoke, I have spoken, so perfect with the have or had form. And another feature of the English verb form is the use of auxiliaries and modals. Modals are also very complex in English as you are aware, the can, must, may, might, might not and so on and so forth. I won't actually have much to say about that. That will be another lecture and a half at least to go into those topics. So my main focus will be on, I'll begin by making some remarks on tense. Then I'll say something about aspect, and then something about the way in which these two interact. So let's begin with what seems to be quite a straightforward matter, which seems to be a very simple matter, the question of tense.

**Tense**

English has two tenses—present and past:

- I know him ~ I knew him

Mostly, present tense refers to present time, past tense to past time.

But there are complications.

This means, it is necessary to distinguish between past and present as grammatical phenomena, and past time and present time as semantic phenomena.

English has two tenses—present and past. Future, well, English doesn't really have a future tense. You make a future by means of modals, by means of will and various other forms: will, be going to and so on and so forth. So the English verb does not inflect for future. There isn't really a future tense as such, you have present tense and you have past tense. So you have the verb form, more specifically, the finite verb form can occur in present tense or past tense. So that is a grammatical distinction. It is a morphological distinction. It's a formal