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The simple past and the past continuous

I-The simple past

The Past is used to refer to a definite event or state that is seen as remote, in time or as unreality or for reasons of politeness. It is used to refer to completed events, states and actions.

Form:

Verbs other than to be:

- He waited (Affirmative)
- Did you ring? (Question)
- When did you ring? (question)
- I didn't understand. (Negative)

To be

I/ she/ he/ it was
 We/ you/ they were

1-Referring to definite events in the past:

When used to refer to past events or states. We choose the past simple when we consider that the event, state or action took place within a finished period of time. The past in English contains two semantic features:

- a) The speaker visualises the event as having occurred at some specific time in the past.
- b) The event was completed in the past, and a gap in time separates its completion from the present.

Examples:

- Mary bought some books yesterday
- James Joyce was born in Dublin in 1882
- I read two novels by Agatha Christie when I was on holiday.

The simple past expresses the meanings of specific occurrence, completed event and disconnectedness from the present time not expressed by the present perfect

The following sentences are considered ungrammatical:

*She has bought some books yesterday. (-she bought...)

*He has been born in Dublin. (He was born...)

*We have met four years ago. (We met....)

Adjuncts of specific time (yesterday, 1882, etc) combine well with the simple past but not with the perfect since their function is to signal the past moment in time explicitly.

The use of the past tense to express a sequence of events and activities is illustrated in the extract from J.G. Ballard's short story *Memories of the Space Age*:

Mallory began to re-start the engine, when the machine-guns over the pilot's wind-shield opened fire on him. He assumed that the pilot was shooting blank ammunition left over from some air display. Then the first bullets struck the metalled road a hundred feet ahead. The second burst threw the car onto its flattened front tyres, severed the door pillar by the passenger seat and filled the cabin with exploding glass. As the plane climbed steeply, about to make the second pass at him, Mallory brushed the blood-flecked glass from his chest and thighs. He leapt from the car and vaulted over the metal railing into the shallow culvert beside the bridge, as his blood run away through the water towards the waiting forest of the space grounds.

In M. Bradbury (ed.), *Modern British Short Stories*

2-The past tense with present and future reference

The past tense can refer to time spheres other than the past in the following three ways:

a) In reported speech or thought:

-She said she would/ will be glad to see us.

(The present tense can be used as long as the situation is **still valid**.)

b) In polite requests and enquiries

The past form 'distances' the proposed action, making the imposition on the hearer less direct:

Would you sign here, please?

Did you want to speak to me now?

I wondered whether you needed anything.

c) In hypothetical subordinate clauses

The simple past can be used to talk about something which is not real (hypothetical), like in the following examples:

- He talks as if he owned the place.
- If only we revised well for our exam.
- I often wish I were somewhere else
- If I were you, I would leave the place immediately.

3-Habitual Past 'used to'

'Used to' shows a habit or custom over a past period of time. The custom/habit no longer exists. It is not used with actions that happened once or a few times.

- Many restaurants used to close on Sundays.
- In 1949, the manager of the Dodgers invited Robinson to play for his team.

The Simple Past can also be used to describe a habit which stopped in the past. It can have the same meaning as "used to". To make it clear that we are talking about a habit we often use expressions such as "always," "often," "usually," "never," "...when I was a child" or "...when I was younger" in the sentence.

- I studied French when I was a child.
- He played the violin.
- They never went to school, they always skipped.

II-The past progressive:

Form:

Was/ were + verb—ing

- They are dancing (affirmative)
- Was he walking when you saw him?
- I wasn't concentrating.

1-Sequence of events

The past progressive provides the time frame without time boundaries around some point of time. It is used to describe something which began before a particular point in the past and was still in progress at that point

- I was still working at 6 o'clock.

- When they arrived, their children were swimming in the pool.
- When we stopped at the door, Pat was shouting to us.

2-‘Complete’ periods of time:

We sometimes use the past continuous to describe events that extend across ‘complete’ periods of time (e.g. all day, the whole lesson, every minute)

- We were working from morn to night.

3-Narrative

In narratives, the progressive has the effect of providing the background against which key events, actions (in the non-progressive aspect) are highlighted and foregrounded:

- When we stopped at the door, Pat was shouting shouted to us.
- Mona was washing dishes with a vengeance when Mrs Madrigal walked into the Kitchen.

Exercise

1. A: What (you, do) _____ when the accident occurred?

B: I (try) _____ to change a light bulb that had burnt out.

2. After I (find) _____ the wallet full of money, I _____ (go, immediately) to the police and (turn) _____ it in.

3. The doctor (say) _____ that Tom (be) _____ too sick to go to work and that he (need) _____ to stay at home for a couple of days.

4. Sebastian (arrive) _____ at Susan's house a little before 9:00 PM, but she (be, not) _____ there. She (study, at the library) _____ for her final examination in French.

5. Sandy is in the living room watching television. At this time yesterday, she (watch, also) _____ television. That's all she ever does!

6. A: I (call) _____ you last night after dinner, but you (be, not) _____ there. Where were you?

B: I (work) _____ out at the fitness center.

7. When I (walk) _____ into the busy office, the secretary (talk) _____ on the phone with a customer, several clerks (work, busily) _____ at their desks, and two managers (discuss, quietly) _____ methods to improve customer service.

8. I (watch) _____ a mystery movie on TV when the electricity went out. Now I am never going to find out how the movie ends.

9. Sharon (be) _____ in the room when John told me what happened, but she didn't hear anything because she (listen, not) _____ .

10. It's strange that you (call) _____ because I (think, just) _____ about you.