Q: A colleague argues that the English language possesses no future tense, only a present tense and past tense. I say it does have a future tense, as well as a perfect tense, a past perfect tense, and a progressive tense. Who is right?

A: You both are, for there's really no argument; the two of you merely define "tense" differently. The tense of the verb itself or of the verb phrase to express how time and attitude relate is called *aspect*. Your definition of *aspect* is broad: the way English speakers indicate time. Your colleague defines *aspect* narrowly, as the change in the tense of the verb itself to indicate time. The English language can express time either by the tense of the verb itself or by the choice of a verb phrase to express both time and the speaker's attitude. The way they do so is called *aspect*.

That definition seems more complicated than it really is. The easiest way to explain it so that you understand it is by illustration. The English language has no way to show future time by merely changing the spelling of the verb (as was done, for example, in Latin). That's why your colleague insists that English has no future tense. In English, both attitude and tense can instead appear in the verb phrase you choose. Notice the difference in time in the following two statements:

I hiked the Appalachians for many years.
I have hiked the Appalachians for many years.

Both statements contain two pieces of information: tense and duration of time. The first statement means that the activity occurred only in the past; it is not connected to the present. The second statement indicates that the past activity occurred continues through the present time. The statements are thus similar in aspect to the statements: "I taught school for many years" and "I have taught school for many years." (The first denies current teaching; the second indicates that the teaching continues into the present.)

The distinction between simple past tense and the past perfect tense is most clearly seen in the two statements:

I smoked for many years.
I have smoked for many years.

On hearing the first statement, your might respond, "When did you quit?" (The simple past tense indicates closure; no connection to the present time.) On hearing the second statement, you might ask, "Are you trying to quit?" (The past perfect tense indicates past behavior as well as connection to the present.) The selection of either the verb or the verb phrase is automatic for native speakers and well understood to indicate the temporal distinction.

Linguists would not define the second statement above ("I have smoked for many years") as past perfect tense; they point out the traditional Latin name should be changed to present perfect tense because it can be used only to refer to people who are alive at present. Their reasoning? You cannot say of a deceased person: "He has eaten."

To indicate present time, many people assume that English speakers use the present tense of the verb. But only rarely does present tense indicate present time; instead it commonly indicates continuing time (past, present, and future)—for example, "I drive home every weekend." That's why your colleague, according to his definition of "tense," argues that the English language lacks a future tense.

The subjunctive mode in English also indicates both time and attitude. Contrast, for example, the way you interpret the following statements:

- Every employee *wears* a uniform. (Present time, habitual behavior.)
- It is required that every employee *wear* a uniform. (Present subjunctive, habitual behavior. The simple present tense (*wears)* would be incorrect here.)
- If I *had not worn* my uniform, I *would have been* fired. (Past perfect tense, past subjunctive.)

But, as I wrote in a column some time ago, the subjunctive mode is moribund; even many educated people ignore it. One recent illustration: in an ABC news program (Nov. 28, 2010), a prominent investment banker remarked, "Who could have known in 1988 that the market *went* down in 2008?" Traditionally, the subjunctive mode is proper: "Who could have known in 1988 that the market *would go* down in 2008?"

The subjunctive mode also indicates both time and attitude. For example:

1. All employees must wear uniforms. (Present tense.)
2. The boss requires that every employee wear a uniform. (Present subjunctive.)
3. Had I known about that, I would not have applied for work. (Past subjunctive.)

Statement 1 contains the normal third-person plural verb *wear*. In statement 2, the third-person singular is *requires* and the verb *wear* is the present tense subjunctive. Statement 3 contains the past perfect tense *had known*, followed by the present tense subjunctive verb phrase (*would not have applied*), indicating a condition contrary to fact.

English speakers have other ways to express both time and attitude in verb phrases. Some are: *iterative*, used for repeated action: "I'm always on time"; *habitual*, used for usual action: "In Florida, winter rain usually precedes cold weather"; for *beginning* action, "I'm putting your check in the mail"; and for *conclusive* action: "I've just finished painting the car."

There are many other kinds of aspet to indicate time as well as attitude. The *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, by Hadumod Vussmann (1990), lists 19, as well as a full discussion of aspect. For an exhaustive treatment of the subject, consult that authority. **TFL**

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