

TENSE IN MODERN ENGLISH AND DANISH

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Introduction

The present paper falls into two main parts. First, I shall discuss the analysis of tense in English and Danish, particularly the number and meanings of tenses. Secondly, I shall describe tense usage in the two languages and in so doing concentrate on the special problems encountered by Danish learners of English. These problems, it may be added, are largely shared by Norwegian and Swedish learners of English.

Number of tenses and tense meanings

In both English and Danish I operate with the following eight tenses, all of which are realized by means of flexives and/or auxiliaries, i.e. morphologically and/or syntactically:

(1)	English	Danish
Present	V + -s/Ø	V + -(e)r
Present perfect	has/have + V + -(e)d	har/er + V + -(e)t
Past	V + -(e)d	V + -(e)de, -(e)te
Past perfect	had + V + -(e)d	havde/var + V + -(e)t
Future	will/shall + V	vil + V
Future perfect	will/shall + have + V + -(e)d	vil + have/være + V + -(e)t
Future in the past	would/should + V	ville + V
Future perfect in the past	would/should + have + V + -(e)d	ville + have/være + V + -(e)t

This table accounts only for regular verbs in verb phrases which are non-progressive and active and which do not contain modal verbs. A complete description of the realization of the eight tenses would naturally have to include all verbal forms. Such an exhaustive description is fairly unproblematic, and I shall therefore immediately turn from form to meaning. Now according to Comrie (1976), tense relates the time of the verbal event to some other time, usually the moment of speech, cf. e.g.

(2) I assure you it *mattered* then, it *matters* now, and it *will matter* in the future

The semantics of these tense forms can be described by means of the following formulas, where — in accordance with Reichenbach (1947) — event time is symbolized as E, speech time as S, simultaneity with commas, and separation in time by dashes:

(3) Present	E, S	<i>matters</i>
Past	E — S	<i>mattered</i>
Future	S — E	<i>will matter</i>

In the case of the perfect tenses, the time of the verbal event is related not only to the point of speech but also to a so-called point of reference (symbolized as R and always posterior to E). In an example like *She had signed the letter (when I returned)* the event of signing takes place before a reference point (that of my return) which in its turn is anterior to the moment of speech (what I say now). In *She will have signed the letter (when I return)* the event of signing takes place before a reference point and after the point of speech, and in *She has signed the letter (now)* the event of signing takes place before a reference point which is simultaneous with the moment of speech:

(4) Present perfect	E — R, S	<i>has signed</i>
Past perfect	E — R — S	<i>had signed</i>
Future perfect	S — E — R	<i>will have signed</i>

Consider finally examples like the following:

(5) (She said) they *would receive* the letter (soon)
(She said) they *would have received* the letter (by Monday)

Here E is not connected directly with S but with a past moment of time which the speaker selects as his point of departure and which may be symbolized as B (as is time):

(6) Future in the past	B — E	<i>would receive</i>
Future perfect in the past	B — E — R	<i>would have received</i>

Future in the past and future perfect in the past are closely related with respectively future and future perfect, the basic difference being that the two former tenses have a B where the two latter have an S. However, it is not possible to analyse future in the past and future perfect in the past as variants—

bound or free, and occurring in indirect speech — of respectively future and future perfect and in this way to reduce the number of tenses from eight to six. The reason why this is so is that in those cases of indirect speech where the *consecutio temporum* principle is violated — as it sometimes is — there is not free variation between future and future in the past or between future perfect and future perfect in the past:

- (7) (a) The weatherman said that the weather *will clear up*, so it probably will S — E
 (b) The weatherman said that the weather *would clear up*, so it probably will B — (S) — E
 (c) *The weatherman said that the weather *will clear up*, and so it did S — E
 (d) The weatherman said that the weather *would clear up*, and so it did B — E — (S)
 (e) The weatherman said that the weather *will have cleared up* by Wednesday, so it probably will S — E — R
 (f) The weatherman said that the weather *would have cleared up* by Wednesday, so it probably will B — (S) — E — R
 (g) *The weatherman said that the weather *will have cleared up* by Wednesday, and so it did S — E — R
 (h) The weatherman said that the weather *would have cleared up* by Wednesday, and so it did B — E — R — (S)

As it appears, the future in the past has the formula B — (S) — E in (7b) but the formula B — E — (S) in (7d). Similarly, the future perfect in the past has the formula B — (S) — E — R in (7f) but the formula B — E — R — (S) in (7h). The important thing to note is that as shown by (7c) v. (7d) there is not free variation between future and future in the past, and as shown by (7g) v. (7h) there is not free variation between future perfect and future perfect in the past. Consequently, if future and future perfect are recognized as tenses, then future in the past and future perfect in the past must be recognized as tenses as well. We thus end up with eight tenses (in both languages), the meanings of which can be expressed in the following way:

(8) Present	E, S
Present perfect	E — R, S
Past	E — S
Past perfect	E — R — S
Future	S — E
Future perfect	S — E — R
Future in the past	B — E
Future perfect in the past	B — E — R

The eight-member analysis of tense proposed here differs from the analyses found in practically all contemporary descriptions of English and Danish. Usually it is argued that there are only two tenses — past and present — in both English and Danish. The perfect constructions are then analysed as aspect and the constructions with *will/shall* and Danish *ville* are analysed as modality. My main reason for not choosing to operate with perfect aspect is that the English and Danish perfects have nothing to do with aspect as normally defined. Aspect has to do with internal event time: the event which is expressed by the verb may be seen as unfolded or as rolled up, as in the case of imperfective v. perfective in Slavic languages and progressive v. nonprogressive in English (cf. Comrie 1976). This is not the function of the perfect at all, for like the obvious tenses it expresses external event time. It has to do with the relative placement of the verbal event in a chronological order.

My main reason for accepting future tenses is that English *will/shall* and Danish *ville* in many cases express pure future time. For example, this is the case when the subject of the sentence is impersonal:

(9) I'm afraid nothing *will come* of it

The meeting *will be* in about ten days' time

Leech, Lyons and others claim, it is true, that English *will*+V is always tinged with modality, for in those cases where it does not express volition, intention, willingness or predictability it expresses prediction. However, this is really a universal argument against recognizing future tenses, for whenever reference is made to future events there will be an element of prediction. The logical conclusion which has to be drawn, then, is to get rid of future tenses universally, for example also in French, where 'prediction' is signalled morphologically, e.g. *il signera la lettre*. This is a price which some linguists are prepared to pay but which is very heavy. In this paper, therefore, future tense will be recognized whenever *will*, *shall* and *ville* do not express volition, intention, obligation, willingness or predictability but pure future time or — according to Leech (1971) — prediction. A distributional argument in favour of this analysis is that temporal (but not modal) *will* and *shall* replace each other in indirect speech and in passivization and that temporal *will*, *shall* and *ville* differ from the modals in not occurring in conditional clauses (cf. Palmer 1965):

(10) I *shall hand* him the bad news

She says she *will hand* him the bad news

It *will surprise* me vastly if you do not go down in history and legend

I *shall be* vastly *surprised* if you do not go down in history and legend

If you *can/dare/will give* me a clue, I shall endeavour to assist you (modal *will*)

Hvis du *kan/tør/vil give* mig et vink, vil jeg forsøge at hjælpe dig (modal *vil*)

Componentially the eight tenses of English and Danish can be analysed by means of three binary features: [\pm PREVIOUS] (event time precedes reference time), [\pm POSTERIOR] (event time follows speech time) and [\pm THEN] (separation backwards in time from the moment of speech in either of two ways: a) there is a past basis time, b) there is neither an E nor an R which coalesces with or follows S):

(11)	THEN	POSTERIOR	PREVIOUS
Present	—	—	—
Present perfect	—	—	+
Past	+	—	—
Past perfect	+	—	+
Future	—	+	—
Future perfect	—	+	+
Future in the past	+	+	—
Future perfect in the past	+	+	+

An argument in favour of the feature [THEN] is that it enables us to account for the *consecutio temporum* principle. If the governing verb is [+THEN] the governed verbs are also [+THEN], and if the governing verb is [-THEN] the governed verbs are also [-THEN]:

(12) When he *has gone* to the ball and the coast *is* clear you and I *will go* and *search* till we *find* them

He *said* the operation *would begin* as soon as the liaison officer *had phoned*.

The tenses systems can alternatively be analysed in terms of marked and unmarked feature values. If it is assumed that the unmarked value of all three features is minus, the following matrix — in which all tenses are kept apart — is obtained:

(13)	THEN	POSTERIOR	PREVIOUS
Present			
Present perfect			M
Past	M		
Past perfect	M		M
Future		M	
Future perfect		M	M
Future in the past	M	M	
Future perfect in the past	M	M	M

This matrix is intuitively satisfactory in representing present tense as totally unmarked and in assigning 1st degree of marking (complexity) to the past present perfect and future, 2nd degree to past perfect, future perfect and future in the past, and 3rd degree (total marking) to future perfect in the past.

Tense Usage

Future v. non-future tenses

Let us consider first the relationship between the present tense and the future tense. In both English and Danish, it is well known, the present tense is a highly elastic tense, for in addition to referring to present events (cf. the formula E, S) it can also refer to past events (historical present), to future events, and to habitual/universal events. The main difference between English and Danish here has to do with the use of the present tense for future events. In the case of the simple present tense, for example *the plane leaves tomorrow*, there has to be a future time adverbial and it must be a case of the future realization of something planned or certain. The progressive present does not require such an adverbial, but it must be a case of a future event which is anticipated or in preparation at the moment of speech, as in *Jane is moving to the States*.

In Danish the present tense with future time reference is used much more freely. In the case of telic verbs, in particular, future time is normally expressed with present tense, even in the absence of a future time adverbial:

- (14) Ved du hvad vi gør? Vi fejrer det med et mægtigt party. Åbent hus! Vi inviterer hele verden
(D'you know what we'll do? We'll celebrate it with an enormous party. Open house! We'll invite the whole world)

This also applies to superordinate clauses of complex sentences:

- (15) Når min søn kommer hjem, slakter vi fedekalven
(When my son comes home, we'll kill the fatted calf)

This difference between English and Danish with respect to the distribution of present v. future tense is part of a more comprehensive pattern, for unlike English, Danish uses the three other non-future tenses for the expression of posterior event time as well, cf. sentences like the following:

- (16) På denne tid i morgen har jeg utvivlsomt afsluttet sorteringen af det første bundt svar
By this time tomorrow I shall no doubt have finished sorting out the first batch of replies
Gid forestillingen snart begyndte
I wish the performance would begin soon

Hvis du havde lyttet til mig i morges, var dette ikke sket
If you had listened to me this morning, this wouldn't have happened

In each of these three pairs, English and Danish differ with respect to the value assigned to the feature [POSTERIOR]. Generally speaking, we can say that if posterior event time is expressed in some other way than by tense, then the non-future tenses are extensively used for the expression of future time in Danish, and this is not the case in English. As it appears from the above examples, such other ways in which posterior event time may be expressed are: by future time adverbials, by telic Aktionsart (telic verbs in themselves indicate transition from one state to another), and by conditional sentence structures (which express that the event referred to in the main clause is subsequent to that referred to in the subordinate clause).

Present perfect v. past tense

Apart from faulty transfer from Danish of present perfects formed with the auxiliary *være/be*, as in **They are become famous*, a major tense problem for Danes is overuse of the present perfect in English as compared with the past tense. This is due, for one thing, to the existence in Danish of a so-called *modal perfect* (Glismann, ms.), which is used in those cases where the speaker infers past events from present evidence, i.e. where a reconstruction is made:

- (17) Den afdøde har siddet ved kaminen, da morderen kom ind
(The deceased — I infer from the evidence — was sitting at the fire-place when the murderer entered)

In this example the present perfect refers to a specified past event — and for this purpose English requires the past tense.

The ordinary non-modal perfect is in Danish most often used referring to unspecified past events, i.e. in the same way as in English:

- (18) Jeg har ikke set pornografi siden den blev legaliseret
I haven't seen any pornography since they legalized it

In addition to this usage, however, Danish not infrequently uses the non-modal present perfect referring to specified or specifiable past events, where English requires the past tense:

- (19) Dickens har skrevet mange romaner
Dickens wrote many novels
Hvornår er det sket?
When did that happen?
Jeg har gået i skole i England
I went to school in England

Thirdly, there are differences between English and Danish in connection with the time adverbials *always/altid*, *ever/nogensinde* and *never/aldrig*. In English, but not in Danish, the past tense may in combination with these adverbials refer to the indefinite past:

- (20) James *was always* a man of honour
Jens har altid været en hædersmand
Did you ever hear of incest?
Har du nogensinde hørt om blodskam?
I never saw such a crowd
Jeg har aldrig set sådan en menneskemængde

According to Leech (1971) such examples with *always*, *ever*, *never* are exceptions to the rule that English past tense expresses definite past meaning.

Finally, a special Danish (Scandinavian) use of the past tense should be mentioned, viz. the *emotive past*, which may be illustrated with the following examples:

- (21) Dags med dig Daniel! Det *var* længe siden!
 (Hello, Daniel! Long time, no see!)
 Tænk at du har fundet på det! Det *var* virkelig en overraskelse
 (Fancy your thinking of that! That's really a surprise)
 Det *var* nu ærgerligt, at vi ikke kan nå at ses inden jul
 (It's really annoying that we won't have time to meet before Christmas)
 Det *var* vel nok dejligt, at vi kan få billetter til landskampen!
 (How nice that we can get tickets for the international)

Where Danish uses the emotive past tense, English uses present tense or verbless constructions.

Tense v. modality

In this section I shall return to the following problem: how does one distinguish between temporal and modal uses of Danish *ville* and English *will*? In the following examples it is fairly clear that the auxiliaries are used temporally, i.e. express future tense:

- (22) (a) The car *will be* at the door at two sharp
 (b) I'm afraid nothing *will come* of it
 (c) There'll *be* rain in Northumberland
 (d) Det *vil* nok *være* mest praktisk med et fryserum til alle disse artikler
 (It *will probably be* most practical with a coldstore for all these articles)
 (e) I'll *be losing* my way in the miles of stately corridors
 (f) We'll *be seeing* him tonight

- (g) They'll *be doing* their best
 (h) Maybe I *won't have* another chance of talking to you
 (i) You'll *have to* trust me
 (j) We *will have* ample opportunity of studying her personality
 (k) In all likelihood they *will smuggle* the necklace away

Examples (a) through (d) illustrate impersonal subjects, i.e. volition, willingness or intention are not involved here. In (e), (f) and (g) the verb is in the progressive form, whereby modality (except for predictability) is ruled out. In the remaining examples it is the linguistic context which shows that *will* is temporal.

Nevertheless, one certainly does come across sentences where it is difficult to make a decision. This is illustrated by the next two examples, which are *prima facie* ambiguous. However, one must assume that they are intended as either temporal or modal and that the larger context is likely to disambiguate them:

- (23) "I'll *write* to you", he cried, racing for a cab
 If you will go and sit in the car, we *will join* you in a minute

If *will* is followed by the perfect infinitive, volitional modality is ruled out, for it does not make sense to declare one's willingness to perform a past event. The only type of modality which *will* may express in this environment is predictability:

- (24) He *will have signed* the letter by now

When attempting to reach a decision as regards present tense + modality v. future tense one may benefit from comparing with German and French. If — in its context — an English verb phrase translates into a German verb phrase with *werden* and a French future tense verb, the auxiliary is primary (temporal):

- (25) He *will sign* the letter tomorrow
 Er *wird* den Brief morgen *unterschreiben*
 Il *signera* la lettre demain

If, on the other hand, it translates naturally into a German verb phrase with *wollen* and a French verb phrase with *vouloir*, the auxiliary is modal:

- (26) He *will sign* the letter tomorrow
 Er *will* den Brief morgen *unterschreiben*
 Il *veut signer* la lettre demain

Summary of differences in tense usage

Although there are the same eight tenses in English and Danish, and although the two languages show considerable agreement in the use of these,

there are also, it has already been shown, a number of important differences with respect to tense usage. These differences can be illustrated graphically in the following way:

(27)	Danish	English
	future	future
	present	present
	future perfect	future perfect
	present perfect	present perfect
	past	past
	future in the past	future in the past
	past perfect	past perfect
	future perfect in the past	future perfect in the past

Apart from the two major differences in the use of future v. nonfuture tenses and of present perfect v. past tense, (26) indicates a difference pertaining to future perfect v. present tense which has not been mentioned above. If a sentence contains a time adverbial which indicates 'anterior-future' time, e.g. *inden næste mandag* (before next Monday), Danish uses besides the future perfect (which is obligatory in English in such cases) not only the present perfect but also the present tense:

- (28) *Inden næste mandag afslutter udvalget sit arbejde*
Inden næste mandag har udvalget afsluttet sit arbejde
In den næste mandag vil udvalget have afsluttet sit arbejde
 By next Monday the committee *will have finished* the job

Tense in non-finite verb phrases

In non-finite verb phrases the number of tenses is in English as well as Danish radically reduced. In English both the oppositions [+THEN] ≠ [−THEN] and [+POSTERIOR] ≠ [−POSTERIOR] are neutralized, i.e. there are only two non-finite tenses, which may be called the *perfect* and the *non-perfect*. They may be illustrated with the following examples:

- (29) I expect *to finish* the job next week
 I expect *to have finished* the job next week

- Giving him a light I set fire to his moustache*
Having given him a light I set fire to his moustache

Any non-finite English verb phrase is thus characterized either by the feature specification [−PREVIOUS, 0 THEN, 0 POSTERIOR] or by [+PREVIOUS, 0 THEN, 0 POSTERIOR].

If progressive and passive forms are disregarded, the two nonfinite tenses have the following realizational possibilities:

(30)	infinitivals	participials
non-perfect	(to+) V	V+ <i>-ing</i>
perfect	to have+V+-(e)d	having+V+-(e)d

In Danish the number of tenses is reduced to four in non-finite verb phrases:

- (31) *Byggeriet anslås at koste 14 mill. kr.*
 (The building project is estimated to cost 14 million crowns)
Byggeriet anslås at have kostet 14 mill. kr.
Byggeriet anslås at ville koste 14 mill. kr.
Byggeriet anslås at ville have kostet 14 mill. kr. (inden årets udgang)

As it appears from these examples not only the opposition [+PREVIOUS] ≠ [−PREVIOUS] remains operative but also the opposition [+POSTERIOR] ≠ [−POSTERIOR]. The four non-finite tenses in Danish are thus characterized by the feature specifications [+PREVIOUS, −POSTERIOR, 0 THEN] (*at have kostet*), [−PREVIOUS, +POSTERIOR, 0 THEN] (*at ville koste*), [+PREVIOUS, +POSTERIOR, 0 THEN] (*at ville have kostet*) and [−PREVIOUS, −POSTERIOR, 0 THEN] (*at koste*). I shall term these tenses respectively *perfect*, *future*, *future perfect* and *present*.

Whereas English has tense distinctions in participials as well as infinitivals, participial non-finite verb phrases are tenseless in Danish. If passive constructions and constructions including modal auxiliaries are disregarded, non-finite verb phrases are realized in the following ways in Danish:

(32)	infinitivals	participials
present	(at)+ V	-(e)nde
perfect	at have/være+V + -(e)t	
future	at ville+V	
future perfect	at ville have/være +V+ -(e)t	

As already pointed out, Danish normally uses the non-future tenses if posterior event time is expressed in some other way than by tense. As a result of this

principle non-finite verb phrases in the future and future perfect tenses are relatively rare, posterior event time being more commonly referred to by one of the two non-future tenses:

- (33) Varmen ventes *at (ville) holde* folk væk fra sommerudsalget
 (The heat is expected to keep people away from the summer sales)
 Frankrig formodes *at (ville) have standset* sine atomsprængninger i Stillehavet inden årtiets udgang
 (France is expected to have stopped her nuclear test explosions in the Pacific by the end of this decade)

What Danish students of English must learn with respect to tense in non-finite verb phrases is to avoid transfer of the future tenses (e.g. **the building is expected to will cost a million pounds*) and to observe the distinction between the perfect and the non-perfect, not only in infinitivals, where they are familiar with it, but also in participials, e.g. *giving him a light* v. *having given him a light*.

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