Tense and aspect: the essential

What follows refers only to English. Languages deal with these two issues very differently indeed.

What’s the difference between Tense and Aspect?

Tense refers to the time of an event and is often marked by a change in the verb ending. So we have, e.g.:

1. Rita believes in ghosts (present)
2. Rita believed in ghosts (past)

In these examples, the tense is marked by a suffix, -s for the present tense (which also shows that it is third-person singular) and -d for the past form.

However, unlike many languages, English often has no inflexion on the base form of the verb in many cases. For example, in:

   They believe in ghosts

the verb is in its base form with no marker to show tense or person but it is still a present tense.

Arguably, too, English has no future tense because we don't have a form of the verb to signify future time. We denote the future in many ways, for example:

   She is going to talk to me
   She will talk to me

etc.

Aspect refers to how an event or state is perceived with reference to time. So we have, e.g.:

3. Rita has broken the rule
4. Rita is breaking the rule

Sentence 3 tells us not only that the rule was broken in the past but also that it changes the present. The fact that she has broken the rule has consequences now. It is a present tense in this respect making the present situation clear in relation to the past. It will come as no surprise that this tense form is referred to as the present perfect.

Sentence 4 gives a different aspect. The -ing ending on the verb is called a present participle ending and in English that tells us that the event is happening now or happens repeatedly. Unfortunately, English present tenses are a bit complicated.

5. Rita walks to school
6. Rita is walking to school tomorrow
7. Rita is walking to school now

Sentence 5 implies that this is her habit, not necessarily what she is doing right now.

Sentence 6 is actually the present progressive used for a future event that has been arranged in some way. It refers to the present and relates the current arrangement to the future.

Sentence 7 is the only one which is truly a present form. It can, however, imply that this action is repeated (because, e.g., she has lost her bicycle or has moved to a home nearer her school and needs no transport).

Aspect and tense are very closely related. We can use other tenses with progressive (be + -ing) aspects and with perfect aspects (have + the past participle of the verb). Here are two examples:

8. Rita had walked to school
   Perfect aspect, past tense – we call this the past perfect tense. It relates a past event to another past event.
9. Rita was walking to school
Progressive aspect, past tense – we call this the past progressive tense. It is often used in conjunction with a simple form in, e.g.:

*Rita was walking to school when she met her friends*

and this is, again, a relational tense providing the background (*walking*) to the event (*met*).

Here's a summary of the all the present and past tenses and aspects with their names, along with the future forms English also uses.

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<th>Tense name</th>
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<td>Present simple (habit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>She <em>is speaking</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Present progressive</td>
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<td>She <em>spoke</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Past simple</td>
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<tr>
<td>She <em>was speaking</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Past progressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>She <em>has spoken</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Present perfect</td>
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<td>She <em>has been speaking</em> to her boss</td>
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<tr>
<td>She <em>had spoken</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Past perfect</td>
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<td>She <em>had been speaking</em> to her boss</td>
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<td>She <em>will speak</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Future simple (factual future)</td>
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<td>She <em>is speaking</em> to her boss tomorrow</td>
<td>Present progressive (future)</td>
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<td>She <em>is going to speak</em> to her boss</td>
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<td>She <em>will be speaking</em> to her boss</td>
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<td>She <em>will have spoken</em> to her boss</td>
<td>Future perfect (past in the future)</td>
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Relativity

An important concept to understand when talking about tense and aspect is the distinction between an absolute tense and a relative tense.

- **Absolute tenses** set an event or a state in time with no need for any reference to any other event or state. For example:
  - *She ate lunch at 1 o'clock* which sets the action in the past and tells exactly when it happened
  - *He lives in London* which sets the state in the present with no need for any further information
  - *The London train always leaves at 6* which sets the action as a definite, timetabled event. We know it refers to the present, the past and the future.
  - *I will be forty years old on Monday* which sets the state (being 40) in a specific time frame (Monday)

- **Relative tenses** relate two actions together and cannot be fully understood without some kind of context or additional information. For example:
  - *He has lived in India for 20 years*
which may be considered as a reference to the past but is only fully understandable if it comes with some additional information, for example...

... so he can tell you (now) something reliable about India

or

but he is moving to Germany soon

or

and he will continue to do so

- She had already eaten
  which clearly refers to the past but is not understandable without some more information, for example:
  
  so didn’t want anything
  
  or

  but was happy to have a little lunch with us

- They will have been at university for 2 years
  which tells us about the future but is incomplete. We need to add information, for example:
  
  and have learned a good deal about geology
  
  or

  and will graduate next year

- She was sitting on the bus
  which tells us that an event was ongoing in the past but needs to be completed with something like
  
  when she realised she had missed her stop
  
  or

  when she started to feel ill

- She had been running
  which combines two aspects (the perfect and the progressive) and is incomplete unless we know what the tense relates to with, for example:
  
  because she was late for work
  
  or

  and was exhausted

This is important because many languages do not make a clear distinction between the two types of tense and the concepts are not easy to grasp.