

# grammar: the system of aspects

Like many languages, English possesses a twofold system of Tense (Present and Past) and Aspect (Simple, Continuous, and Perfect). Other languages may have additional Tenses, such as the Spanish inflected future, or a different set of Aspects: German, for instance, has all but lost the Continuous, and Irish does not possess a Perfect. Some languages have additional inflected moods, such as the Spanish Conditional. English, on the other hand, only has vestiges of an inflected subjunctive, and conditional meanings or the future are realised using tense shifts or auxiliaries.

For learners of foreign languages, it is important to understand the core meanings of, especially, the Aspects. These core meanings tend to be shared in different languages that have the full set of three, though details may vary. For instance, they are identical in Spanish and English despite the fact that there are minor differences in usage (see tables). The diagrams show the central, shared, meanings only. In each case, "X" is the moment in the past, present, or future, we are talking about.

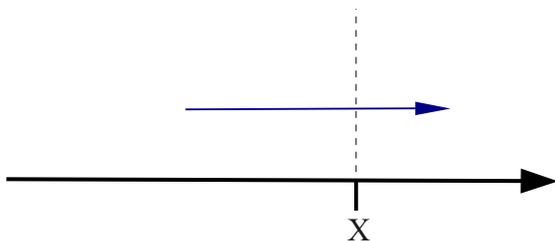


fig. 1: **Continuous** Actions that are in progress at X. These actions may be temporary arrangements -something out of the ordinary.

Continuous Aspect		
Meaning	English	Spanish
In progress at X	✓	✓
Temporary arrangement	✓	✓
"Put on" or "Different from usual"	✓	✗: "estar" instead of "ser"
Future: Fixed in the agenda	✓	✗: Present Simple

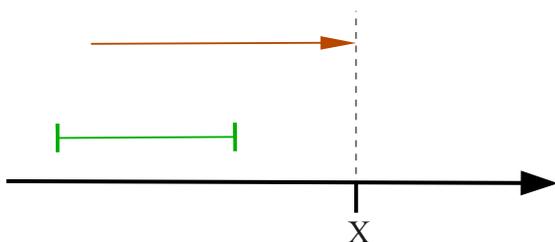


fig. 2: **Perfect** The key concepts are anteriority and indeterminacy. The time frame is not sharply defined, but has a sense of "up to X", "before X". The green line represents Past Simple, by contrast.

Perfective Aspect		
Meaning	English	Spanish
Time unknown: "Ever"/"Up to X"	✓	✓
"Just now/then", nothing new has/had started yet	✓: Perfect + "just"	✓: Also "acabar de + Infinitive"
Previous to X	✓	✓
Finished but recent	✗: Past Simple	✓