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IZVORNI ZNANSTVENI RAD
UDK: 811.111'366.58:37.091.3
DOI: https://doi.org/10.22210/strjez/55-1/1
Primljen: 29. 7. 2026.
Prihvaćen: 13. 10. 2026.

Symmetry and systematicity in presenting English tenses: How grammars make learning more difficult

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This paper examines how English tenses are presented in teaching materials. The aim is to show that systematicity and symmetry of tense formation are tacitly carried over to tense meaning and use, often in disagreement with linguistic evidence. To examine this claim, a convenience sample of traditional reference grammars, practical grammars and L2 textbooks has been used, selected to reflect what Croatian teachers and learners may encounter. The results confirm the tendency, which occurs because the fiction of symmetry and systematicity coincides with a folk theoretical view of grammar often perpetuated in popular views of language: that it is a system of rules enabling correct use. Rules are taught because they are assumed to provide easy access to all the grammatical forms. This clashes with cognitive linguistic theories, where lexicon and grammar constitute a pattern-based resource that speakers use to construe the world. A change towards a more realistic and research-based view of English tenses requires a comprehensive research agenda that could be applied across the board. The paper ends with one such proposal.

Keywords: *English tenses*, *cognitive grammar*, *pedagogical materials*, *Croatia*

1 INTRODUCTION

When teaching English tenses, as teachers, we usually resort to "rule-of-thumb" statements about their use. Are we talking about a present habit? If so, use the present simple. Is it an annoying present habit? If so, use the present progressive with *always*. Does the sentence have *yesterday* in it? If so, use the past simple. Is it a finished action connected to the moment of speaking? If so, use the present perfect. Such "rules of thumb" have a long-standing grammatical tradition, with similar descriptions appearing throughout English grammars (e.g., Jespersen, 1932; Quirk et al., 1985; Thomson & Martinet, 1995).

Relating a tense with its use or meaning[1] is compatible with the traditional notion of grammar as a system of rules, which may be extended to claims about particular choices being "(in)correct". Simplified descriptions of tenses with if-then statements tend to appear in pedagogical materials (cf. Eastwood, 2006; Yule, 2006 for examples). In such cases, tense use is seen as an "(in)correct" choice that a speaker can make based on clues in the linguistic or situational context. This culminates in grammar teaching focusing "on accuracy of form and rule learning … with mechanical exercises seen as the way to bring about the learning of grammar" (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p. 263), which is incompatible with more recent functionalist and cognitive linguistic views (see Section 2).

There may be a variety of reasons for this situation. In this paper, I will focus on one such reason specifically related to English tenses. I claim that traditional grammars, student grammars and L2 textbooks treat English tenses based on the *fiction of symmetry and systematicity*. In brief, the formation of English tenses is presented by means of tables, symmetrical across time reference (past, present, future), aspect (simple, continuous, perfect), and forming interrogatives and negatives (auxiliary use). The systematicity and symmetry of tense formation are tacitly assumed to result in their symmetrical and systematic uses. Therefore, tense uses and meanings are presented by referencing their supposedly systematic contrasts.

The idea of symmetry and systematicity is maintained throughout pedagogical materials because it relies on the traditional view that language is a rule-based activity with correct and incorrect choices. It also corresponds

[1] I employ the term *use* loosely, in the traditional sense that appears in many grammars and textbooks. Theoretically, I side with the claim that any tense has a central schematic meaning realized in specific conventional meanings in context, sometimes termed uses (for a discussion of meaning vs. use in the present perfect, see Žic Fuchs, 2009).

to the ideal of making teaching maximally efficient: providing students with a minimal number of rules that allow them to produce a maximum amount of language. Both ideas may be held pre-theoretically, but are also in line with a Chomskyan view of grammar, notably the "poverty of the stimulus" claim, whose impact on theories of language acquisition can hardly be overstated (see Section 2).

To examine how symmetry and systematicity influence pedagogical materials, I have examined how tenses are presented in several types of resources, all widely used in the Croatian context: traditional and more recent comprehensive reference grammars (Biber et al., 2021; Jespersen, 1932; Quirk et al., 1985), practical grammars for language users (Biber et al., 2002; Grgić & Brihta, 1990; Leech & Svartvik, 2013; Sinclair et al., 1990; Thomson & Martinet, 1995), pedagogical and practice grammars for teachers and students (Eastwood, 2006; Parrott, 2013; Yule, 2006), and a selection of English textbooks used in grades 7 and 8 of Croatian primary school (Anić & Pavlinek, 2022; Barraclough & Gaynor, 2021; Božinović et al., 2022; Breka, 2022; Dooley, 2020, 2021; Gaynor et al., 2021; Marinić et al., 2021, 2022; Wetz & Gormley, 2020; Wetz & Pye, 2021; Wheeldon & Shipton, 2020). I have contrasted this with recent linguistic insights on tenses. The selection of the materials is designed to reflect what university students, teachers, and L2 learners may encounter during their studies, particularly in Croatia, potentially influencing their view of grammar. This is a convenience sample, which I have not formally coded. The main thrust of the paper is to provide proof of concept rather than do a formal study: it is to explore whether the idea of symmetry and systematicity may be a plausible explanatory mechanism at all and, if so, to hypothesize what lies behind it. This can serve as a starting point for more formal future studies.

The following section provides a brief overview of my main theoretical starting points. Section 3 deals with comprehensive reference and practical grammars, and Section 4 turns to pedagogical materials. Throughout sections 3 and 4, I discuss the ways in which symmetry and systematicity are perpetuated, and to what extent this corresponds to linguistic evidence concerning the meaning and use of a particular tense, its frequency, distribution, and lexical associations. The paper ends with a discussion of the reasons for the situation and the implications for teaching grammar.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: CONSTRUAL, FREQUENCY AND STRATIFICATION

In some traditional approaches, grammar is a system of rules and the lexicon is a repository of elements to be arranged according to them. The lexicon is regarded as non-systematic, in contrast to grammar. This view corresponds to defining communication as encoding information and sending it along a channel to be decoded by the addressee. If the information has been coded incorrectly (using incorrect grammar), it will make decoding (understanding) the message impossible. Thus, "correct use" is paramount to being understood. The view is not held in its entirety by any single theory. However, elements of it are clearly evident in Chomskyan ideas of grammar, the lexicon and transformations (e.g., Chomsky, 1980), Shannon and Weaver's view of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1963), and the conduit metaphor (Reddy, 1993), which refers to how communication is conceptualized. Outside of linguistic theories, these ideas correspond to an objectivist folk-theoretical view of communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), which is why they are frequently assumed in everyday descriptions of language and language learning: language has rules that should be learned to communicate correctly; these rules are largely systematic and can be stated in learnable formulas.

This contrasts with contemporary functionalist (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; also see Larsen-Freeman, 2015, pp. 273–274), cognitive, and constructional theories (Goldberg, 2019; Langacker, 2008) that conceptualize the lexicon and grammar as resources at the disposal of the learner to convey a particular meaning. For instance, cognitive linguists claim that both the lexicon and grammar are meaningful, and that they can be combined in various ways to construe meaning. Construal is a matter of selecting novel or conventional (lexico-)grammatical patterns to express meaning. The selection of a (lexico-)grammatical construction is a matter of the speaker's knowledge of the language, view of the situation, and decisions on what they want to express (Langacker, 2008). This is also true of L2 speakers, who make strategic construal decisions (Geld & Stanojević, 2018). Speakers are thus empowered: they are not supposed to use "the correct" resource, but to select the one that matches the meaning they want to convey. Therefore, L1 and L2 speakers have to be aware of the core symbolic meaning of a tense that can be realized in a variety of contextually determined situations. Contextually determined uses are always in line with the symbolic core of a tense (Radden & Dirven, 2007). Grammar is not a

system of yes-or-no rules, but is grounded in patterns and probabilities. This has clear consequences for language learning: "Taking a probabilistic standpoint makes learning language overall look more tractable: learning no longer requires (re)constructing one grammar with certainty, merely approximating it with sufficiently high probability" (Divjak, 2019, p. 263). The idea is also related to the so-called rule/list fallacy (Langacker, 1987, p. 42): our knowledge of the language may include "rules", but this does not preclude knowing "lists" – patterns that are easily accessible as premade wholes, learned if they are sufficiently frequent, entrenched, or salient (Divjak, 2019).

These and other cognitive linguistic principles have been used in theoretical and empirical studies showing the effectiveness of the cognitive linguistic approach in foreign language teaching (for a recent timeline and overview, cf. Qin et al., 2024). Regardless of these studies, classroom "grammar instruction has been relatively unaltered by research findings" (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p. 263). Foreign language teachers teach using textbooks, which may constrain how they work (Akbari, 2008, p. 646), creating a textbook-based method of sorts (Thornbury, n.d.). Most textbook authors "rely on long-established grammar conventions and/or their intuition, rather than on empirical insights from actual language usage" (Le Foll, 2024, p. 62). Two other elements which have often been disregarded when dealing with tenses in textbooks are frequency and stratification.

Frequency is significant for L1 acquisition – "because 'rules' of language … are structural regularities which emerge from learners' lifetime analysis of the distributional characteristics of the language input" (Ellis et al., 2016, p. 35). This goes against the Chomskyan idea of the poverty of the stimulus, which claims that children have knowledge of language "which could not have been acquired from the input which is available to them" (Dąbrowska, 2015, p. 8). If stimulus is poor, language must be based on innate rules and the frequency of language forms must be largely insignificant (cf. Divjak, 2019, p. 263 for a discussion). It has now been shown that L1 stimulus is not poor (Dąbrowska, 2015) and that language learning is frequency-based (Divjak, 2019; Ellis et al., 2016). This also goes for L2 learning, although the mechanisms are not the same as in L1 (Madlener, 2015). Without going into further detail, suffice it to say that if a certain form is very infrequent in L1, it does not warrant investment in classroom practice, because classroom time is very limited. This is the typical approach to vocabulary learning: teachers do not systematically teach highly infrequent words such as *abrade* 'scrape away' or *churl* 'a rude and

unpleasant person' (Brysbaert & New, 2009, have counts of 1 for both). However, our approach to grammar tends to be vastly different (see Section 4.3).

Language is stratified, i.e., it differs depending on who is using it, when, and why. Linguistic research into discourse types (variously termed as registers, genres, or styles) shows that linguistic features may be "distributed in strikingly different ways across registers" (Biber et al., 2021, p. 8). This includes figurative language (Deignan et al., 2013), lexical combinations (Larsson, 2019) and grammatical constructions (Engel et al., 2022). L1 speakers know that a particular linguistic form is more appropriate in one context than another (Engel et al., 2022). Still, language is frequently presented as homogeneous for a variety of reasons, which is merely a convenient fiction (Horst, 2016; Lyons, 1981). The consequences for learning and teaching L2 vocabulary and grammar are significant, but rarely make their way into L2 materials (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, 2015). Therefore, students at higher proficiency levels may sound "too chatty", being largely unaware of register differences (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008). This may be related to limited exposure to authentic language materials exhibiting the full range of discourse variety (Gilquin, 2022).

Frequency and authentic materials have influenced teaching methods and materials. For instance, input may be structured to facilitate acquiring grammatical rules (Madlener, 2015). Nevertheless, pragmatic uses of grammar across discourse types remain largely outside the scope of teaching grammar (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p. 272). The reasons for this are in some measure related to the state of applied linguistics. Not all research should automatically be transposed into pedagogical practice, but should first be mediated and adapted for the purpose (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p. 263). For example, much of the cognitive linguistic materials suggested for classroom use are experimental and published within empirical studies (Gilquin, 2022, p. 111). When appearing in more mainstream publications, cognitive pedagogical materials do not always meet some of the minimum requirements for successful implementation, such as attractive layout, flexibility, or relevance (Romero Muñoz & Decorte, 2025).

Overall, in the prevailing folk theoretical view, grammar is a relatively homogeneous system of rules enabling correct use. Rules are taught because they provide easy access to all grammatical forms and, problematically, meanings. This goes against more recent theories, where lexicon and grammar are a heterogeneous pattern-based resource that speakers use to construe the world.

3 ENGLISH TENSES AND THE SYMMETRY OF FORM AND USE IN REFERENCE AND PRACTICAL GRAMMARS

In this section I explore how seeing language as a system of rules leads to rule-based presentations in grammars. Such presentations often move from a symmetrical system of forms to a symmetrical system of meanings and uses. Although this need not lead to a conflation of symmetry across form and meaning in reference grammars, conflation does occur in practical and student grammars.

3.1 Theoretical and practical treatment of tenses in reference grammars

Most traditional grammars of English describe tenses as combining reference to time (present, perfect, future) with aspectual markers (unmarked; or marked as progressive or perfect) (Comrie, 1976, 1985). This results in a system of tense-aspect combinations, customarily referred to as tenses: the present simple, present progressive/continuous, present perfect, present perfect progressive/continuous, future perfect, etc. Numerous linguistic studies examine English tenses in isolation or alongside other tenses (Brisard, 2002; Declerck, 2015; Langacker, 2001, 2011; Romain et al., 2022; Žic Fuchs, 2009, to mention a few). They deal with what counts as tense, how tenses are used, and their meaning. The theoretical discussions are rich, with limited consensus on many issues, including whether the future should be considered a tense in English (Declerck, 2015, pp. 9–13) or whether perfect should be considered aspect (Žic Fuchs, 2009, pp. 37–55).

The diversity is reflected in descriptive English grammars, some of which do not consider certain tense-aspect combinations tenses proper (Biber et al., 2021, p. 454; Jespersen, 1932, p. 4; Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 176–177, do not consider future to be a tense proper). Still, aiming for completeness, reference grammars describe all combinations traditionally dubbed as "tenses" regardless of how they classify them. As Quirk and colleagues say: "Although according to the analysis we have adopted … there is no future tense in English, it is useful … to consider the most important constructions for expressing future time" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 213). Equal treatment is particularly visible when it comes to formation. This makes sense – you can leave all theoretical ideas aside, when practice shows that "English tenses" are formed in a systematic and regular way, combining (un)auxiliated tense forms for the present, past and future with the continuous and/or perfect aspect. For example, a reference grammar provides a diagram showing how

the simple or complex verb phrase in English is formed (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 152), in essence enabling the formation of any tense-aspect combination. This provides a potentially very powerful descriptive tool for linguists and learners alike. A few simple rules provide instant access to all English tense forms.

3.2 Creating symmetries between tenses in form and use

English practical grammars capitalize on the last point, providing diagrams or tables with all English tense-aspect combinations. For example, a classic of English grammars used in Croatia provides a list of positive, negative, interrogative and negative interrogative forms across the active and passive voice of all English tenses for the verb *to teach* (Grgić & Brihta, 1990, pp. 169–177). This is clearly meant as a model to be applied to all verbs, resembling paradigms in traditional 19th-century grammars (such as Sweet, 1886). Ideally, a metalinguistically aware learner would also notice the systematicity of forms across all tenses.

Similarly, Collins Cobuild English Grammar (Sinclair et al., 1990) features all English tense forms in a table (Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 458). Being corpus-based, it asterisks rarely used passive tenses. Nevertheless, the symmetry of the system is evident, with time (present, past, future) and aspect (simple, perfect, continuous) serving as dividing lines.

The symmetry of form is strengthened by tenses supposedly having "equivalents" across the past-present-future continuum, as seen in the claim: "past perfect is the past equivalent of the present perfect" (Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 175). The purported equivalence is apparent in backshifting in dependent clauses when the main clause appears in the past tense. Tables are used to show backshifting, maintaining the illusion that there is a symmetrical system in use, as shown in Table 1 (Grgić & Brihta, 1990, p. 72).

Table 1
Symmetrical backshifting of tenses from Grgić and Brihta (1990, p. 72) with English translations

Upravni govor 'Direct speech'		*Neupravni govor* 'Indirect speech'
prezent 'present simple'		*preterit* 'past simple'
preterit 'past simple' *perfekt* 'perfect simple'	}	*pluskvamperfekt* 'past perfect'
futur 'future simple'		*futur u prošlosti* 'future perfect'

Table 1 strengthens the fiction that symmetry works across tense use (rather than only its formation), because shifting a tense presupposes that it can be used as a complete "equivalent" of its correspondent. Backshifting the past simple into the past perfect in indirect speech suggests that their meaning is equivalent and symmetrical in all other cases too. Incomplete symmetry is disregarded, such as the past simple and present perfect both backshifting into the past perfect.

Frequency data across discourse types show that the supposed equivalence does not hold. Turning to a pair of tenses that grammars often consider "equivalents" – the present perfect and the past perfect – corpus data reveal that the past perfect, alongside other past tenses, is characteristic of fiction (Biber et al., 2021, pp. 459–460), with many narratives "written entirely in the past tense" (Biber et al., 2021, p. 456). In contrast, conversation "has a strong preference for" various present tenses, including the present perfect (Biber et al., 2021, p. 454), which is a result of its focus on the immediate context (Biber et al., 2021, pp. 454–455). In fiction, past perfects outnumber present perfects roughly 2:1 (Biber et al., 2021, p. 459). The stark difference between the past perfect in conversation and fiction is further evident in the number and variety of verbs used. Conversation features only the forms *had been* and *had gone*, with many past perfect verb forms appearing only in fiction (e.g., *say*, *see*, *become*, *begin*, *bring*) (Biber et al., 2021, p. 467). None of this appears in practical grammars such as Thomson and Martinet (1995) or Collins Cobuild (Sinclair et al., 1990).

Symmetries between tenses do not hold in their frequency counts either. Data (Biber et al., 2021; Romain et al., 2022) show that tense frequencies follow a roughly Zipfian frequency: the most frequent form is about twice as frequent as the next one, three times as frequent as the third, etc. This has consequences for very low-frequency tenses like the future perfect progressive that grammars often treat as full-fledged members of the tense system. Research found that the future perfect progressive appeared only 30 times in a 7-million-word text sample, accounting for less than 0.01% of the sample (Romain et al., 2022, p. 264). The next least frequent tense was the future perfect, constituting 0.04% of the sample, with a frequency nearly 100 times greater than the future perfect progressive. The finding is consistent with those by Biber and colleagues (Biber et al., 2021, p. 460). However, low frequency is rarely taken into account in practical grammars. For example, Thomson and Martinet treat the future perfect and the future perfect progressive similarly (cf. Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 194), with-

out mentioning their rarity, and Collins Cobuild follows suit (Sinclair et al., 1990, pp. 255–256).

Moving from symmetry and systematicity of tense formation towards its use through backshifting and assuming equal frequencies leads to other supposed symmetries of use: listing and contrasting tense uses, and focusing on time expressions. Let us look at each of these in turn.

3.3 The supposed symmetry of use: listing and contrasting uses

Practical and student grammars provide detailed lists of tense uses. They are meant to be explanatory, but do not shy away from great detail and complexity. For instance, Thomson and Martinet (1995, p. 162) list the following uses of the past simple: (1) an action completed in the past at a definite (mentioned or unmentioned) time (*I met him yesterday*; *I bought this car in Montreal*); (2) an "action whose time is not given but which (a) occupied a period of time now terminated (*He worked in that bank for four years*), or (b) occurred at a moment in a period of time now terminated" (*My grandmother once saw Queen Victoria*); (3) "past habit" (*He always carried an umbrella*); (4) conditionals type 2. A similar list is provided by Collins Cobuild, which mentions various past situations and activities "that took place regularly or repeatedly in the past, but which no longer occur" (Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 250). The lists are long and complex, and the descriptions are meant to be fairly complete, but still understandable to language professionals and proficient learners.

These lists do not exhibit systematicity and symmetry when observed in isolation, but taken together, they show their implicit traces, for instance by summarizing tense use in tables. Thus, a table in *A Communicative Grammar of English* provides a condensed list of all tense-aspect uses (e.g., state, temporary habit, state up to present time), with illustrative sentences (e.g., *I like Mary*, *She's getting up early (nowadays)*, *I've known her for years*), and a timeline diagram (Leech & Svartvik, 2013, pp. 57–58). The content in the table is not completely symmetrical, but some systematicity and symmetry is suggested by the very table format.

Another way to imply symmetry and systematicity is to juxtapose "natural pairs" of tenses according to a dimension, as is the case with the past simple and present perfect. The past simple is often described as referring to an action completed in the past at a definite (explicit or implicit) time (Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 250; Leech & Svartvik, 2013, p. 48; Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 250). The present perfect, in contrast, is described as refer-

ring to an indefinite past time (Leech & Svartvik, 2013, p. 49; Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 251; Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 166).

By referencing definiteness vs. indefiniteness, the grammars are establishing a purported symmetry between the two tenses. By this definition, the present perfect should be incompatible with questions of when something happened (Thomson & Martinet, 1995, pp. 171–172) or definite time points such as *on* + *date* (Sinclair et al., 1990, p. 251). This is clearly not the case, as recognized by Leech and Svartvik (2013, p. 51), who provide examples of time expressions used with either tense, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Time expressions used with the past simple and present perfect in Leech and Svartvik (2013, p. 51)

I	*saw* *have seen*	him	today. this week/month/year. recently.

Linguistically, the definiteness of the time point is secondary to whether the speaker locates the situation in the present or past time sphere (Declerck, 2015, p. 320). When a present time sphere is explicitly mentioned, the present perfect may appear with specific past time references, as in (1) (see Declerck, 2015, pp. 333–334).

> (1) *I assumed that England had played more games in June than any other month.* ***They've played on June 3 and June 8*** *nine times each, but they take on Jamaica on June 3 this year making that 10. Furthermore, all of England 's June 3 games have been in the last 24 years!*[2]

The last sentence in (1) makes it clear that June 3, despite being a definite time point, is a way to qualify an experience situated within the present time sphere. Therefore, the symmetry of definiteness vs. indefiniteness crumbles on closer inspection.

The past simple also supposedly refers to an action that is "now terminated" (Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 162), sometimes taken to mean that it cannot have consequences for the present, unlike the present perfect. This is incorrect (Declerck, 2015, p. 302), as evident in the past simple being compatible with present continuation, a fact noticed by Quirk et al. (1985, p. 176). In cognitive linguistic terms, the past simple is vague as to present consequences, which means that "consequences for the present"

[2] Example taken from the ukWaC corpus available at: https://www.sketchengine.eu/.

are not symbolically encoded in the past simple. Rather, its connection with the present is a matter of contextual reference rather than part of its meaning (unlike the present perfect, which encodes it symbolically). Here are two illustrations from the Skell corpus (https://skell.sketchengine.eu/#home?lang=en), with additional context retrieved from their original pages.

> (2) *I have a 2002 CRV-LX AWD with 110,000 miles. Several months ago it started making a 'popping noise' when going over minor bumps. Seems to be getting louder. My mechanic thinks it could be the sway bar but that doesn't make sense to me.* ***I bought the car used so the warranty is elapsed.*** *Any suggestions?*[3]
>
> (3) ***Subsequently, Mrs Hudson bought the car from the crook****. The crook disappeared. Then Shogun Finance, who had predictably never been paid, found Mrs Hudson and sued to retrieve the car. … Mrs Hudson never acquired legitimate title to the car from the crook and had to give back the car.*[4]

The final sentence in (2) refers to a past situation that happened before the speech time. It has clear consequences for the present: the person in question still owns the car, which is why they are reporting on the problem with it. Example (3) describes a past situation which no longer holds at the moment of speech: Mrs. Hudson, who bought the car, no longer has it. Thus, present continuation and an action finished in the past do not symbolically distinguish between the past simple and the present perfect in a symmetrical way: the past simple is vague as to these two points, whereas the present perfect asserts them.

Although listing tense meanings need not lead to presupposing symmetries, a detailed examination of how tense meanings are worded shows that their presentation often relies on assumed symmetries that do not hold up under closer scrutiny. The same effect is achieved by focusing on time expressions.

3.4 The supposed symmetry of use: focus on time expressions

Many practical grammars draw attention to adverbials of time, usually by including them in examples of use (as in Thomson & Martinet, 1995, p. 162

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[3] https://angelo.mandato.com/2007/07/22/2007-civic-si-sedan-clicky-knock-popping-noise-while-turning-in-front-suspension/

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_contract_law

for the past simple) and when contrasting tenses. For instance, grammars list adverbials when comparing the past simple and the present perfect (Leech & Svartvik, 2013, p. 51; Thomson & Martinet, 1995, pp. 166–172) and other past tenses (Sinclair et al., 1990, pp. 252–254). Time expressions are likely listed for completeness rather than to provide a learnable resource. However, given that they are mentioned with all the tenses implies that the tenses are systematic in their use of time expressions and that a time expression can unambiguously indicate "correct" tense assignment.

Research data contradicts this assumption: some tenses are characterized by adverbials, but others appear without them. For example, the present perfect is strongly linked to time adverbials such as *already*, *since*, *so far*, *traditionally*, *never*, *recently*, *over the years* (Romain et al., 2022, p. 272). When encountering these expressions, there is a high likelihood that the present perfect will be used, and they correspond to many mentioned in grammars and textbooks. In contrast, co-occurrence with time adverbials is not characteristic of the past simple, which is strongly related to verbs such as *reply*, *murmur*, *whisper*, *nod*, *smile*, *mutter*, *say*, or *shout* (also see Biber et al., 2021, p. 457; Romain et al., 2022, p. 272). Thus, the verb *reply* appears in the past simple in over 80% of the cases (Biber et al., 2021, p. 457), and rarely appears with time expressions. An informal examination of 40 examples of the form *replied* from the Skell corpus revealed only a single example with a time expression, "within a few hours", rather than one of the "classical" ones. Relatedly, out of 40 examples of the "typical past simple expression" *last week*, 22 were in the past simple, but the remaining included 2 present perfects and 3 past perfects. This illustration goes to show that even the supposedly characteristic time expressions such as *last week* are by no means safe bets to unambiguously signal the use of the past simple. Although ascertaining whether adverbials are used with a tense and, if so, which ones they are, all practical grammars list adverbials for all tenses, and lexical associations are limited to two references (Biber et al., 2002, pp. 155–156, 2021, pp. 457–458).

4 TENSE USE IN PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS: CREATING AND PERPETUATING SYMMETRY

Pedagogical materials maintain the main elements of tense description: explaining and illustrating main uses, providing lists of adverbials, and contrasting pairs of tenses. Rather than providing all meanings at once, they start with those they consider central, leaving some for later stages. They

adapt their descriptions to learner age, proficiency, and sometimes their L1. Here are examples for the past simple: "We use the past simple for an action which started and finished in the past" (Marinić et al., 2022, p. 138; a seventh-grade textbook) or "We use the Past Simple for something in the past which is finished" (Eastwood, 2006, p. 18; an intermediate practice grammar). Examples follow (*Our team won the championship last year*) (Marinić et al., 2022, p. 138), as well as time adverbials: "We use the Past Simple with time adverbials: e.g. *yesterday, last week/year; two hours/days/weeks/years ago, in April, in 1595*" (Barraclough & Gaynor, 2021, p. 24; a seventh-grade textbook). Other examined textbooks and practice grammars follow suit (Anić & Pavlinek, 2022, p. 148; Barraclough & Gaynor, 2021, pp. 24, 119; Božinović et al., 2022, p. 125; Breka, 2022, p. 157; Dooley, 2020, p. 182, 2021, p. 186; Gaynor et al., 2021, p. 118; Marinić et al., 2021, p. 136, 2022, p. 138; Wetz & Gormley, 2020, p. 23; Wetz & Pye, 2021, p. 23; Wheeldon & Shipton, 2020, p. 21; Yule, 2006, pp. 20, 22).

Keeping the exposition uniform, selecting main uses (and leaving "more complex ones" for later) and using everyday language in tense descriptions is designed to facilitate learning. The uniformity of description is particularly significant in contrasting pairs of tenses and listing time expressions, which we examine in the following sections.

4.1 Contrasting tenses in pedagogical materials

Pedagogical materials place a lot of emphasis on comparing and contrasting pairs of tenses. They often reduce contrasts to simple formulas, presumably to facilitate retention. This has the effect of reifying tense use formulations and symmetries, hiding some of the complexity and sometimes even the central meaning of a tense. Let us examine the contrast between the present perfect and the past simple.

Parrott's pedagogical grammar of English for teachers (Parrott, 2013) is a rare example of embracing the complexity. It is meant for teachers to grapple with tenses, listing typical learner difficulties, consolidation exercises and examples of learner English. It cautions teachers against commonly held assumptions about the present perfect, often in relation to the past simple. Claiming that the present perfect is used for a more recent past than the past simple is dubbed "simply wrong" (Parrott, 2013, p. 239). Referring to the present relevance of events or a connection with now is designated "vague" because "we can argue that everything we express has present relevance regardless of the tense we choose (why else would we be saying or

writing it?)" (Parrott, 2013, p. 239). Such statements, combined with the idea that the present perfect refers to "unfinished periods of time", may be helpful to teachers and are in line with linguistic data. However, when referring to the key similarities and differences between the past simple and present perfect, the grammar still relies on symmetries of use (Table 3).

Table 3
Comparison of the past simple and present perfect from Parrott (2013, p. 241)

	Past simple	Present perfect simple
Finished events	✓	✓
Events in a finished period of time	✓	
Events in an unfinished period of time		✓
General biographical details about a living person		✓
General biographical details about someone who is dead	✓	
Generally used in telling stories	✓	

The main takeaway of Table 3 seems to be that both tenses refer to finished *events*, but differ according to whether the *time period* itself is finished. The last three statements are specific uses subsumed under the general definition. Their specificity creates symmetries: it would be difficult to claim that providing general biographical data is a significant part of the meaning of the present perfect or past simple, although it does relate to an example used earlier in the grammar.

Practice grammars and textbooks tend to reify symmetries, often relying on elements that Parrott (2013) cautions against. When explaining the difference between the present perfect and the past simple, the Oxford Practice Grammar provides a drawing of two football teams and the following sentences: *We've won the Cup. It's ours at last!* vs. *Well, we won the Cup last year.* The explanation is the following: "The Present Perfect tells us about the past and the present. United have won the Cup, so it's theirs now. The Past Simple tells us about the past, a time which is finished. Last year is in the past" (Eastwood, 2006, p. 32). The main problem is the statement that the past simple refers to a finished time and that "last year is in the past". Both events are finished and in the past (regardless of the recency of the first one!), but one is presented as being related to the present. This practice grammar presents the tenses in terms of rules to be learned, rather than conceptualizing grammar as a resource that enables speakers to construe an event. It creates a fictional symmetry between the two tenses based on an erroneous description of their use.

Textbooks used in Croatia in the seventh and eighth grade of primary school may contrast the present perfect and the past simple by means of symmetrical and systematic rules shown in tables. For example, an eighth-grade textbook (Breka, 2022, p. 157) bases its contrasts on the idea of (in) definiteness and continuation into the present taken from reference grammars (see Table 4). Similar claims appear in another eighth-grade textbook (Marinić et al., 2021, p. 136). They create symmetries between the two tenses which are not based on best linguistic practices, as seen in reference grammars and as mentioned by Parrott (2013). Moreover, formulating uses/meanings in terms of their objective characteristics (when a tense is used rather than what a speaker is trying to say) conceptualizes grammar as a set of rules.

Table 4
Contrast between the present perfect and past simple in Breka (2022, p. 157)

We use the present perfect simple	**We use the past simple**
* for actions that happened in the past but we don't know when or the specific time is not important.	* to talk about actions that happened in the past and we know exactly when.
I have made a lot of new friends.	I made a new friend last month.
* to talk about an unfinished action	* to talk about an action that is finished
They have lived in London for a year.	They lived in London for a year. (But not any longer. Now they live in Brighton.)

Not all textbooks are like that, but even those that are not, demonstrate how difficult it is to escape the ideas of symmetry and systematicity. A seventh-grade textbook (see Table 5) shows the difference between the present perfect and past simple as construing the action from different reference times (now vs. the past), and the (lack of) focus on the present consequences (Božinović et al., 2022, p. 125). This is what is meant by what the expression "tells us about". However, some of the remaining ideas are problematic (e.g., time specification).

Table 5
The use of the present perfect and past simple in Božinović et al. (2022, p. 125)

the present perfect simple	**the past simple**
tells us about the *situation now*	tells us about the *situation in the past*
we are interested in *what* has happened	we are interested in *when* it happened
we use it to talk about actions when we *don't specify* a time	we use it to talk about past actions when we *specify* a time
we use it with *unfinished* time reference	we use it with *finished* time reference

Textbooks and practice grammars follow the method of listing and contrasting tenses established in reference and pedagogical grammars. They use simplified and sometimes erroneous views, creating and reifying symmetries, possibly motivated by the desire to provide an easy-to-learn system of rules. In doing so, complexities of tense use are reduced, creating idealizations that may go beyond actual usage. This may lead to students having to unlearn "rules" in later stages, when new "uses" are introduced.

4.2 Focus on time expressions in pedagogical materials

Like reference and practical grammars, practice grammars and textbooks also emphasize time adverbials. For the past simple, "definite" time expressions are frequently mentioned, which contrasts with the present perfect, where adverbials such as *never, ever, just, recently, already, yet* are listed (Anić & Pavlinek, 2022, p. 70; Marinić et al., 2022, p. 141). No consulted grammar or textbook fails to mention time expressions for any tense.

Relying on time adverbials creates a symmetrical system of tenses, which is based on a fiction. Research shows a bifurcation between tenses strongly associated with particular verbs vs. time adverbials, which has not yet reached mainstream teaching materials, although applications have been proposed (Romain & Divjak, 2025). For now, the purported symmetry between all tenses being associated with *some* time adverbials remains prevalent.

4.3 Frequency and discourse types in pedagogical materials

Frequency and different use across discourse types rarely appear in practice grammars, and cannot be found in any of the examined textbooks. This comes as no surprise, given that their traditional models (reference and practical grammars) do not treat the issue systematically.

Some forms with very low frequency are simply omitted, depending on whether they are considered level-appropriate. Thus, the future perfect progressive is left out of Oxford's intermediate pedagogical grammar (Eastwood, 2006), but appears in its advanced version (Yule, 2006, p. 24), with no caveats concerning frequency. In other cases, symmetry and completeness seem too important, and rare tenses such as the future perfect progressive are discussed, but relegated to several paragraphs (as in Parrott, 2013, pp. 206–207), with no references to their rarity or mentions in later chapters.

The seventh- and eighth-grade textbooks do not mention the future perfect or the future perfect progressive. Presumably, they are left for more

advanced stages rather than being omitted due to their infrequency. This is corroborated by the future perfect continuous appearing in an upper-intermediate secondary school textbook, with no reference to its infrequency in the accompanying teacher's book (Stannett, 2014, p. 29).

Pedagogical materials seldom consider tense differences across discourse types. The seventh- and eighth-grade textbooks make no mention of it. The Croatian official curriculum stipulates that seventh graders should recognize formal and informal communication (*Kurikulum nastavnog predmeta Engleski jezik za osnovne skole i gimnazije*, 2019, p. 250), which corresponds to awareness of discourse types. However, as argued by Larsen-Freeman (2015, p. 272), such pragmatic knowledge usually refers to vocabulary rather than grammar, which seems to be the case in the examined textbooks.

Pedagogical and practice grammars usually relegate discourse types to examples, rather than explanations. Parrott (2013, pp. 221–222) is a rare exception, explicitly referencing the use of the past perfect in narrative fiction and illustrating it with an extract from a novel. Other practice grammars largely ignore discourse type differences. The Oxford Practice Grammar features a conversation between two coworkers in the canteen, with a first-person past perfect account to tell "a colleague about the dreadful day he had yesterday" (Eastwood, 2006, p. 42). This is an atypical use of the tense. Similarly, of the four examples of the past perfect in an advanced practice grammar (Yule, 2006, p. 20), two illustrate conversational use (*Joe told me our team had scored twice. I thought we had won.*), featuring verbs which are infrequently used in such a way. By the same token, an upper intermediate level textbook used in the third grade of secondary school in Croatia uses a spoken interview to exemplify the past perfect (Stannett, 2014, pp. 16–17).

Pedagogical grammars and textbooks do not explicitly rely on frequency and different discourse type distributions, although they may implicitly reflect them by providing less detail. A lack of mention of a tense is likely due to its perceived complexity and stage- or age-inappropriateness rather than its low frequency. Discourse type use is often based on erroneous data.

5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

I have claimed that the symmetry and systematicity evident in the formation of English tenses is transferred into the assumption that symmetry and systematicity hold across tense meanings. I have examined this claim in reference and practical grammars and teaching materials used in the

Croatian context. The proposal holds true. All the sources assume equal frequencies and balanced use across discourse types, and focus on listing and contrasting tense uses and time expressions. Textbooks and pedagogical materials – presumably due to increasing learnability and age- and level-appropriateness – lose much detail and nuance in their formulations.

I suggested that perpetuating assumed symmetry and systematicity of use may be based on the folk model of communication and an intuitive view of learning. The folk model of communication assumes that grammar is a system of rules enabling correct language use, essential for successful communication. Intuitively, we see symmetrical systems as easier to learn than scattered facts, which leads to the desire to present tenses as a symmetrical system. This is often merely a matter of presentation in reference grammars, but becomes reified in practical grammars and pedagogical materials.

The treatment of tenses as a symmetrical system is a natural consequence of our intuitive views of language and learning. Therefore, it is easy to perpetuate it in reference grammars, pedagogical grammars, and textbooks used across primary, secondary and tertiary education. This suggests that the view is highly resistant to change, because it is based on preconceptions that we find natural and self-evident. Consequently, any materials based on recent research and non-traditional conceptualizations of language will not only have to be practical, appealing and classroom-ready, but will go against the received view. Although some of us may be convinced that communication is best described by cognitive linguistic or functionalist views, we are still faced with the burden of proof that these approaches are beneficial to language learning. In the meantime, it is easier to rely on time-honored grammatical teaching practices.

To check the accuracy of my claims requires a larger-scale research project including several steps:

1) Formally probing a larger sample of grammars and textbooks to ascertain the degree of symmetry and systematicity of use in the presentation of English tenses across different levels.
2) Examining primary, secondary and tertiary teachers' views on the meaning of English tenses, their practices of teaching them, and their views on the difficulty of particular English tenses for them and their students to ascertain whether any consequences of symmetry and systematicity are present.
3) Examining Croatian learners' use of English tenses, how they conceptualize their meaning and how they evaluate their difficulty to as-

certain whether any consequences of symmetry and systematicity are present.

4) Based on the results of (1)–(3), drawing up a practical grammar of English tenses with a set of research-based best teaching practices with age- and level-appropriate recommendations.
5) Using interventions and action studies to evaluate the set of best practices proposed in (4) and modifying them on the basis of the results.
6) Employing elements from (4) and (5) throughout primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Steps (1) through (6) are meant to lead to a shift towards teaching grammar in line with more recent conceptions of language, which means breaking the pattern of perpetuation evident in the materials. This is also why many recent attempts at introducing innovations into teaching grammar remain largely experimental: they require a departure from how we intuitively see language. The burden, therefore, is not on teachers applying "new content", but on the entire educational system changing to a new philosophy. Although this is a tall order, the goal seems attainable if broken down and applied through small-scale pockets of good practice across the curriculum with potential to be implemented across the board. Teaching English tenses seems to be a natural place to start, because tenses are considered a significant part of English grammar, but their presentation is still very traditional, despite current research.

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Simetrija i sistematičnost u prikazu engleskih glagolskih vremena: kako gramatike otežavaju njihovo učenje

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U radu se analiziraju načini prikazivanja engleskih glagolskih vremena u nastavnim materijalima. Cilj je pokazati da se sistematičnost i simetrija tvorbe vremena prešutno prenose na njihovo značenje i upotrebu, što je često u neskladu s lingvističkim saznanjima. Ta se tvrdnja ispituje na tradicionalnim referentnim gramatikama, pedagoškim gramatikama i udžbenicima engleskoga kao inoga jezika, koji su birani tako da budu odraz onoga s čime su u doticaju nastavnici i učenici u Hrvatskoj. Rezultati potvrđuju pretpostavljenu tendenciju, koja se javlja jer se fikcija simetrije i sistematičnosti podudara s intuitivnim shvaćanjem gramatike kao sustava pravila koji omogućuje ispravnu upotrebu. Pravila se uče jer se pretpostavlja da daju pristup svim gramatičkim oblicima. Takav pogled nije u skladu s kognitivnolingvističkim teorijama, koje smatraju da su leksik i gramatika utemeljeni na obrascima, a ne pravilima te da je riječ o resursima koje govornici koriste za konstruiranje značenja. Promjena prema takvom istraživački utemeljenom pogledu na engleska glagolska vremena zahtijeva sveobuhvatan istraživački program koji bi obuhvatio sve razine obrazovanja. Rad završava prijedlogom takvoga sveobuhvatnoga istraživačkog programa.

Ključne riječi: *engleska glagolska vremena*, *kognitivna gramatika*, *pedagoški materijali*, *Hrvatska*