

## Unit 4

# AUXILIARY VERBS & ASPECT

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Unit 3, you saw that a verb in English is not always used alone, but often together with one or more **auxiliary verbs** (or ‘auxiliaries’ for short) to form a **verb group**. In this unit, we’ll explore the most important grammatical functions that are associated with the use of auxiliaries.

There are two broad types of auxiliaries in English: **primary auxiliaries** and **modal auxiliaries**. We will focus on the primary auxiliaries here, as they are much harder to learn, and are much more different from Chinese, than the modal auxiliaries. The primary auxiliaries in English are *be*, *have*, and *do*. You should not confuse these auxiliaries with the **main verbs** below:

1. My neighbour is rich.
2. He has a Rolls Royce.
3. He always does his work after dinner.

The verbs *be*, *have* and *do* in the above sentences are main verbs and are used on their own, but what we’re dealing with in this unit are the uses of these verbs as **auxiliaries**, as in:

4. My neighbour is walking his dog.
5. He has bought a Jack Russell.
6. The dog does not bark at strangers.

## II. THE AUXILIARY *BE* & THE PROGRESSIVE ASPECT

As an auxiliary, *be* has two main uses. The first is to mark **progressive aspect**. [NB. The ‘progressive aspect’ is also known as ‘continuous tense’ (which is a misleading term which we’ll avoid here).] The progressive aspect is marked by the auxiliary *be* + the **present participle** form of the main verb, e.g.:

7. He is/was dancing with his partner.
8. They are/were singing the song ‘Changing Partners’.

If *be* is the first verb of the verb group, it will be marked for either present or past tense, as in the above examples.

The form itself is quite simple. It is much more important to understand the uses of the progressive aspect. The following questions will help you to work them out.

**QUESTION 1:**

The following sentences have verbs in the present tense with or without progressive aspect. By comparing the two, can you figure out the main use of the progressive aspect?

1. He usually plays tennis on weekends, but not today.
2. No, he's not in his office right now. He is playing tennis at the club.
3. He washes his car every day.
4. He is washing his car now, but he should be back in a few minutes.
5. She waits for her children at the bus stop after school each day.
6. She is waiting for you at the bus stop, so better hurry now!
7. I feel very satisfied with the way I've lived my life.
8. I am feeling sick. I've got to lie down.

ANSWER: The Progressive Aspect is used to indicate:

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Please check your answers before proceeding to the next question.

**QUESTION 2:**

The examples in Question 1 show only the simplest use of the progressive aspect. The following data may look similar, but if you think about it, they do not show exactly the same use of the progressive aspect as in Question 1. What similarities and differences do you notice between them?

1. She writes romantic novels for a hobby.
2. She is writing a book on Leslie Cheung at the moment. It'll probably be finished by the end of the year.
3. My brother lives with my parents.
4. My brother is living with my parents these days, but he'll move into his new apartment when it's ready.
5. He normally plays villains and psychopaths in his movies, but he is now playing good guys for a change.

ANSWER:

**QUESTION 3:**

How do you think the progressive aspect is used in the following examples?

1. I am leaving for London this weekend.
2. He is moving to the Peak next month.
3. Beijing is hosting the Olympic Games in 2008.
4. What are you doing tomorrow evening?
5. When are you starting your new job?

ANSWER:

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You have seen three of the most important uses of the progressive aspect. What you should also know about the progressive aspect is that it cannot be used with all verbs in English.

**QUESTION 4:**

Which of the following verbs are wrongly used in the progressive aspect?

1. I am knowing five languages.
2. He is having a house and a car.
3. She is liking classical music.
4. This book is belonging to me.
5. I am understanding your problem.
6. They are thinking about the problem.

ANSWER:

The progressive aspect is wrongly used in:

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Can you explain why most of the above verbs cannot be used in the progressive aspect? Before you do that, you may want to compare English with Chinese. Chinese expresses the progressive aspect by attaching the progressive ‘marker’ *zai* (在) before the verb, e.g. *ta zai kan shu* (他在看書 ‘He’s reading a book’). In Chinese, too, there are certain verbs that you cannot attach *zai* to.

**QUESTION 5:**

Give the Chinese equivalents of the sentences in Question 4. [NB. If you need to use Cantonese, the Cantonese progressive marker is *gen* (緊), which you attach after the verb, e.g. *koi tai gen xu* (佢睇緊書 ‘He’s reading a book’).] Which Chinese verbs cannot take the progressive marker? Do you notice any similarities with English?

ANSWER:

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You will no doubt discover that, by and large, similar verbs in English and Chinese cannot take the progressive aspect marker! Is this a coincidence?

**QUESTION 6:**

Can you think of an explanation why certain types of verbs both in English and Chinese cannot take the progressive aspect? This may not be a simple question, so we’ll give you a clue. First, think of what the progressive aspect does (refer to Questions 1 and 2 in particular); then, think of the nature of the ‘activity’ or ‘state’ that the verbs in Question 4 stand for. Is there a clash between these activities or states and the meaning of the progressive aspect? (Don’t just think of ‘mental’ vs. ‘physical’ alone, as *think* and *understand* are both mental, and yet the latter cannot take the progressive aspect.) A common-sense explanation would be enough.

ANSWER:

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Now let’s try to sum up what we have learnt from Questions 1-6 about the progressive aspect in English. Questions 1 and 2 have brought out the central uses of the progressive aspect, namely:

**The progressive aspect typically indicates an on-going and unfinished activity, or a temporary state.**

Thus, sentence (4) in Question 1, ‘He is washing his car now’, indicates that the activity of washing his car is going on and unfinished at the moment of speaking, and that it is

something which is temporary and not permanent (that is, his washing of the car will come to an end some time). The examples in Question 2 emphasise the temporariness. For example, 'My brother is living with my parents these days' implies that this is a temporary arrangement, not a permanent one.

With the above characterisation in mind, it makes sense that certain states which are not normally temporary but are (more or less) permanent, such as *to know, like, understand*, etc. do not fit well with the progressive aspect. (Note that, unlike *understand, think* (in the sense of using your mind) is a temporary activity, and hence can take the progressive aspect.) We can make the following generalisation:

**Verbs that indicate non-temporary or permanent states (e.g. *know* or *understand*) cannot be used with the progressive aspect.**

#### **QUESTION 7:**

In the following sentences, can you explain why what looks like the same verb (e.g. *have*) can be ungrammatical (\*) in one sentence but grammatical in another when used with the progressive aspect? (Clue: Do these two uses of the same verb have the same meaning?)

1. \* He is having a sports car.
2. He is having his dinner.
3. \* He is seeing the picture on the wall.
4. The doctor is seeing his patients in the surgery.
5. \* This book is costing \$100.
6. I must resign from the club. It is costing me too much.

ANSWER:

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#### **QUESTION 8:**

So far we have been using the progressive aspect in combination with the present tense -- or 'present progressive' for short. The following are some examples where it is combined with the past tense ('past progressive'). What do you think the past progressive indicates?

1. When I rang last night, he was having his shower.
2. I was driving to Hong Kong island when the typhoon struck.
3. Two hours after the football match, the fans were still hanging around.
4. What was the burglar doing when the police arrived? He was trying to climb over the fence.

5. When the earthquake struck, some people were rushing into buildings while others were rushing out of them.

ANSWER:

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As we have seen in the first part of this unit, the first function of the auxiliary *be* is to indicate progressive aspect. The second important function is to indicate **passive voice**, as in: 'The windows were smashed by the typhoon'. We will deal with this in Unit 5.

One final note: Some students use *be* unnecessarily, e.g.

1. \* I am agree with you.
2. \* I am strongly recommend this book to all of you.
3. \* We were asked 30 chief executives about what is necessary.

### QUESTION 9:

What do you think the students were trying to say in sentences (1-3) above? Is there a difference in their saying 'I am agree with you' and the normal 'I agree with you'? Discuss this with your classmates and teacher.

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Since the use of *be* in sentences like (1-3) above is ungrammatical, take care to avoid using it this way. If you think the writer was trying to add emphasis by using *be*, the proper way is to use *do* ('I do agree with you', etc.)

## III. THE AUXILIARY *HAVE* AND THE PERFECT ASPECT

### 1. PRESENT PERFECT

The auxiliary *have* has one main function: i.e. to mark the **perfect aspect**, e.g. 'I have eaten already'. There's that word again, 'aspect'. Maybe we should pause here to ask what 'aspect' means in general.

**Aspect** has to do with how a situation (an event or a state) is viewed. As you know, a situation can be seen from a number of different 'viewpoints'. For example, you can look at it as something going on at some point of time (such as right now). The **progressive** aspect does that. 'He's dancing on the table' means the activity of dancing is happening right now (at the moment of speaking). What we see is only what's going on

at this moment, and does not include the beginning or end of that activity. The dancing started before you say this sentence, and will go on after you've said it.

Now, what 'viewpoint' is connected with the **perfect aspect**?

### QUESTION 10:

The following sentences contain verbs in the present tense and perfect aspect (or 'present perfect' for short). In these sentences, what is the viewpoint from which we are looking at the underlined event (e.g. from the beginning, middle, end, or what)?

1. I have finished my homework, so I can sit back and enjoy a video now.
2. You have eaten two pizzas already – do you really want more?
3. He has gone to Japan, and won't be back till next week.
4. I have applied for ten jobs, but so far I have received only two replies.
5. She has married and divorced eight times already, and is now working on husband No. 9.

ANSWER:

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As you may have concluded above, the perfect aspect views an event from the end-point, as something that is completed. The combination of **present tense and perfect aspect** (as in sentences 1-5 above) implies that something is completed before the present moment. So, 'I have finished my homework' means that, before the present moment (the moment of speaking), the homework was completed, and therefore I am free to enjoy myself now.

## 2. PAST PERFECT

What about the combination of **past tense** and perfect aspect (the 'past perfect')? Question 11 below will help you think about how it should be used.

### QUESTION 11:

Look at the way the past perfect (underlined) is used in the following sentences. When did the event referred to in the past perfect take place?

1. By the time I arrived at the airport, the plane had left.
2. By 1960, the population of Hong Kong had reached 3 million, and by 1990, it had exceeded 6 million.

3. Luckily for him, by the time he retired, his children had all grown up.
4. When he reached home, he found his house in a mess. Someone had broken all the windows. They had even smashed the flower-pots.

ANSWER:
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As the name itself suggests, the use of the 'past perfect' implies that something was completed before some other point of time in the past. This is an important point. The past perfect is often misused by students, who treat it as if it were the same as the simple past tense, but it is not.

**QUESTION 12:**

In the following pairs of sentences (a-b), the past perfect is used correctly in one but wrongly in the other. Identify where the past perfect is wrongly used, and explain why it is wrong:

- 1a. He had moved to his new home yesterday.
- 1b. He had moved to his new home by the time he got married.
  
- 2a. By the end of the War the Americans had dropped two atom bombs on Japan.
- 2b. In August 1945 the Americans had dropped two atom bombs on Japan.

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**QUESTION 13:**

Fill in the blanks in the following passages with the correct forms of the verbs in brackets:

1. After more than 150 years of colonial rule, Hong Kong reverted to China on July 1, 1997. By that time, it \_\_\_\_\_(grow) from a barren rock to one of the most modern and prosperous cities in the world, and the population \_\_\_\_\_(increase) from a few hundred to six million. After 1997, many of the people who



\_\_\_\_\_ (migrate) overseas earlier \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) to return, as they \_\_\_\_\_ (find) that things were not so bad after all.

2. Recently, I returned to my old neighbourhood to look for my childhood friend. I found that she \_\_\_\_\_ (move) out long ago. Some neighbours told me that she \_\_\_\_\_ (marry) a rich old man from America, but others said that she \_\_\_\_\_ (join) the sisterhood and \_\_\_\_\_ (go) to serve in India. Someone even said that she \_\_\_\_\_ (die). I hope that I can find her again some day.

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### 3. PRESENT PERFECT AGAIN

Now let's go back to the present perfect, which (as we've seen) refers to events completed before the present moment. A natural question to ask at this point is this: if both the **simple past tense** and the **present perfect** refer to events which were completed before the present – e.g. 'I wrote a letter' and 'I have written a letter' -- then what is the difference?

#### QUESTION 14:

Compare the sentences below, where the verb is used either in the past tense or the present perfect. [NB. Those marked with \* are unacceptable.] Can you explain why some are grammatical and some are not, and describe the differences between how the past tense and present perfect should be used?

1. His forefathers arrived in this country in 1900.
2. \* His forefathers have arrived in this country in 1900.
3. The train left two minutes ago.
4. \* The train has left two minutes ago.
5. The train has just left.
6. He has written many books since 1989.
7. \* He wrote many books since 1989.
8. Until now, I have not heard from him.
9. \* Until now, I did not hear from him.

ANSWER:

Apart from the above differences, some people think that the present perfect is used for very recent events, and the past tense for events further back. Even if this is a typical interpretation, is it necessarily true? Consider the following sentences, which are perfectly normal:

1. I saw him just now. (This happened a few minutes ago.)
2. I have seen this film before. (The film is *Gone with the Wind* and you actually saw it many years ago.)

You will see that ‘recentness’ is not really the crucial point here. Then what is?

#### **QUESTION 15:**

There are some fine differences between the sentences in the past tense and present perfect below. Can you tell which ones are more appropriate and which ones less appropriate? Can you explain why?

1. A: Can we start the party now? B: Sure, my parents have left.
2. A: Can we start the party now? B: Sure, my parents left.
3. The guests have arrived. Bring out the food.
4. The guests arrived. Bring out the food.
5. A: Would you like to join us for dinner? B: No thank you, I have eaten.
6. A: Would you like to join us for dinner? B: No thank you, I ate.
7. Can you give me a lift home? The last bus has left.
8. Can you give me a lift home? The last bus left.

ANSWER:

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#### **4. PERFECT + PROGRESSIVE ASPECT**

English grammar allows us to combine the perfect and progressive aspects within the same verb group – e.g. ‘I have been living here for ten years’. This may sound awfully complicated, but the following exercise should help you understand it a little better.

#### **QUESTION 16:**

In the following sentences, you will find verb groups which are either in the present perfect or the present perfect progressive. From the contexts provided in these sentences, can you figure out the difference between the two?

1. I have written a novel. It was hard work and I am glad it’s finished at last.

2. I have been writing a novel. It's been two years since I started it, and I have no idea when I'll be able to finish it.
3. I have read the exam scripts. There were no failures.
4. I have been reading the exam scripts. I think I should be able to finish by tomorrow evening.
5. He has helped me before, and I'm sure he'll help me again.
6. He has been helping me in his spare time, but I don't think he can go on helping me much longer.

ANSWER:

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#### IV. THE AUXILIARY *DO*

*Do* has been called a 'dummy' auxiliary. Do you know why?

**QUESTION 17:**

From the following examples, can you explain the uses of the auxiliary *do*?

1. I know where he lives.
2. I do not know where he lives.
3. Do you know where he lives?
4. Yes, I do.
5. He climbed Mount Everest alone.
6. Did he climb Mount Everest alone?
7. He did not climb Mount Everest alone.
8. Why did he climb Mount Everest alone?
9. When did he climb Mount Everest?

ANSWER:

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A common error is to leave out the auxiliary *do* when it's needed, e.g.:

1. Why  $\wedge$  they go to the center of the earth?

2. She thinks he ^ not know.

Such errors are not surprising for Chinese students, because in Chinese the above sentences would be perfectly correct, since Chinese does not have any auxiliaries like *do*.

Other than the above uses, *do* is also used for emphasis: 'I do believe that he is innocent'. But be careful – it should only be used occasionally, not regularly.

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### ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

Fill in the blanks with the correct forms of the verbs in brackets:

#### **Text 1:**

Global economic growth \_\_\_\_\_(take) its toll on the environment, and Hong Kong's pollution is certainly the worst I \_\_\_\_\_ (see). The warning bells \_\_\_\_\_(ring) and the air pollution index (API) readings keep increasing in Hong Kong. Strict policies and fines \_\_\_\_\_(be put) in place, and it is well-known that the removal of lead from petrol and the use of energy-efficient technology can also greatly reduce the problems. But why \_\_\_\_\_the situation not \_\_\_\_\_(improve)? Can't the government do more to fight pollution?

It may be our fault. Many environmental measures \_\_\_\_\_(be set), but only a few people support them. How can the air improve without our support?

The government should strictly punish people who throw rubbish on the streets or in the sea. Industries which \_\_\_\_\_(pollute) our rivers and oceans must be hit with heavy fines.

#### **Text 2:**

Under Article 23 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong is required to pass laws against acts of treason, secession, sedition, subversion and the theft of state secrets.

There \_\_\_\_\_long \_\_\_\_\_(be) concerns that the laws will restrict freedoms and be used to clamp down on dissent.

Officials both in Hong Kong and on the mainland \_\_\_\_\_(seek) to play down the fears, while insisting that the time \_\_\_\_\_(come) for the national

security laws to be enacted. The government is expected to release a consultation paper soon, perhaps as early as next month.

**Text 3:**

Since the downfall of former strongman Suharto in 1998, restrictions on Chinese culture \_\_\_\_\_(begin) to lift.

Last year, President Megawati \_\_\_\_\_ (declare) Lunar New Year or Imlek as a national holiday, making it the first time that Chinese culture \_\_\_\_\_ (be recognized) officially since the 1965 ban.

Since 1999, Chinese Indonesians \_\_\_\_\_ (celebrate) Imlek openly, shopping malls \_\_\_\_\_ (be decked) out in red and gold lanterns every New Year, several Chinese-language newspapers \_\_\_\_\_(hit) the streets, and Metro television station broadcasts the news several times a day in Putonghua.

But Hendrawan says, in practice, that many of the old laws discriminating against ethnic Chinese \_\_\_\_\_ (operate) still. Along with 100 other ethnic Chinese professionals, he \_\_\_\_\_ (meet) the president's husband, Taufiq Kiemas, last night, to demand equal rights for Chinese-Indonesians.

