

Chapter 2

Verbs and Verb Phrases

Introduction

Verbs in English can be distinguished by the kinds of marking they can take and by what they can co-occur with. English verbs all function inside verb phrases (VPs). A simple VP consists of a lexical verb acting as the main verb of the VP and anywhere from zero to four auxiliary verbs which are used to mark modality, aspect, and voice. (A compound VP consists of the conjunction of two or more simple VPs. Compound VPs will be discussed in Chapter 6 which deals with coordination.)

VPs can be finite or non-finite. A finite verb phrase

- marks tense and agreement where appropriate, and
- has a subject which must be in the subject case if it is a pronoun¹.

A non-finite verb phrase

- never marks tense or agreement;
- has a subject which can never be in the subject case if it is a pronoun.

Verbs have a range of forms from the base (or uninflected) forms through a number of inflected forms, as illustrated in figure 1.

Table 1: Forms of English Verbs					
	Base Form	-s form	-ing Participle, Present Participle	Simple Past Form	-ed Participle, -en Participle, Past Participle
Regular					
<i>play</i>	<i>play</i>	<i>plays</i>	<i>playing</i>	<i>played</i>	<i>played</i>
Irregular					
<i>write</i>	<i>write</i>	<i>writes</i>	<i>writing</i>	<i>wrote</i>	<i>written</i>
<i>cut</i>	<i>cut</i>	<i>cuts</i>	<i>cutting</i>	<i>cut</i>	<i>cut</i>

¹ As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, some pronouns in English mark what is called case. In particular, for example, the personal pronoun *I* is used for subject and subject complements of finite verbs, as in *I like pickled beets* and *It is I*, while *me* is used for objects of various kinds, as in *Pickled beets please me* and *Pickled beets are pleasing to me* and *my* is used for possessors, as in *Pickled beets tickly my fancy*. The form of many pronouns is sensitive to the role of the pronoun in the clause and if it is the subject sensitive to what kind of verb phrase (finite or non-finite and if non-finite the kind of non-finite VP) it is the subject of.

The main clause of a declarative sentence² (a statement) or interrogative sentence (a question) is always finite. A simple sentence consists of only one clause – the main clause. A compound sentence consists of the coordination of two or more finite clauses. A complex sentence consists of a main clause which contains at least one subordinate clause. Therefore all complete declarative or interrogative sentences contain a finite clause. We'll start by considering the structure of finite verb phrases.

Finite VPs

The simplest finite VP consists of just a full or lexical verb. In the sentence *The children played*, *played* is the lexical verb, acting as the main verb of the VP; it is also the complete VP on its own. In the sentence *Mary likes cheese*, *likes* is the lexical verb, main verb, and complete VP. Notice that when the lexical verb is the only verb in the VP, then it is marked with tense and, where appropriate, agreement.

Tense What does tense mean? In this case, it means that you can look at the form of the verbs *played* and *likes* and tell that the events or states conveyed in the sentences took place at different times – that the children's playing took place in the past and that Mary's affection for cheese is still going on. Tense is a system of marking on the first verb of a finite VP to indicate whether the event or state held in the past or it holds in the present or future (what might be called the non-past). English has two tenses, which are traditionally called past and present.³

Agreement If the verb is in the present tense, then it will agree⁴ with its subject in person⁵ and number⁶: *-s* is suffixed (attached to the end of) to a verb which has a third person singular subject

² A declarative sentence makes a statement, as in *The moon is made of green cheese*; an interrogative sentence asks a question, as in *Is the moon made of green cheese?*; an imperative sentence gives an order, as in *Make it out of green cheese!*; and an exclamatory sentence expresses an exclamation, *What great cheese the moon is made out of!*

³ We'll see however that the present is used to mark a range of times including the future. Notice that there is no way in English to mark a single verb to indicate an unambiguous future. Tense-marking in English is accomplished by marking the first verb in the VP. Unambiguous futures are indicated by using a modal auxiliary, *will* or *shall*, or by using semi-modal constructions like *be going to*.

⁴ Traditional grammar treats one form as changing to adjust to the presence of another form as agreement or concord: The notion here is that the verb changes to agree or be in concord with its subject. We assume that the person and number of the subject in a clause is fixed--already decided by the speaker/writer, and that the form of the verb changes to agree with it in person and number. So verbs are said to agree with their subjects; subjects are not said to agree with verbs.

⁵ In English there are three persons: **first person** refers to the speaker or the speaker and the group that includes the speaker; **second person** refers to the addressee or addressees; **third person** refers to anyone or anything else. So for example, the first person subject pronouns are *I* and *we*; the second person pronoun is *you*; the third person subject pronouns are *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*.

⁶ English has two numbers: **singular** referring to one and **plural** referring to more than one.

More complicated verb phrases which mark more modalities, aspects and passive voice require the use of auxiliaries; in general, auxiliaries are also required when the clause is negative, a direct question, or emphatic—that is, when the clause requires the presence of an **operator**. (*be* is the only main verb which can function as an **operator** in American English; *have* and *be* are the only main verbs which can function as **operators** in British English.)

Auxiliaries

Simple VPs which consist of more than one verb contain a main verb and one or more auxiliaries. Auxiliaries are distinct from main verbs in a couple of ways: (1) they can function as **operators**, carrying negatives and emphatic stress and marking questions; (2) they primarily carry grammatical information. Tense and agreement are marked on the first verb of a VP, so if a VP contains any auxiliary, the first auxiliary will be the only available carrier of tense and agreement; and (3) they are a closed class: *can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must, have, be, and do*.

Operators If you consider the declarative sentences (13-14) below, how would you make them negative?

13. I was playing chess.

14. I have played chess.

You add *not* or *n't* after the first verb:

15. a. I was not playing chess. b. I wasn't playing chess.

16. a. I have not played chess. b. I haven't played chess.

We can see that *was* and *have* are the first verbs in (13) and (14) since *was* and *have* are the words in the sentence which mark tense (*was* is past and *have* is present) and agreement (since if the subject in (13) was *We* the sentence would be *We were playing chess* and if the subject in (14) was *She*, the sentence would be *She has played chess*).

But a simple rule that says put the negative after the first verb won't work, if the first verb is a main verb other than *be*. So the negative of

17. I played chess.

is not

18. a. *I played not chess. b. *I playn't chess.

but

18' a. I did not play chess. b. I didn't play chess.

Maybe the rule should be “Put *not* or *n’t* immediately before the lexical verb.” So to make (20) negative,

19. I have been playing chess.

you would get

20. a. *I have been not playing chess b. *I have beenn’t playing chess.

which are clearly ungrammatical. Similarly, the negative of (17) *I played chess* must be (19a) or (19b), not **I not/n’t played chess*, as a rule that inserted the negative before the lexical verb would give.

So instead we must say that you add *not* or *n’t* after the first auxiliary to negate a clause. The only exception to this rule is that you can also add *not* or *n’t* after a lexical main verb which is a form of *be*, as in (22)

21. He is a chess player

is negated as

22. a. He is not a chess player. b. He isn’t a chess player.

Negation is therefore sensitive to whether or not a verb is an auxiliary and works differently with lexical verbs and auxiliaries. Similarly the structure of questions is sensitive to the same categories: It treats auxiliaries and forms of the verb *be* in one way and all other lexical verbs another way. For example, to make a *yes-no* question⁸, you move the first auxiliary or form of *be* before the subject as in

23. Was I playing chess? (cf. 13)

24. Have I played chess? (cf. 14)

25. Have I been playing chess? (cf. 20)

26. Is he a chess player? (cf. 22)

These (and other properties) distinguish auxiliaries from other verbs and distinguish auxiliaries from any other category. Only auxiliaries and forms of *be* can be operators.

Practice Sentences

Identify all the lexical and auxiliary verbs in the sentences below.

⁸ There are several different kinds of interrogative sentences. Among them are *yes-no* questions (which anticipate an answer *yes* or *no*) and *wh*-questions (which use a *wh*-pronoun, *what*, *who*, *which*, *where*, *why*, *when*, *how*).

EXAMPLE: Everyone has talked all night.

The auxiliaries is *has*; the lexical verb is *talking*. *Has* can function as an operator: *Has everyone been talking all night?* Only auxiliaries and forms of *be* can be operators – *has* is not a form of *be*. If you remove *has*, you get *Everyone talks all night*. (Try to keep the tense the same – *has* is present tense so *talk* should be as well.) *Talks* marks agreement and tense, but it cannot be an operator and it does not belong to the closed class of auxiliaries, so it must be a main verb. Only lexical verbs function as main verbs.

1. Oswald has stolen the money.
2. Mariel might have been given an A by that professor.
3. Some people think that Boise should be the capitol of the U.S.
4. Has the light been blinking on and off?
5. Could that cat have been being fed by someone in this house?

The identifications of all the lexical and auxiliary verbs in the sentences are given below; the auxiliaries are underlined and the lexical verbs are italicized. Evidence for some of the identifications are given below the sentences. Do your identifications agree with these?

1. Oswald has *stolen* the money.

The auxiliary is *has*; the lexical verb is *stolen*. *Has* can function as an operator: *Has Oswald stolen the money?* Only auxiliaries and forms of *be* can be operators – *has* is not a form of *be*. If you remove *has*, you get *Oswald steals the money*. (Try to keep the tense the same – *has* is present tense so *steal* should be as well.)

Steals marks agreement and tense, but it cannot be an operator and it does not belong to the closed class of auxiliaries, so it must be a main verb. Only lexical verbs function as main verbs.

2. Mariel might have been *given* an A by that professor.

The auxiliaries are *might*, *have*, and *been*. *Might* is on the closed list of modal auxiliaries -however, *might* can also be a noun (as in, *Their might was overwhelming*). However, we can tell it is an auxiliary here, because it can function as an operator as in *Mariel might not have been given an A by that professor* which means it must be an auxiliary or a form of *be*. Since *might* is not a form of *be* it must be an auxiliary. If we remove *might* (the past tense form of *may*, remember), we get *Mariel had been given an A by that professor*.

Have is a primary verb which might be either an auxiliary or a main verb so the question is can it be an operator. The answer is yes: *Had Mariel been given an A by that professor* is fine. Now what about *been*? Forms of *be* are the trickiest to work out. If you removed *had*, you get *Mariel was given an A by that professor*.

was, here, is transparently a verb --it is an operator if the sentence is made into a question as in *Was Mariel given an A by that professor*. The question is whether this form of *be* would be an auxiliary or a main verb. We can't just remove the auxiliary and get something good (*Mariel gave an A by the professor* is ungrammatical.) The answer here comes from deciding what the voice

of this sentence is. We have a form of *be*, followed by the past or *-en* participle of *give* with a *by*-phrase. This looks suspiciously like a passive, but, if this *be* is the passive auxiliary, we should be able to find the appropriate active paraphrase for the clause. You can make a passive clause active by removing the form of *be*, adapting the verb form to that appropriate to follow the auxiliary *have* and making the object of *by* the subject and making the subject of the passive into the object of the active. So *That professor might have given Mariel an A* should be the active paraphrase of (2). Since this active clause does, in fact, mean the same thing as (2), *been* must be a passive auxiliary.

given, the past participle of *give*, is the only available main verb. A passive VP must end in a past participle of the main verb, so *given* must be the main verb, therefore it must be the lexical verb.

3. Some people *think* that Boise should *be* the capitol of the U.S.
4. Has the light been *blinking* on and off?
5. Could that cat have been being *fed* by someone in this house?

Modal Auxiliaries

What words can act as operators? *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, *would*, and *must* all can be operators. Consider the following sentences:

27. I can't play chess.
28. Could you play chess?
29. May I play chess?
30. You might not have played chess.
31. Shall we play chess?
32. Should you play chess?
33. I won't play chess.
34. I wouldn't play chess.
35. Must you play chess?

These auxiliaries are presented together because they belong to the same category – modal auxiliaries. How do we know they belong to the same category?

(1) In standard English (both British and American) they are mutually exclusive – you can only have one per verb phrase.

36. *I might could play chess/*I could might play chess/*I can may play chess etc.

(2) They occur in the same position in the verb phrase – always first.

37. I might be playing chess/*I was might(ing) play chess.

(3) They condition the next verb in the same way. The next verb is always an uninflected form. It never has any suffixes or other inflections.

38. She might play chess.

39. She should be playing chess.

40. She could have played chess.

41. She must be admired by everyone.

(4) They all fail to show agreement with third person singular subjects, so

42. a. I can play chess.

b. He can play chess.

c. *He cans play chess.

All these auxiliaries set the event or state expressed outside of ordinary reality – they set it in the future, in a hypothetical state, in an inferred state or as possibility or probability or necessity.

We can tell that some of them form present/past pairs: *can/could*, *may/might*, *shall/should*, *will/would*. It is not that *could* can refer only to past time events or states since something like *I could go tomorrow* clearly refers to some non-past event. However, one way we can tell that *could*, *might*, *should*, and *would* are all formally past tense verbs is that their history shows it. (Check out these words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see their etymology.) Another way that is more current is to see what happens when we switch from direct to indirect discourse. In (44) we see ordinary direct discourse.

43. The doctor said, “I am a great doctor.”

This sentence gives the doctor’s exact words. But when we switch the sentence to integrate the proposition into the sentence, the pronouns and the tense of the verbs switch from being appropriate to the context in which they were originally uttered to being appropriate to the time of the new complete utterance, as in

44. That doctor said that he was a great doctor.

When we switch a direct quotation with present tense modals (as in 46a-47a) to an indirect quote, the modal switches to past tense modals (as in 46b-47b).

45. a. The doctor said “I can do anything!”

b. The doctor said that she could do anything.

46. a. Moriarty announced “I will defeat Holmes.”

b. Moriarty said that he would defeat Holmes.

Modal auxiliaries are therefore special since no other past tense form can be used to refer to future or present events. Another way in which modal auxiliaries are special is that unlike all other verbs, they never show agreement – the present tense forms do not change if the subject is third person singular. However, since they serve as operators and since they control the shape of the following verb, we know they must be verbs—in particular auxiliary verbs.

Primary Auxiliaries

The primary auxiliaries are fully productive verbs of English which can (with different senses) all be used as full lexical verbs. They are *be*, *have*, and *do* and are used to indicate aspect and voice and to function as operators when one is needed.

Aspect

There are four aspects in English, three of them marked by the presence of primary auxiliaries and specific forms of the following verbs.

Simple The first aspect is simple, which has no primary auxiliary of its own. (48-50) are simple aspect.

- 47. I play chess.
- 48. The children might like balloons.
- 49. Oliver left last Thursday.

Simple aspect in non-modal VPs in the present tense have two readings. When the main verb is stative⁹, the simple present just means present: the state holds now, as in

- 50. I know French.
- 51. Mary likes you.

When the main verb is not stative, then the simple present usually means the event or state is not necessarily true now, but that it is habitual or repeated and that the last occurrence hasn't happened yet, as in

- 52. The children play hide-and-seek.
- 53. My husband teaches linguistics.

(53) is true even if the children aren't playing anything right now, as long as they have been known to play hide-and-seek repeatedly already and they haven't played their last game yet. (54) is true even if my husband is fast asleep now, as long as he has taught linguistics and will

⁹ The verb expresses an unchanging state – like *know*, *understand* or *resemble*. continue to in the future.

again.

The simple past does not require this same habitual sense with non-stative verbs. (55) can hold even if the children only played hide-and-seek once in their whole lives.

55. The children played hide-and-seek .

Simple aspect forms with modal auxiliaries don't have the habitual sense in the present tense either, so in (56) and (57) there is no requirement that events be interpreted as

56. The children will play hide-and-seek.

57. I may run around the block

habitual or repeated. There is a special narrative use of the simple present to give the impression that the events being narrated are happening at the time of the narration. It is intended make the events more vivid, as in

He stands at the front door hesitating. Finally, he reaches out and pushes open the door and before him stands everything he fears and his heart stops.

Progressive So how do English speakers usually talk about a presently on-going event?

We use the present progressive. Tense is marked on the first verb of the VP. The progressive is formed with a *be* auxiliary and the *-ing* form of the following verb, as in

58. The children *are playing* hide-and-seek.

59. My husband *is teaching* linguistics.

It can't be used with stative verbs in standard American and British English, so (60) and (61) are ungrammatical in standard American and British English (though they are fine in Indian English—the English of the Indian subcontinent).

60. *I am knowing French.

61. *Mary is liking you.

The present progressive can be used to talk about the future as well.

62. The children are playing hide-and-seek tomorrow.

63. My husband is teaching linguistics next year in France.

In general, the present progressive can be used to talk about non-stative events which are not completed – so to talk about events happening now or which will end in the future.

Past progressives are used to talk about events that took place across time in the past. Many times you can use either the simple past or a past progressive interchangeably, as in (64) and (65) (because (64) seems to include the reading of (65)). Other times they mean different things, as in (66) and (67).

64. I was studying all day yesterday.

65. I studied all day yesterday.

66. When the bell rang, I was studying.

67. When the bell rang, I studied.

They differ logically when there is a point in time expressed: In the past progressive, the event is interpreted as being on-going on at the point in time, as in (66) (at least as having started), while in the simple past it is interpreted as just starting at the point in time, as in (67).

Perfect We use the perfect to look an event or state from or after its endpoint. The perfect is expressed with a *have* auxiliary and a following *-en* participle.

68. I *have studied* today.

69. By 5:00 a.m. yesterday I *had finished* that book.

Students often have difficulty distinguishing the uses of the present perfect and the simple past, since they both are used typically to talk about events and states which are completed as of the present. However, the point of view and time setting of the present perfect is clearly the present as we can see by noting that it cannot occur with adverbials that would set the event in the past, like *last week* or *yesterday*:

70. *I have finished that book last week. (as opposed to *I finished that book last week*)

71. *I have studied yesterday. (as opposed to *I studied yesterday*)

Used with a modal *will* or *shall*, a present perfect produces a form meaning that the event or state will be complete by some point in the future, as in

72. I will have left by tomorrow night.

A past perfect means the event or state is complete with respect to some point of time in the past. If you don't specify that point in time or it isn't very clear from context, past perfects tend to sound rather odd. So (73) sounds fine, but (74) sounds odd (at least out of context without an implied point in the past under discussion).

73. The students had performed their first number by dinnertime.

74. ?The students had performed their first number.

A simple past can be interchangeable with a past perfect in many cases, so *The students performed their first number by dinnertime* is also fine with much the same meaning. However, when no point in time is given (and no modal is used), a simple past tense form is usually preferable to a past perfect, so (74) would be better as *The children performed their first number*.

On the other hand, when a neutral point in time is given (one which does not force a particular order of events, *when* or *at* unlike *before* or *after*), simple past, past progressives and past perfects all mean quite different things. Consider (75-77) below:

- 75. When the bell rang, the children left.
- 76. When the bell rang, the children were leaving.
- 77. When the bell rang, the children had left.

In (75) the ringing preceded the leaving; in (76) some leaving occurred before the ringing (and the leaving could go on after the ringing); and in (77) the leaving was completed at the time of the ringing.

A past perfect modal construction forces a past time reading (which past tense modals don't normally have) so **I could go yesterday* is impossible, but *I could have gone yesterday* is just fine.¹⁰

Perfect Progressive The perfect progressive is formed by combining the perfect and the progressive, that is, a *have* auxiliary, followed by the past or *-en* participle of *be*, *been*, with a following *-ing* participle, as in

- 78. I have been working all day.
- 79. Oscar has been finishing that book for a year.

The perfect progressive suggests that some (usually not all) of the event has been completed, and completed over time. Notice that casting (79) in the perfect (as in (80)) produces something really strange,

- 80. ?Oscar has finished that book for a year.

When the lexical verb is normally viewed as nondurative, a durative reading can be forced by making the VP progressive (as with *finish* in (79)). *Die* can be viewed as an instantaneous event or a durative process, but the process reading is really only possible in the progressive. So if you want to suggest that some completed event took place over time, you use the perfect progressive, as in

- 81. Cousin Evelyn had been dying for weeks when the doctor arrived.

¹⁰ Notice that this strengthens the claim that *could*, *should*, *might*, and *would* are formally past tense since present perfects cannot co-occur with past-time adverbials like *yesterday*. (See (70) and (71) above.)

82. ?*Cousin Evelyn had died for weeks when the doctor arrived.
83. ?*Cousin Evelyn died for weeks when the doctor arrived.

If you want to have a past-time referring modal progressive, it must be a perfect progressive. So to refer to time past, you must use (84), not (85).

84. My brother should have been working yesterday.
85. *My brother should be working yesterday.

Voice

English has two voices, active and passive. Only some verbs are used in the passive voice. Most transitive verbs (verbs which have a direct object or indirect object) can be used in the passive voice.¹¹ Essentially all verbs can be used in the active voice. That, among other things, has led grammarians to treat the active voice as basic and the passive voice as derived from it.

Voice is somewhat more involved to talk about than aspect, since voice requires us to rearrange the structure of the whole clause. To make an active sentence like (86) passive,

86. A lion killed the lamb.

you must rearrange the structure so that the direct object in (86), *the lamb*, becomes the subject of the passive in (87), the subject in (86) becomes the object of the preposition *by*, and a *be* auxiliary is inserted (and the lexical verb, which is the next verb in the VP, must be an *-en* participle).

87. The lamb was killed by a lion.

Passive clauses don't have to include the *by* phrase (often called the passive agent) so (88) is also grammatical

88. The lamb was killed.

If a speaker wants to reduce the importance of the subject of the active or increase the importance of the object of the active, the clause will typically be converted into a passive. In (87) *the lamb* is typically the focus of the sentence and in (88) *a lion* is entirely removed from the event. Often if the subject of the active would be indefinite (and never discussed again) and the object would be definite, a speaker is more likely to employ the passive. The passive is more common in certain kinds of texts – so technical and other impersonal texts are more likely contain passives.

¹¹ I say most because some transitive verbs like *have* (in the sense of “own” or “have as a part”, as in “Mary has a little lamb” or “I have two eyes”) and *resemble* are never used in the passive.

Operators Revisited: the *Do* Auxiliary

As noted above, English requires auxiliaries or forms of *be* to negate a clause (since *not* follows the auxiliary or *be* and possibly contracts with it) and to make some kinds of questions (including *yes-no* questions, since the auxiliary or form of *be* must precede the subject). There are several more ways in which auxiliaries and forms of *be* can serve as operators – when a speaker wants to insist on the truth of a sentence, the operator is stressed. So in (89)-(92), the operator gets stress, as indicated by underlining and implies a kind of defensive insistence on the truth of the utterance.

89. Mary is a good doctor.
90. The doctor will be here on time.
91. The children have left.
92. The lamb had been killed by the lion.

English has several different kinds of tag questions. One fairly neutral kind, which just seems to ask the addressee(s) to confirm the first part of the question consists of a statement followed by a copy of the first auxiliary or form of *be* in the statement and a pronoun that refers back to the subject of the statement. If the statement is positive, then the tag copy is negative. If the statement is negative, then the tag copy is positive. So (93)-(97) are all tag questions.

93. Mary is a good doctor, *isn't she?*
94. The doctor will be here on time, *won't she?*
95. The children have left, *haven't they?*
96. The lamb had been killed by the lion, *hadn't it?*
97. The students can't do that exercise, *can they?*

A number of constructions, therefore, need an operator to work. But how do they work if they are based on clauses which don't contain an operator, like (98)-(101)?

98. Mary became a good doctor.
99. The children left.
100. The students did the exercise.
101. My brother works in California.

Lexical verbs other than *be* as an operator cannot function as operators. Consider

- 102.a. *Mary became not/n't a good doctor. b. *Became Mary a good doctor?
- 103.a. *The children left not/n't. b. *Left the children?
- 104.a. *The students did not/n't the exercise. b. *Did the student the exercise?
- 105.a. *My brother works not/n't in California b. *Works my brother in California?

When an operator is needed in a clause without an auxiliary or form of *be*, then the primary auxiliary *do* must be used. So the negatives and question forms of (98)-(101) have to have an extra *do*, as in

- | | |
|--|--|
| 106.a. Mary didn't become a good doctor. | b. Did Mary become a good doctor? |
| 107.a. The children didn't leave. | b. Did the children leave? |
| 108.a. The students didn't do the exercise. | b. Did the students do the exercise? |
| 109.a. My brother doesn't work in California | b. Does my brother work in California? |

If *do* is inserted as an auxiliary whenever we need an operator (in negatives, in questions, in emphatics) and the VP doesn't contain a candidate, that implies that the *do* auxiliary will never co-occur with any other auxiliary or form of *be* and that appears to be true.

Digression 1: Distinguishing auxiliary and lexical verbs: *Can*

Now that we've established what properties distinguish auxiliaries from main verbs, we can use those properties to identify them. Notice that if you are asked what category *can* belongs to, you have a problem. You really can't tell what category it belongs to in the abstract – you have many choices. It might be a noun, as in

110. The can is full of water.

It might be a lexical verb, as in

111. My aunts can tomatoes every year.

It might be a modal auxiliary, as in

112. I can help you.

If we just consider the verb uses, then how can we tell that the *can* in (111) is a lexical verb and that the *can* in (112) is an auxiliary verb, in fact, a modal auxiliary? We can demonstrate that the *can* in (111) is a verb and not an auxiliary. How can we demonstrate that it is a verb? By showing that it marks tense and agreement, we can demonstrate that the *can* in (111) is a verb since only verbs mark tense and agreement with their subjects. So we can change (111) to the past tense, as in (113).

113. My aunts canned tomatoes every year.

If we change the number of the subject of (2) from plural to singular, the form of *can* also changes, as in (114).

114. My aunt cans tomatoes every year.

The *can* in (111) changes if you change the aspect of the verb phrase, as in (115-116).

115. My aunts are canning tomatoes every year
116. My aunts have canned tomatoes every year.

In (111) *can* is obviously a verb. It is moreover clearly a lexical verb. First, it is the only verb in the verb phrase in a complete sentence – it must be a lexical verb. It has lexical content – it means “put into cans”. That’s not the kind of meaning that tends to grammaticize into an auxiliary. More importantly we can demonstrate that it can’t be auxiliary. If *can* in (111) is an auxiliary verb, it ought to be able to function as an operator. Let’s try. If we negate (111), we get

117. My aunts don’t can tomatoes every year.

If we turn it into a *yes-no* question, we get

118. Do my aunts can tomatoes every year?

If we emphasize the truth of (111), we get

119. My aunts do can tomatoes every year.

Every time we make the sentence into one which needs an operator, suddenly out of nowhere appears a form of *do*, serving as the operator. That form of *do* must, therefore, be an auxiliary. Notice that *do* as an auxiliary cannot co-occur with any other auxiliary. So it is clear that, while *can* in (111) is a verb, it is not an auxiliary verb so it must be a lexical verb.

In (112) *can* can be an operator – which means (1) it is a verb and (2) it is an auxiliary verb. So if we make (112) into a negative, a question or emphatic, the *can* functions as an operator, as in (120-122).

120. I can’t help you.
121. Can I help you?
122. I can help you.

How can we tell it is a modal auxiliary? There are a couple of ways: (1) Modal auxiliaries, unlike all other verbs, do not mark agreement when they are present tense and the first verb in a VP. If the subject of (3) shifts from *I* to *She*, nothing else changes. Even though in (123) there is a third person singular subject, the verb does not change.

123. She can/*cans help you.

(2) Modal auxiliaries in standard American and British English cannot co-occur with each other. We can’t say

124. *She will can help you.

Therefore, we can see clearly that in (111) *can* is a lexical verb and in (112) *can* is a modal auxiliary.

Digression 2: Distinguishing auxiliary and lexical verbs: *Do*

What about *do*? Consider the forms of *do* in (125) and (126) below.

125. The children do homework every day.

126. The children do not like homework.

In (125), *do* is a lexical verb and, in (126), *do* is a primary auxiliary. How can we tell? We can use very similar arguments to those we used above. In (125) and (126) both, *do* is clearly a verb; it marks both tense (contrast it with the past tense version in (127) and (128)) and agreement (contrast it with the examples in which the subject is singular rather than plural in (129) and (130)).

127. The children did homework every day.

128. The children did not like homework

129. The child does homework every day.

130. The child does not like homework.

They share those verb properties. How do they differ? Well, only the *do* in (17) is an operator. In (125) you would have to add another instance of *do* to have an operator, as in (131).

131. *The children don't homework every day/The children don't do homework everyday.

Moreover, we can add a modal auxiliary to (125), as in

132. The children can do homework every day.

or a primary auxiliary, as in

133. The children have done homework every day.

134. The children are doing homework every day.

The auxiliary *do* cannot co-occur with any other auxiliaries.

135. *The children can not do like homework

136. *The children do not can like homework

137. *The children have not done like homework

138. *The children do not have liked homework

139. *The children are not doing like homework

140. *The children do not be liking homework

So we note that (135-140) are all ungrammatical. They are ungrammatical because we are trying

to force this auxiliary *do* to co-occur with other auxiliaries in the same VP and that is impossible. Only the auxiliary *do* is barred from co-occurring with other auxiliaries.

For you to try

1. Consider a slightly harder case: *have* as in
 - i. The students have a real problem
 - ii. The students have spoken to me about the problem.

How can you determine which is a lexical verb and which is an auxiliary verb? What evidence do you need?

2. Now consider a much harder case: *be* as in
 - iii. They were very interesting books.
 - iv. They were books.
 - v. They were reading books yesterday.
 - vi. They were written by a complete hack.

These are harder because both lexical *be* and auxiliary *be* can be operators.

How can you determine which forms of *be* are lexical verbs and which are auxiliary verbs? What evidence do you need?

PRACTICE ANALYSIS: Identifying VPs

1. Underline all the VPs in the text below.
2. Identify the type of each verb (lexical, primary auxiliary or modal auxiliary)
3. Identify the tense, aspect and voice of each VP you identify.

A Visit

It was a dark and stormy night. Well, actually, it wasn't. It was a mildly overcast day, but that's not nearly as dramatic. As we all know, drama is everything in this life. I was walking down the narrow street in front of the house, while I dreamed I walked on the boulevards of Paris.

I was entertaining myself with fantasies in which I was a tall, slinky, enigmatic beauty who had outwitted the Gestapo. At the beginning of the dream, I had been

wearing black pants and a black sweater, clearly a member of the Resistance on a midnight raid. But in only a few minutes my clothes had mysteriously changed into a white silk evening gown of the sort you often see in the films of the 30's.

My imagination was quite vivid and completely unconstrained by the necessities of reality. In my daydream my clothes shifted at will regardless of the appropriateness of the attire. I realize that the only thing more annoying than the recitation of dreams is the recitation of daydreams, but you're a captive audience and I find this story quite gripping. Nobody else will listen to me, and you aren't, after all, going anywhere.

So there I was, without a spot on my white silk dress or a hair out of place. The Gestapo of my imagination, of course, were very frightening, but my particular brand of cleverness and beauty apparently left them vulnerable to misdirection. It seemed that they were shocked by my general gorgeousness so that they were taken in by my clever tale of misfortune and confusion. Besides, who would think that anyone would go out on a midnight raid on an ammo dump in a white, low-cut evening gown?

Unfortunately, another part of my brain mentioned to me that the reason no one would imagine that someone in white formal clothes would be attacking an ammo dump is that it would be moronic. The dress would be like a neon sign that was flashing "I'm here. I should be arrested." On top of that piece of idiocy, the kind of shoes appropriate for an evening gown would hardly work for an assault on an ammo dump.

By the time I reached the house, I had realized that this drama wasn't going anywhere. When I went in, though, the real drama was waiting for me. Mom and Dad were just standing by the phone, which was making that angry noise it makes when you

don't hang up. Both of them were pale and trembling and tears were streaming down their faces. I admit the way they looked scared me. I couldn't picture what could have upset them so much after all I was all right and they were both in front of me apparently okay.

It took them a minute, but they finally choked it out, "There's been an accident."

Do you realize what a nasty sentence that is?

Then I knew it must be you. Something bad had happened to you. You know I've often said that I wish you would drop dead? It turns out I didn't mean it. But you are a jerk. Only you could get in such a stupid accident. Other guys fall out of dorm windows in a drunken stupor when they go away to college. You don't even drink. You're hit by something some drunken nitwit throws out of a dorm window. A stupid lamp hits you on the head, and now here you are, in the hospital, unconscious. If I'd wanted a brainless brother, I'd have kept you the way you were. You know you always were kind of unconscious, but now you really are. Unconscious, I mean.

You're not like that woman down in Florida. The doctors say that somewhere inside of you there's a working brain, at least as much as there has ever been. That's good, I guess. You shouldn't be be a vegetable. That would be really nasty even if you were an onion, and I like onions. But what if your brain is really working, and you just can't connect ot the outside world? What if the stuff in your head is horrible, like the Gestapo, but you don't get a white evening gown? What if you never escape?

You should just wake up now. Mom and Dad look so sad all the time. I know

they've been spending a lot of time here. They don't usually leave me alone with you, but they're having some kind of meeting with the doctors now. You should wake up now.

Have I told you what happened at school yesterday? I don't think I told anyone so I guess I didn't tell you. Ms. Jackson told me that the essay I wrote for civics (about police states, you know, the Gestapo and all that), the one we talked about before the accident, won the school contest and it's being sent in to the state essay competition as the only entry for the whole school. I know I shouldn't really care, but I'm afraid I really do. I like that essay. But I'd trade it away, I'd give it up, if you'd just wake up. I didn't tell Mom or Dad. I don't think they can hear anything now that isn't about you.

Anyway the essay came out pretty well. I used the Gestapo as an illustration of an overwhelming arm of a totalitarian state, just like we talked about. I didn't put in any brave Resistance members in white gowns, though.

It's time. I'll see you tomorrow. You should just wake up; if not now, then soon. I love you.
