

# Comparison of Tenses between Latin and English

In English and Latin, tenses can be visualised in a table with two variables. These variables are *time*, which is fairly self-explanatory, and *aspect*, which refers to how an action extends through time. In Latin and English there are three 'times', as with Dickens' Christmas Ghosts: **Future**, **Present**, and **Past**. There are also four 'aspects' relevant to English and Latin.<sup>1</sup> These are:

1. **Simple** – a single, self-contained action.
  - E.g. I ask, I asked, I will ask.
2. **Continuous** – an incomplete or progressive action.
  - E.g. I am asking, I was asking, I will be asking.
3. **Perfect** – referring to a state resulting from a past action, or a past action with continuing relevance to the time of the verb.
  - E.g. I have died [and now I am no longer alive], I had hurt my knee [and it was still hurting], I will have eaten [and I will therefore no longer be hungry].
4. **Perfect Continuous** – combines Types 2 and 3 – i.e. referring to a state resulting from an incomplete action in the past, or an incomplete action in the past with continuing relevance to the time of the verb.
  - E.g. I have been playing tennis, I had been playing tennis, I will have been playing tennis.

Note that for our purposes here, *Perfect* is an aspect, not a tense. The tense traditionally called 'Perfect' in Latin is actually two tenses: the Past Simple (I ate) and the Present Perfect (I have eaten) – it can be translated both ways. When referring to Latin, I like to call the Past Simple tense the **Aorist Perfect**, after the Aorist tense in Greek, and the Present Perfect tense the **True Perfect**, since this is what is generally understood by Perfect in other languages. For more explanation see Point 4 on the next page.

Combining these three Times and four Aspects we get the following range of twelve English tenses – an unusually wide range. They are named by putting Time before Aspect, e.g. Present Perfect or Past Perfect Continuous.

	<b>Simple</b>	<b>Continuous</b>	<b>Perfect</b>	<b>Perfect Continuous</b>
<b>Future</b>	I will eat	I will be eating	I will have eaten	I will have been eating
<b>Present</b>	I eat	I am eating	I have eaten	I have been eating
<b>Past</b>	I ate	I was eating	I had eaten	I had been eating

<sup>1</sup> These four aspects can actually be categorised into two larger groups, *Perfective* and *Imperfective*. *Perfective* means a single, completed action and contains *Simple* and *Perfect* under this schema. *Imperfective* means a continuous or progressive action and contains *Continuous* and *Perfect Continuous* under this schema. The Simple Past tense in English is thus *Perfective*, but not *Perfect* (confusingly).

Now let's see how Latin's traditional tenses map onto this schema.

	Simple	Continuous	Perfect/Perfect Continuous
Future	Future		Future Perfect
Present	Present		<b>True Perfect</b>
Past	<b>Aorist Perfect</b>	Imperfect	Pluperfect

And now again, with examples:

	Simple	Continuous	Perfect/Perfect Continuous
Future	<i>amabo</i> I will love		<i>amavero</i> I shall have loved
Present	<i>amo</i> I love		<i>amavi</i> I have loved
Past	<i>amavi</i> I loved	<i>amabam</i> I was loving	<i>amaveram</i> I had loved

We can now see that the tense traditionally called **Imperfect** in Latin (e.g. *audiebam*) is equivalent to the English Past Continuous tense (I was listening), and that the tense traditionally called **Pluperfect** (e.g. *audiveram*) can be translated in English either by the Past Perfect (I had listened) or by the Past Perfect Continuous (I had been listening) - whichever seems more natural.

There are several points to note here.

1. Latin makes no distinction between the Perfect and Perfect Continuous aspects in any tense. This means that *audivi* can mean both 'I have listened' and 'I have been listening' in English.
2. In Future and Present Time, Latin also makes no distinction between the Simple and Continuous aspects. This means that *audio* can mean both 'I listen' and 'I am listening'.
3. In Past Time, however, Latin *does* distinguish between the Simple and Continuous Aspects. Past Time Simple (I listened) is expressed by the **Aorist Perfect**, and Past Time Continuous (I was listening) is expressed by the **Imperfect** Tense.
4. Finally, the tense traditionally called **Perfect** in Latin was originally two tenses: the Aorist Tense 'I listened' (equivalent to the English Simple Past); and the 'true' Perfect 'I have listened' (equivalent to the English Present Perfect).
  - By the Classical period, the Aorist and 'True' Perfect forms had merged into one tense with two potential meanings. Despite the name, the Classical Perfect is usually translated with the English Simple Past (I listened), not the Present Perfect (I have listened).
  - The Aorist forms generally replaced the 'True' Perfect forms to create the Classical 'Perfect', but in a few verbs the original Perfect forms replaced the Aorist, e.g. *cecini* 'I sang', *peperi* 'I gave birth', *cecidi* 'I fell'. Note the characteristic consonant reduplication in the Perfect, as in Greek.
  - Perfect forms in Classical Latin can have either Aorist or 'True' Perfect meaning, depending on context.
  - For the purpose of Sequence of Tenses, the Aorist Perfect is a Historic Tense, and the True Perfect is a Primary Tense.