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استاذ المادة:- م. ايهان عبدالمنعم غفوري

A University Grammar of English

Lecture No.9

Look at each of these examples. Do they have **present tense** or **past tense**?
Can we change the tense?

- *She feels sick.*
- *I was watching TV.*

In the first example, we have the present tense **verb** form *feels*. We could change to past tense: *She felt sick*.

In the second example, the verb phrase *was watching* contains the past tense form *was*. We could change to the present tense: *I am watching TV*.

These are called **finite** clauses because they contain finite verbs: verbs in the present tense or past tense form.

Our examples of finite clauses so far are **main clauses**: *She feels sick* and *I was watching TV* stand alone as complete sentences. **Subordinate clauses**, which form part of a larger **sentence**, can also be finite:

- *I know that she feels sick.*
- *While I was watching TV, the phone rang.*

Compare the examples above with those below which are **nonfinite** clauses (highlighted). Can you see a difference in the **verb phrases**?

- *She doesn't want **to feel sick**.*
- ***Watching TV**, I dozed off.*

The highlighted clauses do not contain any tensed verb forms. Nonfinite clauses are usually subordinate clauses, as in these examples: *to feel sick* and *watching TV* could not stand alone as sentences.

Nonfinite clauses tend to express less information than matching finite clauses. Take this example:

- *I am happy **to see you**.*

We have here the nonfinite clause *to see you*. Think about this clause on its own. Does it tell us when the seeing happened? Or who is doing the seeing?

- No, it doesn't tell us whether the seeing is present or past (unlike the finite clauses *I see you*, *I saw you*). We can only work out the time from the main clause verb (*am*).
- No, it doesn't say who is doing the seeing: there is no **Subject** expressed in this clause. We have to work out from the main clause that it is 'I' (the speaker) doing the seeing. (If we had *He is happy to see you*, it would be 'he' doing the seeing.)

It is very common for nonfinite clauses to have no Subject. However, some do have a Subject. For example, in *I am happy **for you to start without me**, you* is the Subject of the nonfinite subordinate clause.

There are three main types of nonfinite clause, corresponding to the three types of nonfinite verb. Let's look at an example of each type.

- *I'd always wanted **to go to Australia**.* [S1A-050 #5]

This is a **to-infinitive clause**, with *to* followed by the **infinitive** verb form *go*.

- ***Arriving just before lunch**, I looked for Harry Frampton in the dining room.* [W2B-004 #67]

This is an **-ing participle clause** (also called present participle clause), with the **-ing** participle verb form *arriving*.

- *They've never improved on the distance **covered on that first expedition**.* [S2B-024 #30]

This is an **-ed participle clause** (also called past participle clause), with the **-ed** participle verb form *covered*.

To-infinitive clauses are easy to recognise because they have an infinitive verb form following *to*. Can you identify the *to*-infinitive clauses in these examples?

- *It only took us about twenty minutes **to get here**.* [S1A-019 #144]
- *It only took us about twenty minutes **to get here**.*
- *I'd be quite keen **to try anything like that**.* [S1A-035 #57]
- *I'd be quite keen **to try anything like that**.*
- *Does anyone else want **to be nominated**?* [S1B-079 #50]
- *Does anyone else want **to be nominated**?*

- *To reach it on foot, you must navigate hundreds of miles across a perishing sub-zero landscape.* [S2B-024 #3]
- *To reach it on foot, you must navigate hundreds of miles across a perishing sub-zero landscape.*

It is easy to recognise *-ing* participle verb forms, as they always end in *-ing*.

They can occur in finite clauses after a tensed verb: *He is/was eating his dinner.*

However, in *-ing* participle clauses, which are nonfinite, there is no tensed verb before the participle:

- *Eating his dinner, he leafed through a magazine.*

Can you identify the *-ing* participle clauses in these examples?

- *Thank you for your letter enquiring about vacancies at the Museum shop.* [W1B-016 #71]
- *Thank you for your letter enquiring about vacancies at the Museum shop.*
- *I remember being 3-2 down to Liverpool in the semi-final.* [W2C-014 #24]
- *I remember being 3-2 down to Liverpool in the semi-final.*
- *I hope you don't mind sleeping on the floor.* [W1B-004 #53]
- *I hope you don't mind sleeping on the floor.*
- *Overtaking a moving vehicle is more dangerous.* [S2A-054 #214]
- *Overtaking a moving vehicle is more dangerous.*

To recognise *-ed* participle clauses, we need to remember that an *-ed* participle form does not always end in *-ed*. This is because some verbs are irregular. Examples of irregular *-ed* participles occur in the following:

- *He has taken it. It was taken.*
- *He has sold it. It was sold.*

In each of those examples the *-ed* participle occurs in a finite clause, after a tensed verb.

But in *-ed* participle clauses, which are nonfinite, there is no tensed verb before the *-ed* participle. Here is an example:

- *Taken three times a day, these pills should clear the rash.*

Now see if you can identify the *-ed* participle clauses in these examples:

- *This is a diagram of the respiratory system taken from front to back.* [S2A-035 #53]
- *This is a diagram of the respiratory system taken from front to back.*
- *Compared with London, travel around Brussels is so amazingly hassle-free.* [W1B-002 #67]
- *Compared with London, travel around Brussels is so amazingly hassle-free.*
- *The evidence given to Cullen was monitored closely.* [W2C-007 #122]
- *The evidence given to Cullen was monitored closely.*
- *First across the line was East Germany in 1969, followed by West Germany in 1972.* [W2B-018 #36]

- *First across the line was East Germany in 1969, followed by West Germany in 1972.*

Key points

A **finite** clause typically contains a verb in the present tense or past tense form. It can be a main clause or a subordinate clause, e.g.:

- *Kate broke the dish.* (main clause)
- *They suspect that Kate broke the dish.* (subordinate clause)

A **nonfinite** clause does not contain any present or past tense verb. It is usually a subordinate clause. There are three main types:

- *Kate didn't mean to break the dish.* (*to*-infinitive clause)
- *Kate remembers breaking the dish.* (*-ing* participle clause)
- *They will replace the dish broken by Kate.* (*-ed* participle clause)