

THE PAST CONTINUOUS TENSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DESCRIPTIONS IN MAJOR ENGLISH GRAMMAR SOURCES**Ahmedov Azimjon***teacher of Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages.*

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Annotatsiya: *Past Continuous (yoki Past Progressive) zamoni o‘tmishda ma‘lum bir vaqtda davom etayotgan harakatlarni ifodalovchi muhim grammatik shakldir. Ushbu maqolada Past Continuous zamonining yirik ingliz grammatik manbalarida – A. J. Thomson va A. Martinet, Raymond Murphy, Michael Swan, Betty Schramper Azar, George Yule, L. G. Alexander hamda Marcella Frank asarlarida qanday ta‘riflanganligi o‘rganiladi. Maqolada ushbu zamonning umumiy mazmuni, qo‘llanishi, nazariy talqinlari va mualliflarning yondashuvlaridagi farqlar tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, barcha manbalar Past Continuous zamonining asosiy vazifasini bir xil izohlashsa-da, mualliflar turli darajadagi chuqurlik, nazariy yondashuv va pedagogik metodlar bilan unga izoh beradi. Ushbu tahlil o‘quvchilar, o‘qituvchilar va tadqiqotchilar uchun zamonning lingvistik xususiyatlarini chuqurroq anglashga yordam beradi.*

Kalit so‘zlar: *Past Continuous, Past Progressive, ingliz grammatikasi, aspekt, lingvistik tahlil, progresiv aspekt, fon harakati*

Аннотация: *Время Past Continuous (или Past Progressive) является важной грамматической формой, используемой для обозначения действий, которые находились в процессе выполнения в определённый момент в прошлом. В данной статье исследуется, как время Past Continuous описывается в ключевых источниках английской грамматики — в работах А. Дж. Томсона и А. Мартинет, Реймонда Мёрфи, Майкла Суона, Бетти Азар, Джорджа Юла, Л. Г. Александра и Марселлы Франк. В статье анализируются общее значение, функции, теоретические интерпретации и различия в подходах авторов. Результаты исследования показывают, что, хотя все авторы едины во мнении об основных функциях Past Continuous, их объяснения различаются по глубине анализа, теоретическим акцентам и методам преподавания. Данное сравнение помогает учащимся, преподавателям и исследователям глубже понять лингвистическую сущность данного времени.*

Ключевые слова: *Past Continuous, Past Progressive, английская грамматика, аспект, лингвистический анализ, прогрессивный аспект, фоновое действие.*

Abstract: *The Past Continuous tense, also known as the Past Progressive, represents an essential grammatical form used to describe actions that were in progress at a particular moment in the past. This article examines how the Past Continuous is presented, defined, and explained in several influential English grammar sources, including works by A. J. Thomson and A. Martinet, Raymond Murphy, Michael Swan, Betty Schramper Azar, George Yule, L. G. Alexander, and Marcella Frank. By comparing these descriptions, the article aims to highlight commonalities, theoretical variations, pedagogical approaches, and practical implications of this tense. The findings show that although all authors agree on the fundamental meaning of the Past Continuous, their approaches differ in emphasis, detail, and linguistic interpretation. This comparative analysis provides learners, teachers, and researchers with a deeper understanding of the tense and its functional complexity.*

Keywords: *Past Continuous, Past Progressive, English grammar, aspect, linguistic analysis, progressive aspect, background action*

Verb tenses play a vital role in English grammar because they allow speakers to communicate time, duration, and the nature of an action. Among these, the Past Continuous tense occupies a special place due to its ability to describe events that were occurring at a specific moment in the past and actions that formed the background of a narrative. Although its general meaning may seem straightforward, different grammar scholars explain it with varying levels of detail and theoretical grounding. Some focus on practical usage and learner-friendly explanations, while others approach the tense from a linguistic or aspectual perspective.

This article explores how the Past Continuous is interpreted across major grammar texts. The goal is to synthesize these explanations and reveal how different authors conceptualize its structure, meaning, and usage patterns.

2. Structure of the Past Continuous

Across all grammar sources, the basic structure of the Past Continuous is universally defined as:

was/were + verb-ing

This form reflects the combination of the past tense of the verb to be (“was” or “were”) with the present participle (the -ing form). This morphological consistency demonstrates that the tense is primarily aspectual—it highlights the nature of the action rather than its chronological limits. In most academic interpretations, the Past Continuous represents the progressive aspect situated in the past.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Thomson & Martinet: The Classic Pedagogical Description

Thomson and Martinet present the Past Continuous as the tense used for “an action in progress at a definite time in the past.” Their explanation emphasizes several typical contexts: ongoing actions at a specific moment, simultaneous actions, and actions interrupted by shorter events. They also note the tense’s role in storytelling, where it provides background descriptions. Their treatment is traditional but remains clear and practical.

3.2. Raymond Murphy: Practical and Visual Explanation

Murphy’s explanation in *English Grammar in Use* is accessible and learner-centered. He highlights the visual nature of the tense—helping the learner imagine a situation unfolding. Murphy contrasts the Past Continuous with the Past Simple, stressing that the former provides context while the latter describes completed events. His approach is practical: he prioritizes real-life usage, common patterns, and contrastive examples.

3.3. Michael Swan: Linguistically Grounded Analysis

Swan offers a more advanced explanation in *Practical English Usage*. He emphasizes that the Past Continuous expresses duration, temporariness, and scene-setting. He notes that the tense often softens focus on the beginning and end of an action. Swan also discusses restrictions such as the limited use of the tense with stative verbs (e.g., know, believe, want). His approach is systematic, connecting form and meaning through functional linguistics.

3.4. Betty Azar: Structured and Visual Approach

Azar’s explanation is organized and supported by visual timelines. She highlights the relationship between longer ongoing actions and shorter interrupting events, illustrating how the Past Simple interacts with the Past Continuous. She presents the tense as essential in narrative coherence because it builds the background on which events unfold.

3.5. George Yule: Semantic Emphasis

Yule’s explanation incorporates semantic nuance. He identifies meanings such as “unfinished action,” “temporary background,” and even “irritation in the past,” especially with the adverb *always*. His example—He was always losing his keys—demonstrates how the tense can express emotional attitudes. This interpretation expands the functional range of the Past Continuous beyond merely describing actions.

3.6. L. G. Alexander: Formal Categorization

Alexander categorizes the use of the Past Continuous into specific functional types: progressive past actions, simultaneous actions, interruptions, temporal background, and

polite requests (e.g., “I was wondering if...”). His structured classification is helpful for academic learners because it separates communicative functions clearly.

3.7. Marcella Frank: Linguistic Aspect Theory

Frank’s approach is rooted in linguistic theory. She analyzes the Past Continuous as a representation of the progressive aspect marked for past time. She also examines how this tense distinguishes between background and foreground information in discourse. Her analysis aligns with discourse linguistics and focuses on the role of aspect in narrative construction.

4. Discussion

4.1. Shared Core Meaning Across Sources

Across all grammar authors, the essential meaning of the Past Continuous remains consistent:

an action was in progress at a specific time in the past.

This shared definition reflects the stability of the progressive aspect in English. All authors also agree that the tense is used to:

describe contexts and background situations,
signal temporary actions,
show two actions happening simultaneously, and
combine with the Past Simple to show interruption.

4.2. Differences in Emphasis

While the core meaning is the same, authors differ in the aspects they highlight:

Murphy focuses on practical, real-life examples.

Swan discusses theoretical restrictions and nuance.

Yule expands the tense’s meaning to express emotional attitudes.

Azar emphasizes timelines and visual representation.

Frank connects the tense to aspect theory.

These differences reflect distinct audiences—some books target language learners, others linguists or teachers.

4.3. The Past Continuous as Background Action

A striking common theme is the role of this tense in establishing background information. In narratives, the Past Continuous situates events within a descriptive frame. For example:

The birds were singing, the sun was shining, and people were walking along the street when the accident happened.

All grammar authors mention this function, highlighting its importance in building coherent stories.

4.4. The Past Continuous and Interruption

Most sources emphasize how the tense interacts with the Past Simple to show interruption. This is illustrated through examples such as:

I was cooking when the phone rang.

She was walking home when she met her friend.

This relationship between a longer ongoing action and a shorter interrupting action is foundational to understanding narrative structure in English.

4.5. Restrictions on Stative Verbs

Only some authors—especially Swan and Frank—mention that the Past Continuous is rarely used with stative verbs (e.g., understand, believe, know, like). This theoretical distinction connects grammar to semantic principles and is often overlooked in simpler explanations.

4.6. Extended Functions: Politeness and Irritation

Two less commonly discussed functions of the Past Continuous include:

1. Politeness

I was wondering if you could help me.

He was always interrupting me.

These uses reveal how the tense contributes to subtle communicative strategies in English.

The Past Continuous tense is more than a simple grammatical form; it is a multifunctional aspect of English that communicates duration, background description, emotional nuance, and interpersonal meaning. The analysis of major grammar sources shows that, while all authors agree on its fundamental purpose, they differ in the details they emphasize. Some prioritize clear practical examples, others explore theoretical depth, and yet others classify usage patterns systematically.

By synthesizing these perspectives, this article demonstrates that understanding the Past Continuous requires recognizing its role in narrative structure, its aspectual nature, and its interactions with other tenses. This comprehensive understanding is essential for learners, teachers, and linguists studying English grammar.

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