Module: Grammar

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Level: L2

2. Indirect Speech

In indirect / reported speech, we report the meaning of what was said by the speaker rather than repeat the exact words.

We put the indirect speech in a noun clause beginning with that or a wh-word or if/ whether.

That is omitted in informal uses.

• ‘He is a strange person.’ – He said that he was a strange person.’

• ‘Where do you go?’ – He asks where she goes.

• ‘Did you finish your work?’ – The teacher asked us if / whether we finished our work.

2.1. Necessary Changes:

Changes from the direct to the indirect speech depend on the situation, i.e., who speaks and to whom, who reports and to whom. Here are some typical changes.

Person (pronouns /adjectives)

I  he / she

my  his /her

Adverbs of place

here  there, at the theatre, at the corner, etc.

adverbs and adverbial phrases of time

today  that day

yesterday  the day before

the day before yesterday two days before

tomorrow  the next / following day

this week / year, etc  that week / year, etc

last week / year  the previous week / year, the week /year before

next week / year, etc  the following week /year, etc

a year / an hour ago  a year / an hour before/ earlier, the previous year /hour

2.2. Tense Changes in Indirect Speech

a. Introductory Verb in Present Tenses

Indirect speech can be introduced by a verb in a present tense when we are:

 Reporting a conversation which is still going on.

 Reading a letter/ an e-mail and reporting what it says.

 Reading instructions and reporting them.

 Reporting a statement that someone makes very often.

Therefore, when the introductory verb is in the present simple, present perfect or future, we do not change the tense of the verb(s) in the statement (reported clause).

• ‘I’m going to sleep’ He says that he is going to sleep.

b. Introductory Verb in the Past Simple

 The introductory verb is mostly used in the past simple tense. In this case, we change the tense of the in the statement (reported clause) shifting from a present to a past tense and from a past tense to a past perfect. It should be noted that the form of the tense doesn’t change; i.e., simple, continuous and perfect remain the same, except from the past simple to the past perfect. There are examples in the following table:

Direct speech Indirect speech

Present

Past

‘Ali works in a bank.’

‘Ali is working.’

‘Ali has finished his work.’

‘Ali has been working.’ She said that Ali worked in a bank.

She said that Ali was working.

She said that Ali had finished his work.

She said that Ali had been working.

past

Past perfect

‘Ali worked in a bank.’

‘Ali was working in a bank.’ She said that Ali had worked in a bank.

She said that Ali had been working in a bank.

1. If the statement in the reported clause is still up to date or exists when we report, then we can either change the tense or keep it unchanged.

• ‘The jacket suits you.’ She told me that the jacket suits / suited me.

• ‘I don’t like this type of music.’ He said that he doesn’t / didn’t like that kind of music.

• ‘My parents are going for pilgrimage in August.’ She said that her parents are /were going for pilgrimage in August. (We are still in April).

• ‘Inflation is rising more and more.’ They noted that inflation is / was rising more and more.

2. If the statement in the reported clause is no longer up to date, then we change the tense.

 - ‘I don’t like music.’ I remember a month ago he told he didn’t like music. (Now he is listening to music).

 - ‘My parents are going for pilgrimage in August.’ She said that her parents were going for pilgrimage. (We are in October, now they have returned).

 - ‘We were thinking of buying the house but we decided not to.’ He said that they had been thinking of buying the house but had decided not to.

3. If we doubt whether the statement is true or untrue, then we change the tense.

 - ‘We have a yacht’. She once said that they had a yacht. (So why do they want to lend yours.)

 -‘The prime minister claimed that the government had made the right decision.

4. When the past continuous refers to an action that was completed before another in the past simple or present perfect, then the past continuous becomes past perfect continuous.

 -‘We were planning to buy a new house but we have decided not to.’

 He said that they had been planning to buy a new house but had

 decided not to.

5. In written English past tenses usually do change to past perfect. But there are the following exceptions:

 a. Past / past continuous tenses used in time clauses normally do not change.

 He said, ‘When I was watering/ watered the garden…’

 He said that when he was watering / watered the garden…

The main verb in time clauses can either remain unchanged or change to the past perfect.

 He said, ‘When I was watering the garden, I found a coin.’

 He said that when he was watering the garden, he found / had

 found a coin.

 b. Unreal past tenses (subjunctives) after wish, would rather/ sooner and it is (high) time don’t change.

 ‘We wish we didn’t have to take exams’, said the students.

 The students said they wished they didn’t have to take exams.

 She said, ‘It’s (high) time we started changing our bad habits’.

 She said that it was (high) time they started changing their bad habits.

 c. Conditional sentences type 2, 3 remain unchanged.

 -‘If I knew, I would tell her,’ said Tom. Tom said that if he knew, he would tell her.

c. Modals:

When reporting with a verb in the past simple, some modals change but others remain unchanged as it is shown in the table:

Direct Indirect

Will

Can

May

shall

Would

Could

Might

Would (prediction)

 Should (offers, requests

 and suggestions)

Would, could, might, should, ought to,

needn’t, used to would, could, might, should, ought to,

needn’t, used to

Must (obligation)

Must (deduction) Must/had to

must

 -‘People will love it.’ He said that people would love it.

 -‘When shall I leave?’ She asked where she should leave. (request)

 -‘We shall visit you soon?’ He said that they would visit us soon. (future/prediction)

 -‘You must stop smoking.’ The doctor told me that I had to/ must stop smoking. (obligation/necessity)