

Reported speech: backshifting

Present tenses in the direct speech will become past tenses in the indirect speech. This change in tense is often called backshifting.

Study the following sentences.

Susie said, 'I am buying a new car.' (Direct speech)

Susie said that she was buying a new car. (Indirect speech)

'Where are you going?' asked Peter. (Direct speech)

Peter asked me where I was going. (Indirect speech)

Alex said, 'I have been to Australia.' (Direct speech)

Alex said that he had been to Australia. (Indirect speech)

As you can see from the above examples, present tenses in the direct speech are shifted back to corresponding past tenses in the indirect speech.

Verbs in the simple past tense are shifted back to past perfect tense.

'When did you arrive?' he asked. (Direct speech)

He asked when I had arrived. (Indirect speech)

'I wasn't expecting to hear from you' she said.

She said that she hadn't been expecting to hear from me.

The modal verbs can, may and will change to could, might and would.

'Can you help me?' asked the little girl.

The little girl asked if I could help her.

The modal auxiliary verb must does not usually change in indirect speech. However, it changes to had to when it shows obligation. Note that this change isn't strictly necessary.

No backshifting

When the reporting verb is in the present tense, we do not backshift .

'I want to go home.' (Direct speech)

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He has been saying that he wants to go home. (Indirect speech)

'I have been waiting to hear from you.'

She says that she has been waiting to hear from me. (Indirect speech)

'Did John come?'

He is asking whether John came.