

The Inflected Forms of the English Verb

Richard C. DeArmond

Simon Fraser University

1 Introduction

In this file we will discuss the process of how an inflected verb is formed in English. We will start with the closest operator—voice, and progress upwards through the operators that occur in the scope of the subject (Prominence).

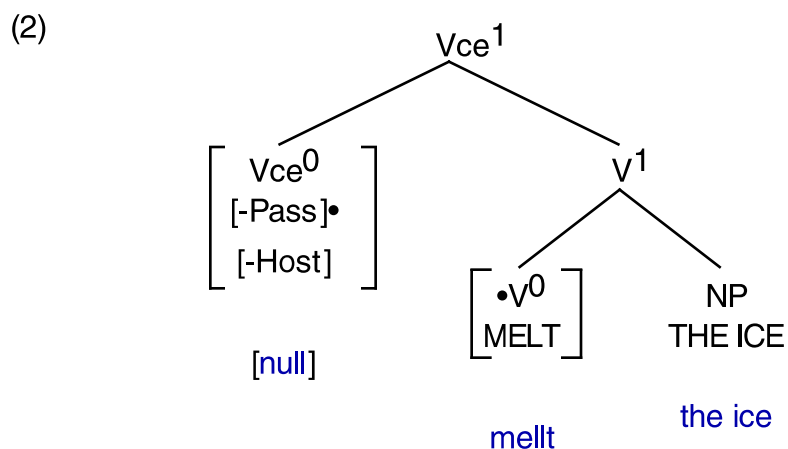
2 Voice

2.1 Active

In the file Feature Copying, we introduced the four operators that occur in the scope of the subject (c-commanded by the subject). We also introduced voice. The active voice in English is not marked. There is no inflectional ending and there is no dummy verb (see below). Consider the simple sentence:

(1) The ice melted.

The active voice is marked as [-Pass]. It does not require a host, and it is spelled out as [null]:

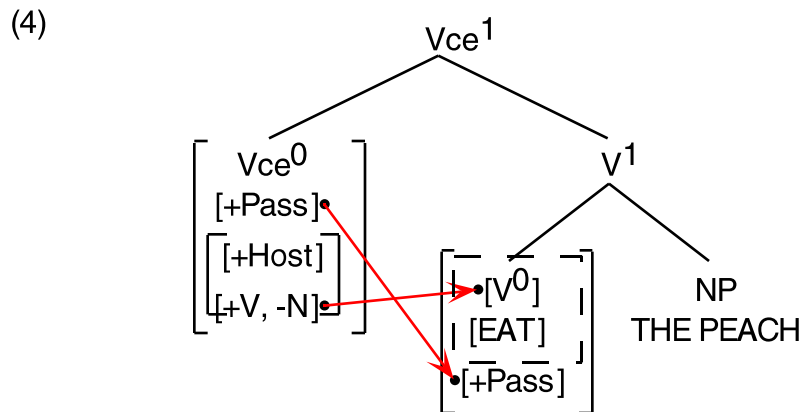


Below we will bring in tense. In a subsequent file we will discuss raising one of the verb arguments to the subject position.

2.2 Passive

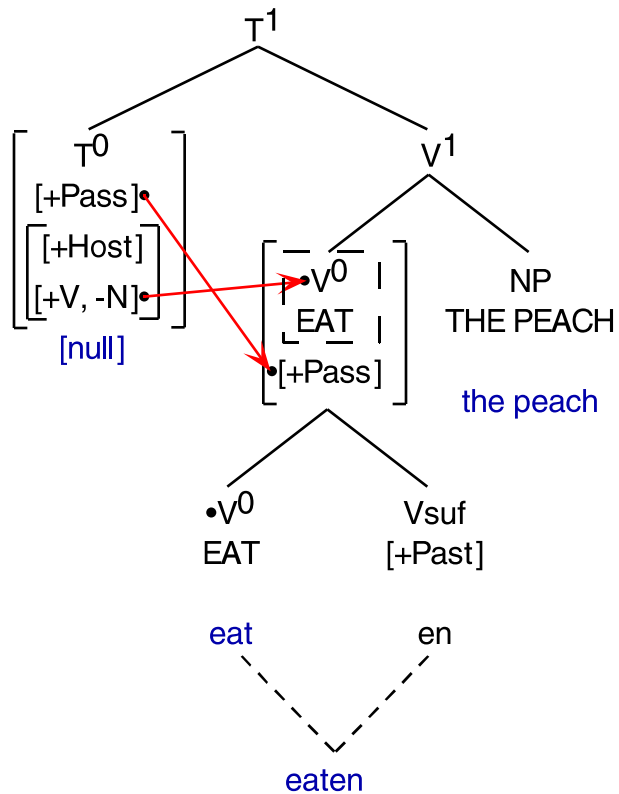
The passive is marked by the feature [+Pass]. It is marked such that it needs a verbal host. The structure of voice and the verb of (3) is shown in Figure (4):

(3) The peach was eaten.



The verb and its features are designated as the host for [+Pass]. We mark the host with a dashed square. The default for the passive is that the verb splits creating a verb stem and a verb suffix containing the feature [+Pass]. The default ending for the Passive is the suffix “-ed”:

(5)



Orthographic rules of English determine that stems and their suffixes are spelled out as a single word. This is indicated by the dashed inverted branch at the bottom of the diagram. Technically, the feature [+Pass] in the middle structure should be linked to the same in the lower feature as should EAT and V⁰. The diagram gets too messy if we show both links and branches here. Let us assume informally, that each half of the branch functions as a link.

3 Aspect

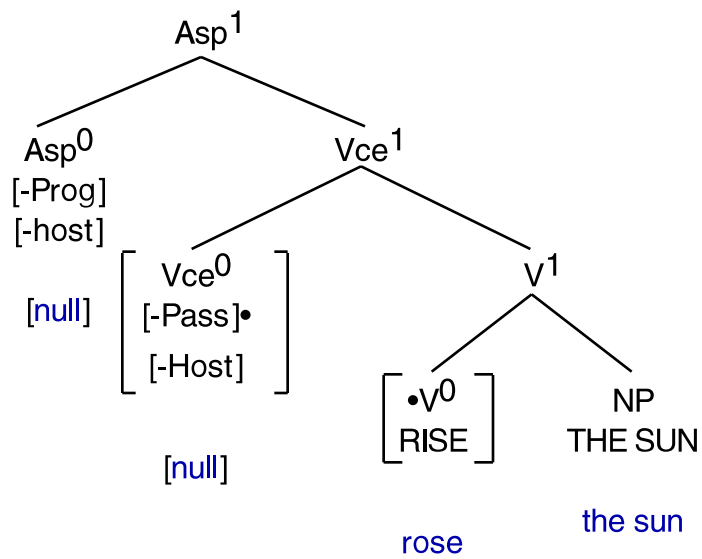
3.1 Non-Progressive

Like the active voice, the non-progressive aspect is not marked; it is spelled out as [null]. The structure for (6):

(6) The sun rose

is given in (7):

(7)

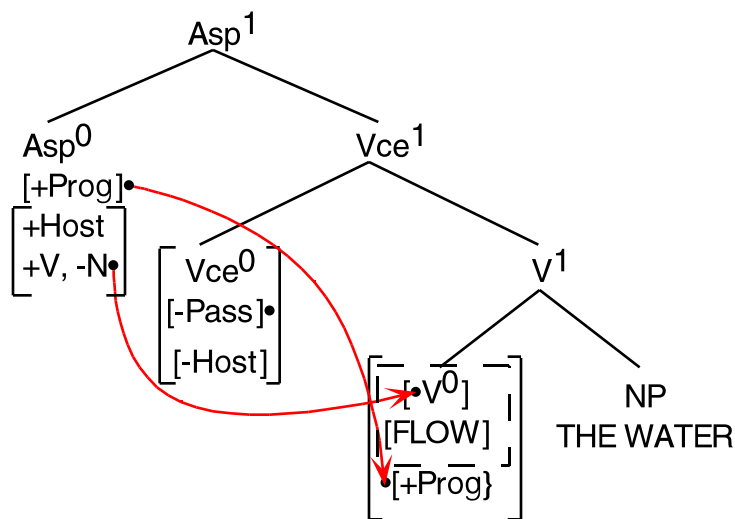


Now consider the progressive active example (8):

(8) The water is flowing.

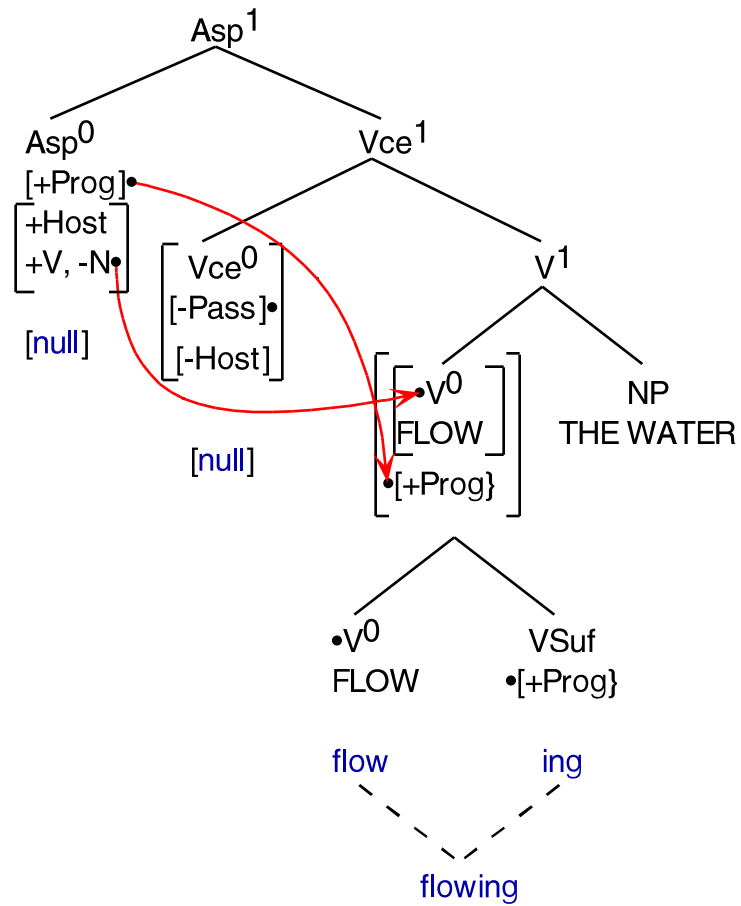
Like the passive the progressive voice needs a verbal host:

(9)



The progressive feature is always regular in English; there are no exceptions. The default for English operators is [+Split] and the feature is spelled out as "ing":

(10)



The same orthographic rule about suffixes applies.

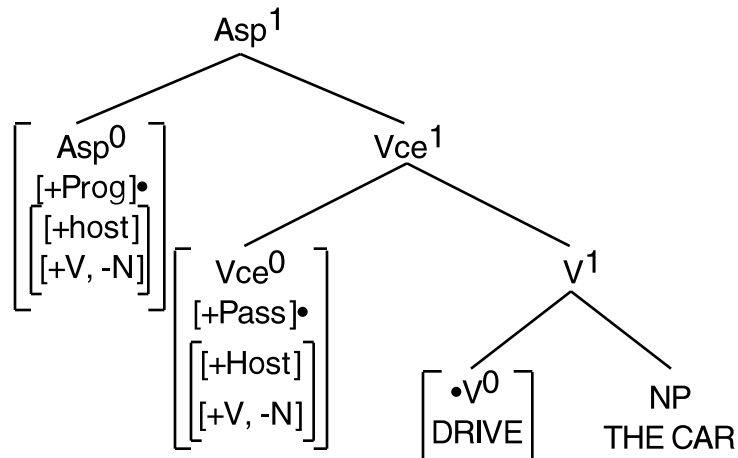
3.2 Progressive Passive

The progressive passive introduces a new strategy. Consider the following example:

(11) The car was being driven.

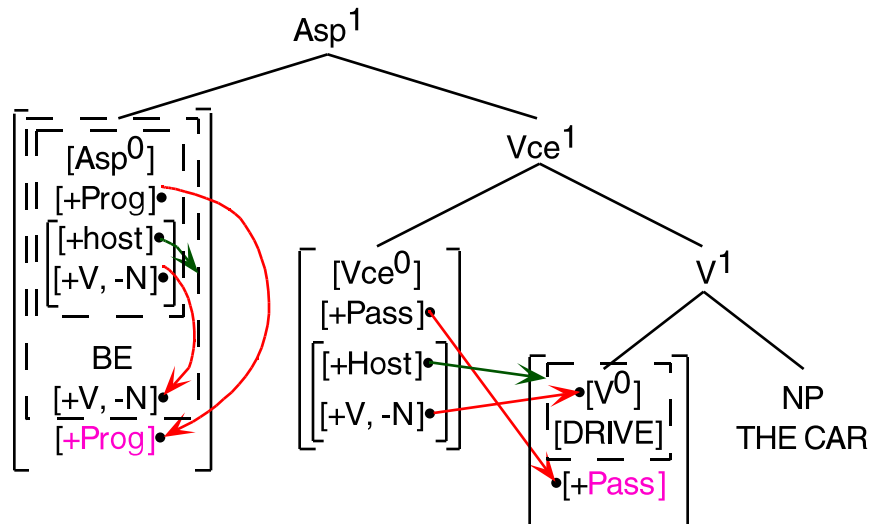
Here, both **[+Pass]** and **[+Prog]** is required. Both require a verbal host:

(12)



Both need a verbal host. Only [+Pass] governs V⁰,. Since [+Pass] governs V⁰, it block [+Prog] from governing V⁰ by the no intervening governor stipulation on government. First, the link is shown between [+V, -n] and its counterpart in the projection of V, between [+Pass] and its position adjoined to the verb:

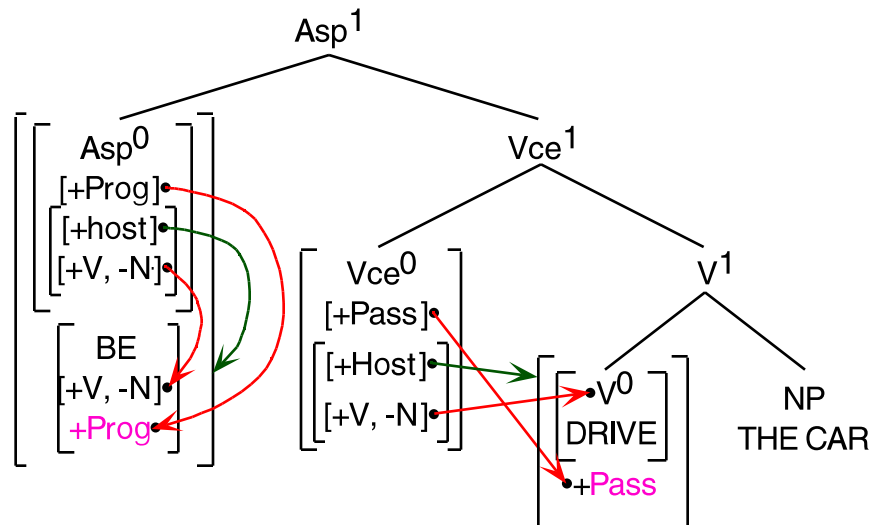
(13)



A link cannot be established between [+V, -N] in Asp and its counterpart in V. Yet, [+Prog] needs a verbal host. Another strategy is required. The strategy is to insert a dummy form—a dummy verb in this case. A dummy verb is adjoined to Asp⁰. Asp⁰ is functioning as the host for the dummy verb. In turn, BE becomes a host for [+Prog]. Hence, there is a host within a host. The dummy verb is BE, a variant of the verb *to be* with all of its morphological

properties. That is to say, there is one lexical entry BE, and it has several functions. Functioning as a dummy verb is one of them:

(14)



Note, carefully, a host is needed. First, the dummy verb BE is adjoined to Asp⁰. This is a costly manoeuvre to the grammar, but apparently the need for a host outweighs the insertion of a dummy. A link is established between [+V, -N] in [+Prog] and the dummy verb. This link sets up the past for creating the host position. The feature [+Host] means that a space must be created for the feature bearing the feature [+Host]. This position is said to be adjoined to the hosting category. The green arrow points to the new position indicated by the outer brackets. Then a link is created between the original feature needing a host and the newly created position marked in pink.

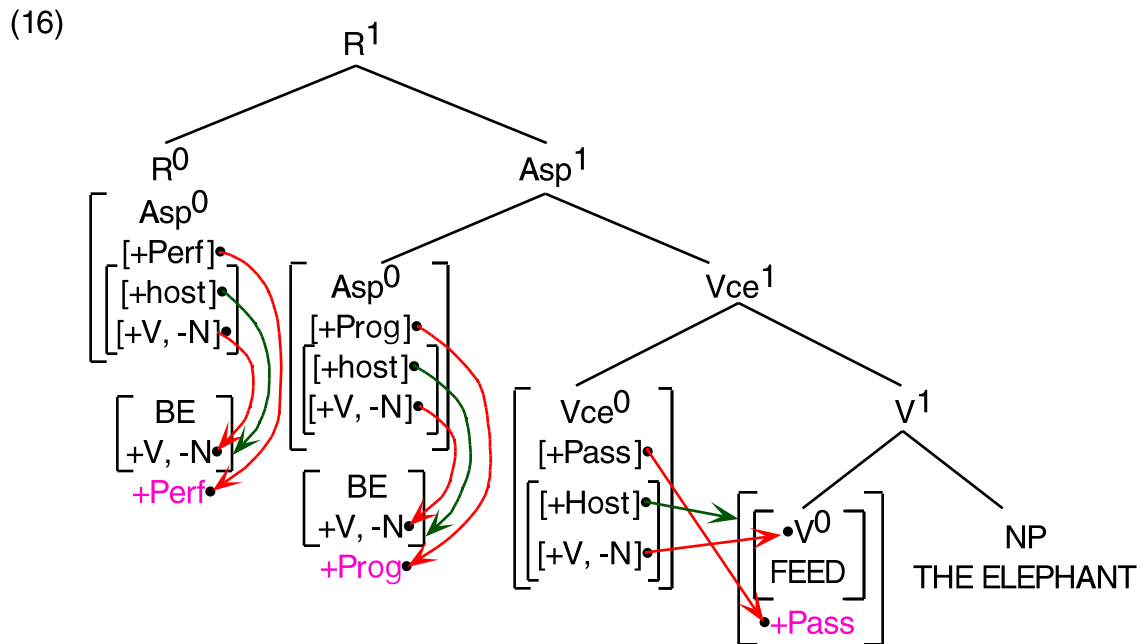
3.3 Three Strategies

We have now covered the three strategies for solving the problem of how to create words and syntactic structures: linking (agreement), creating a host position (adjunction), and inserting a dummy word. The remaining operators will make use of one or more of these strategies.

3.4 Relevance

Relevance contains two polar features: [\pm Perfect]. The negative one bears no extra features like [Pass] and [-Prog]. The positive one requires a verb host. Let us consider the structure of the verbal phrase for (15) up to relevance:

(15) The elephant was being fed.



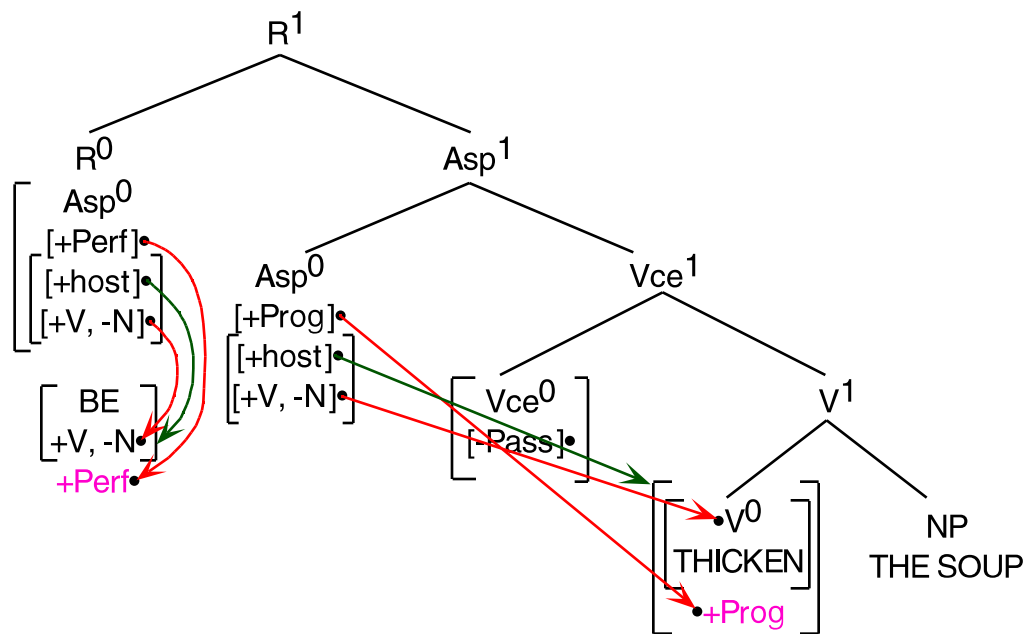
In Figure (16) another dummy verb must be inserted to act as a host for [+Perf], since there is no verbal host available elsewhere in the construction.

If voice is active, it needs no host as an example:

(17) The soup was thickening.

The feature [+V,-N] governs the same (the main V^0) blocking government by [+V,-N] in R^0 . Thus, a link is built from each appropriate feature in Asp^0 to V^0 :

(18)



[+Perf] still needs a host; hence, the dummy verb BE is inserted.

There are other combinations possible by changing the values of the operators. These will be given to the student to figure out.

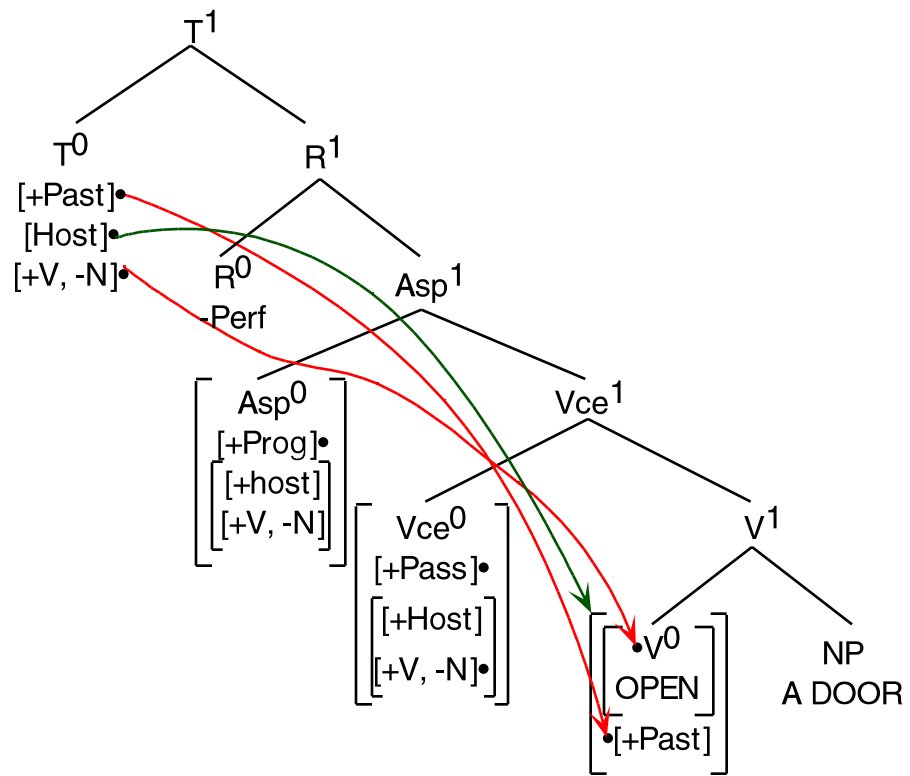
3.5 Tense

The last operator occurring in the scope of the subject is tense. There are two tenses: [\pm Past]. [+Past] requires a verb host. For example:

(19) A door opened.

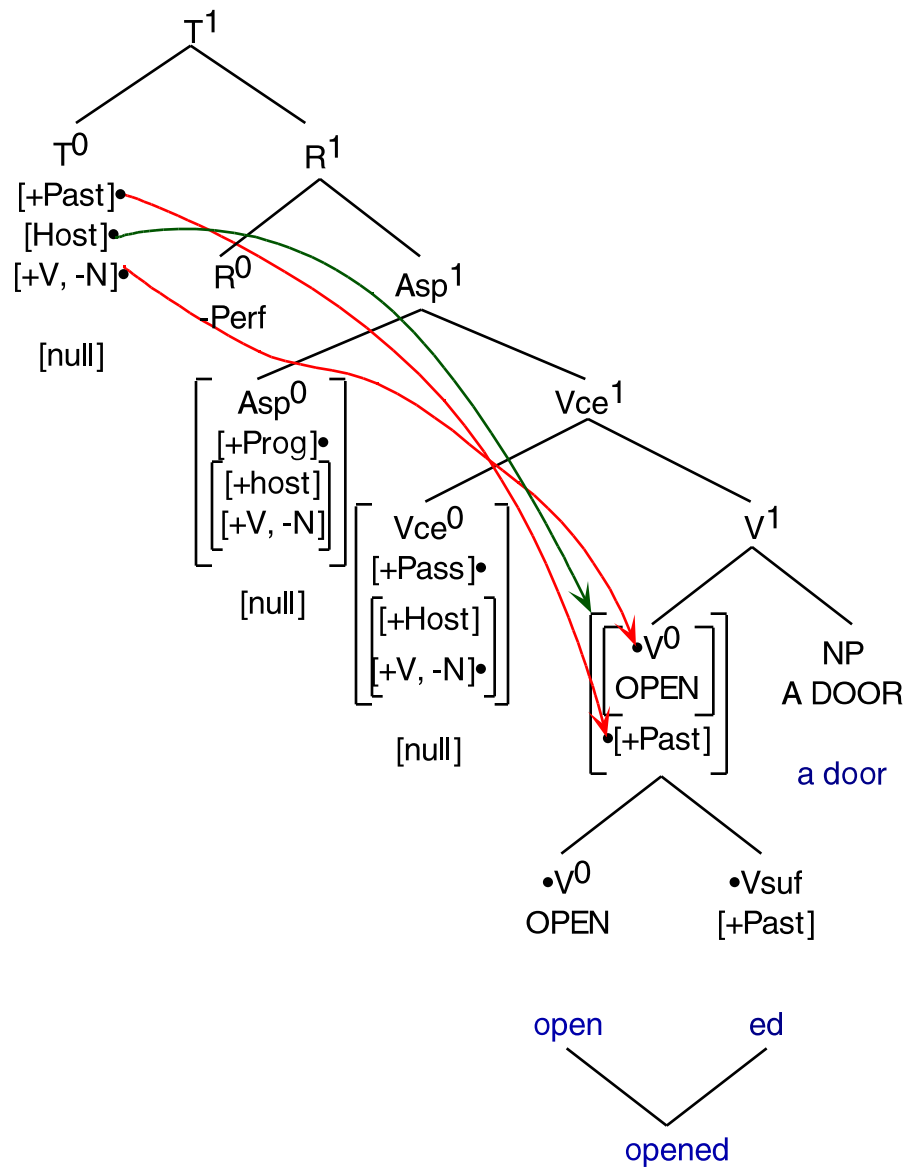
[+Past] is adjoined to the main verb, since the other operators are minus and do not need a host:

(20)



There are no surprises here. V^0 splits forming a verb stem and a suffix. Both parts are spelled out:

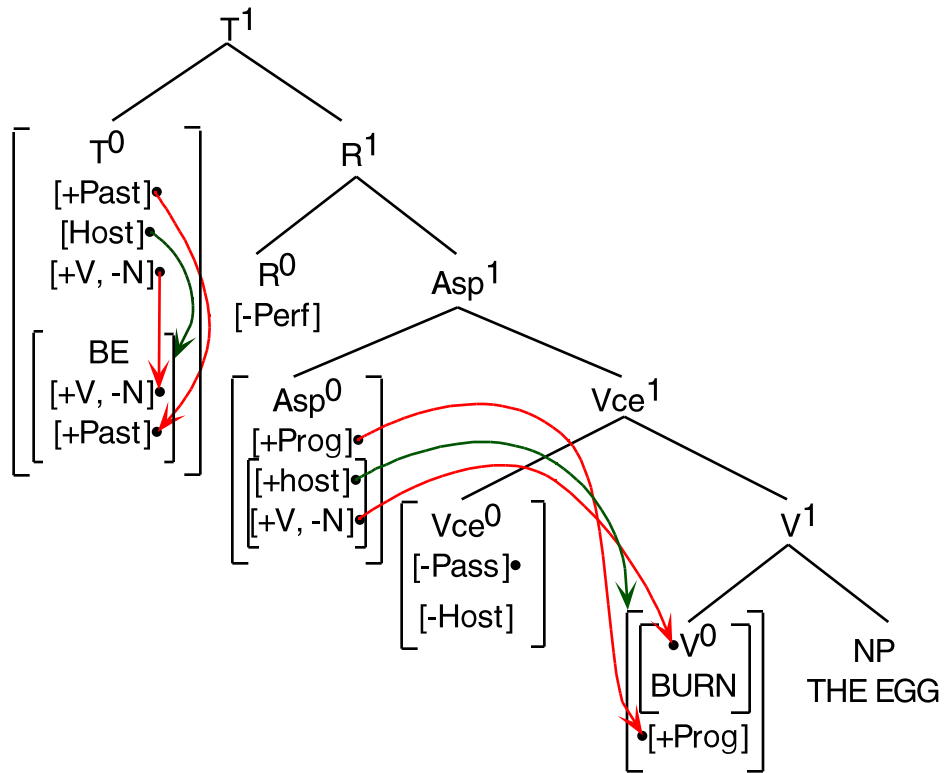
(21)



Now consider an example where tense does not govern the verb:

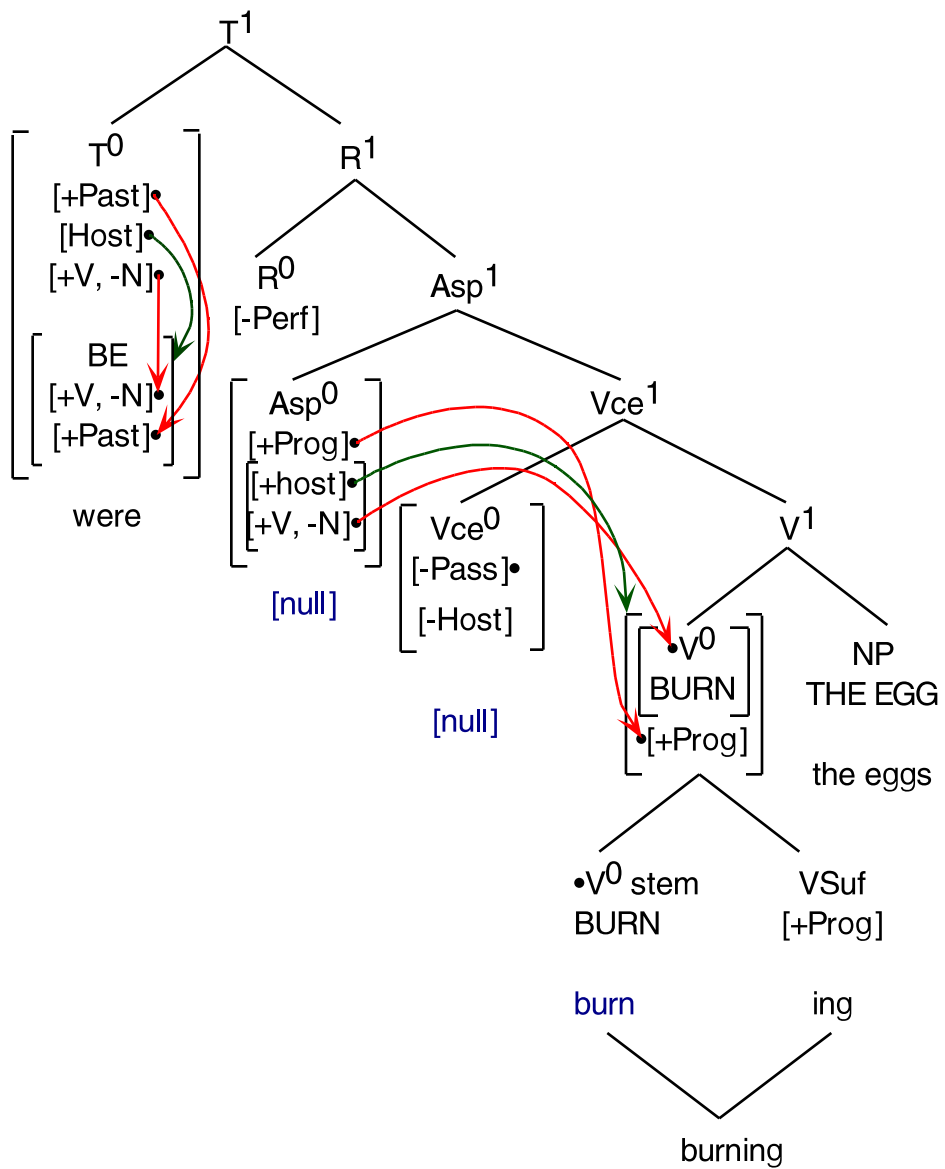
(22) The eggs were burning.

(23)



Spell out yields the following structure:

(24)

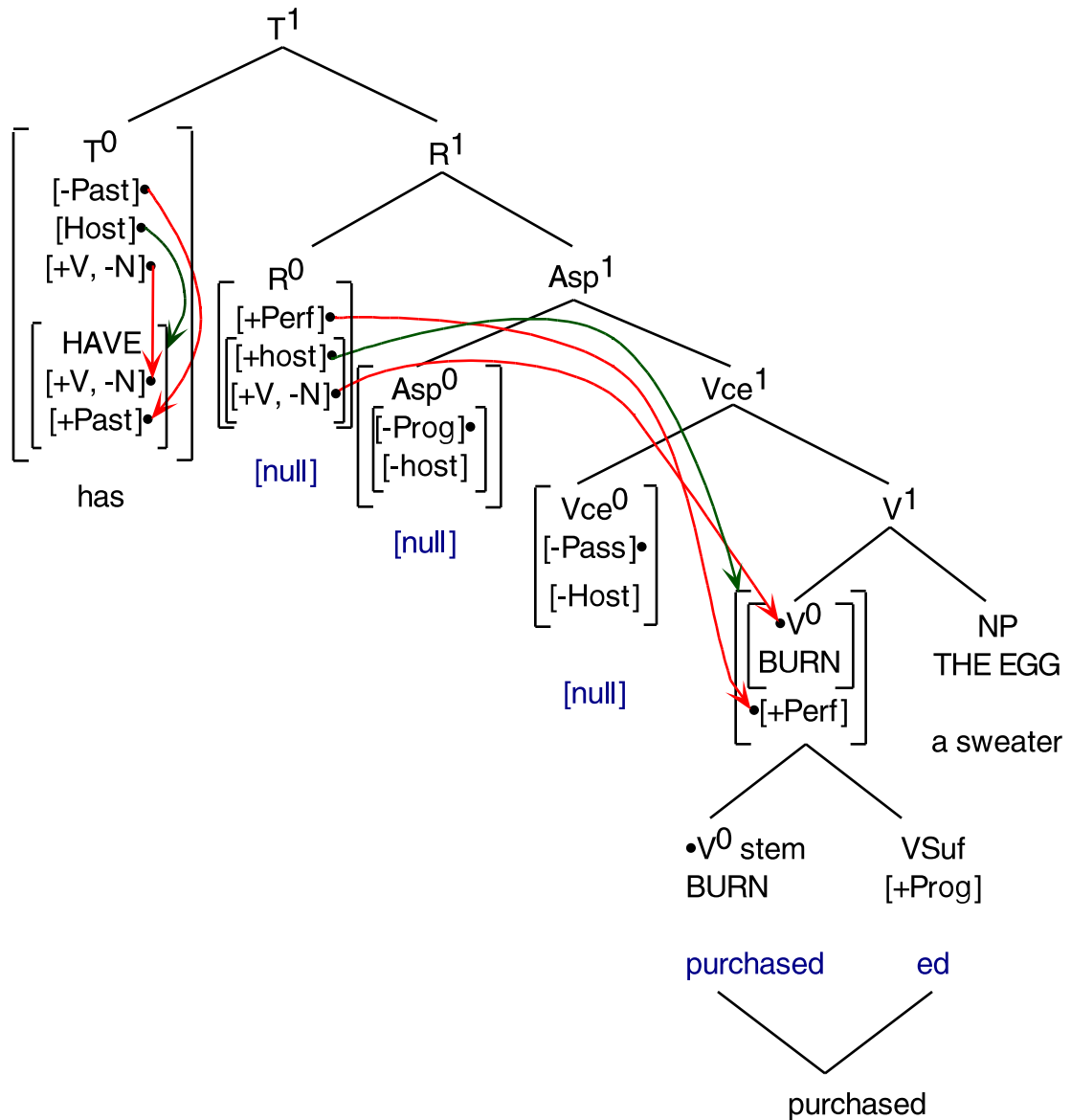


If the relevance feature is [+Perf], the dummy verb HAVE is inserted as function as a host for tense:

(25) John has purchased a sweater.

In this construction, T⁰ governs R⁰:

(26)



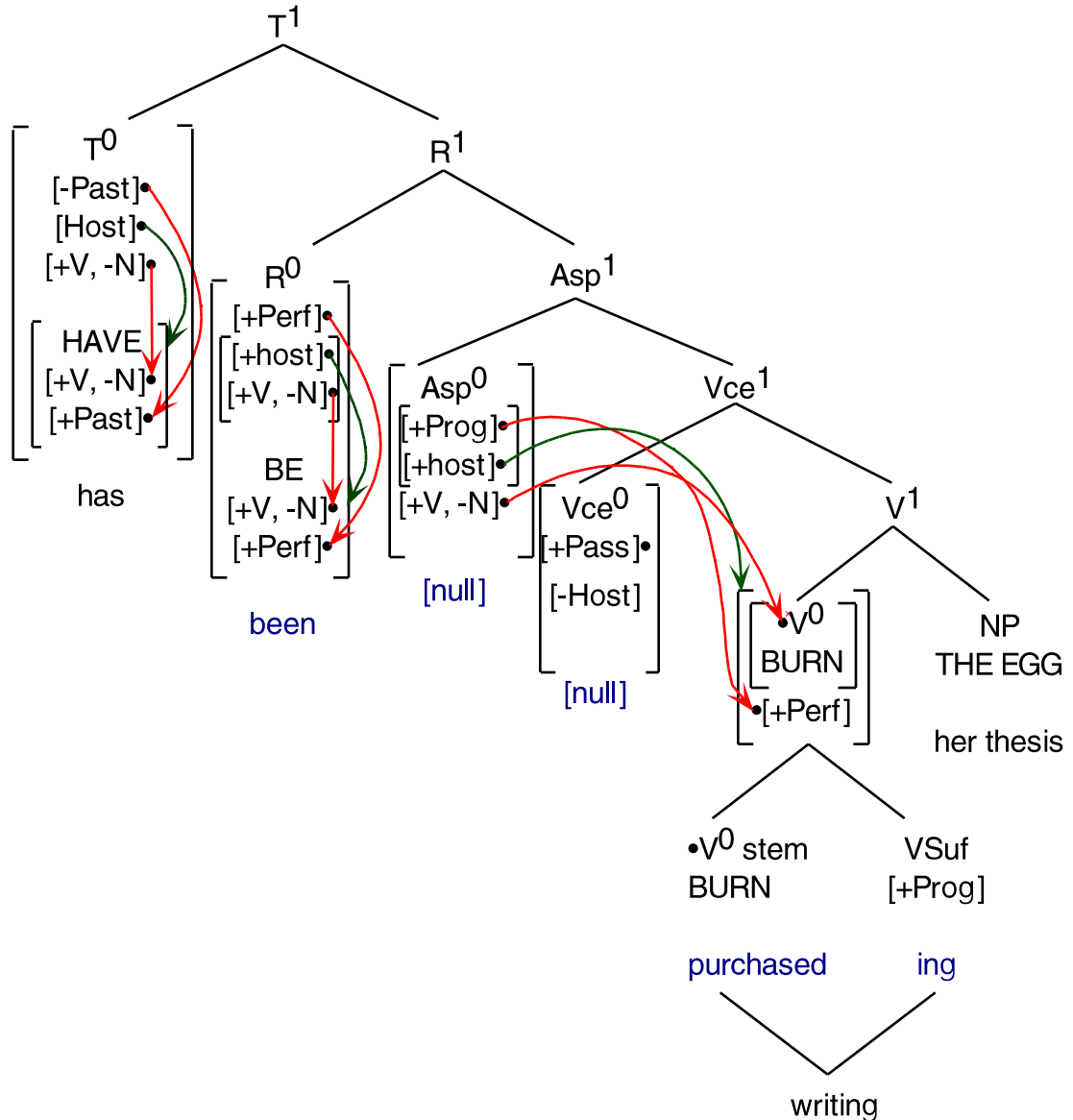
Technically, the verbal feature in R^0 feature governs the main verb, which establishes the host. Then a link is built adjoining $[+Perf]$ to the main verb. Asp^0 and Vce^0 are not inherent governors and do not block government from another operator. $[-Past]$ needs a host. In this case, the dummy verb HAVE is inserted. Have is selected when $[+Perf]$ is governed. What determines the choice of a dummy verb is which positive operator is governed. T^0 governs $[+Perf]$, which determines the selection of HAVE.

What happens if three operators are marked positive, as in:

(27) Mary has been writing her thesis.

The following operators are positive: [+Past], [+Perf], and [+Prog]; all three need a host. Only [-Pass] does not need a host:

(28)



[+Perf] needs a verbal host, but [+Prog] blocks [+Perf]. Since [+Perf] governs [+Prog], the dummy verb BE is adjoined to R⁰. As in the preceding example, HAVE is adjoined to T⁰ to [+Past] function as a host.

The student will be given the task of accounting for a verb phrase where the three operators in the scope of tense are positive.