

Tenses are Important in the Speech

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Abstract: Humans think of time in terms of space, as evidenced by the terminology we use to describe temporal relationships: we talk about stretching out or compressing an activity, moving toward the future, returning to the past, and so on. Linguists have depended on a special instantiation of the space-time analogy: the timeline, to describe the meanings of the tenses. The timeline is a line (or, more precisely, an ordered sequence of points) that is unbounded on either end and divided into three sections: the past, the present, and the future. While we may express many ordering relations between points on the timeline (such as when two events are described as contemporaneous), only one sort of relation counts as a tense relation: something which encompasses the moment at which the linguistic act is occurring.

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“The key feature about tense [...] is that it is a deictic category”, writes Lyons. A tensed proposition, then, will not only be timebound, but will also contain a reference to some place or period of time that cannot be recognized except in terms of the utterance's zero point.”

The temporal zero point, like other linguistic reference points grounded in the "here and now," can be identified with times other than the time of speaking or writing under the right conditions. One example is when a writer utilizes the time of message interpretation as the zero point rather than the time of message production.

For example, a note writer may use I'm across the hall rather of I'll be across the hall. The shifting of the temporal zero point also happens in temporal and conditional subordinate clauses, such as When/if you have finished your test, [raise your hand]. Despite the fact that its reference point is in the (hypothetical) future rather than at the moment of speaking, a present perfect predication is utilized here.

When we refer about the "location" of the temporal zero-point, we are of course making use of the space-time analogy. But, if the zero point is a temporal marker, where are we in relation to it?

According to Comrie, “tenses place situations either concurrently with the present instant [...], previous to the present moment, or following to the present moment”.

This definition looks straightforward since it follows the logic of the space-time analogy, but there is reason to doubt whether tense "locates situations." If the situation in issue is an event, then it is obviously true, for example, that a past-tense phrase like (1a) locates the \scab journey previous to the time of speech, but do past-tense state predications, as in (1b), localize the \situations that they designate in a similar way?

Exponents of tense and aspect interact semantically inside a specific grammatical construction, but they also interact within English's time reference system: aspectual constructions can convey the same basic temporal connections as tense inflections do. The English present perfect construction, for example, is a well-known example of such functional overlap. Theorists disagree on how the English perfect construction should be treated; it has been studied as both a tense and an aspect.

The essential idea of Reichenbach's (1947) tense model is that the meaning of each tense may be expressed as a series of the three time points indicated above: E, R, and S.

In Reichenbach representations, these points are divided by a line to show that the lefthand point comes before the righthand point, or by a comma to indicate that the two points are identical (i.e., not ordered with respect to one another). R and E are equivalent in the basic tenses—past, present, and future—because the time referred to is also the time of the state of things represented by the phrase. In the case of the relative tenses, such as the past perfect, E and R are distinct: the time that the speaker is referring to is either before or after the time of the state of things represented by the phrase. In this section, Reichenbach's representations of the simple tenses and the three perfect "tenses" are provided (4a–f). An example phrase is provided for each tense representation, along with the specification of the R point (which may or may not be explicitly referred to by a subordinate clause or adverbial expression):

- a) Present: E, R, S (e.g., She's at home right now; R = right now).
- b) Past: E, R_S (e.g., She was at home yesterday; R = yesterday).
- c) Future: S_E, R (e.g., She will be home this evening; R = this evening).
- d) Present perfect: E_S, R (e.g., the crowd has now moved to plaza; R = now).
- e) Past perfect: E_S_R (e.g., the crowd had moved to the plaza when the police showed up; R = the time at which the police arrived).
- f) Future perfect: S_E_R (e.g., the crowd will have moved to the plaza by the time you call the police; R = the time at which the police are called) or S_R_E (e.g., That's Harry at the door; he will have bought wine; R = a time prior to Harry's arrival).

There is, however, another reading of the predication the room was silent in which silence was a consequence of Sue's action. This reading clearly does require updating of R: the room's silence began at a reference time following that of the sentence [Sue] turned around. On this latter reading, in fact, the assertion the room was silent denotes not a state but an event—the event of the room's becoming silent. Partee (1984) captures these two distinct interpretations by means of the following generalization: if the situation denoted is an event, R includes the event, and elapses with its cessation; if the situation denoted is a state, R is included within that state, and does not elapse (i.e., it remains the reference time for the next assertion). Dowty's (1986) temporal discourse interpretation principle is a similar generalization, although Dowty assumes, contra Partee (1984), that state predications, like event predications, move reference time forward in temporal discourse. Dowty (1986) proposes that pragmatic inferences concerning possible overlap relations determine whether the situation denoted is interpreted as holding at both the new reference time and prior reference times. He argues (1986, p. 48) that the inferences we draw in a narrative about which events or states overlap with others in the narrative [are] not really a consequence of the times sentences are asserted to be true, but rather also in part a consequence of the times at which we assume that states or events actually obtain or transpire in the real world, intervals of time which may in some cases be greater than the intervals of time for which they are simply asserted.

According to Bybee et al. (1994, p. 152), the present tense "carries no explicit meaning at all; it refers to the default state from which other tenses express variations." They contend that the present tense may "absorb the meaning inherent to regular social and physical occurrences, and this meaning, if stated and broken down clearly, comprises of habitual occurrence and action as well as continuing states" because of its neutral semantics (ibid). The study generates more questions than it answers.

To begin, why should ongoing states be considered more "natural" than ongoing events? Second, why does a meaningless construction necessitate a disjunctive description that includes both current states and habits? Even putting aside these difficulties, it is clear that one could not characterize the aspectual limits that the present tense shows, or the coercive effects that it causes, if one did not see it as having meaning. The present tense, as stated in the Introduction, can be considered as an aspectual sensitive tense operator that picks for a class of states. As previously stated, this selective behavior stems from the logical link between time depth and the verification constraints on event reports.

While the preceding section dealt with implicit type shifting, or coercion, an interpretive process in which the meaning of a verb is shifted to resolve semantic conflict between a verb and its grammatical context, the current section will deal with explicit type shifting, in which verbal aspect is shifted through grammatical means, specifically through the use of periphrastic, auxiliary headed constructions (Herweg 1991). Several of these formulations have meanings that are indistinguishable from those of certain tenses, which is why we are interested in them here. The auxiliary verb specifies the output type (a state) in type shifting constructs, whereas the nonfinite complement denotes the input type (an event).

The degree of functional overlap between exponents of tense and aspect becomes particularly clear when one considers the English modal future. Unlike other languages, English has no morphological future tense, but only a periphrastic construction containing the auxiliary will, a form derived via semantic bleaching from a stative verb meaning "want." While this construction is a satirizer, that function is somewhat more difficult to establish by means of the when-test than were the satirizing functions of the progressive and perfect constructions. The reason is that will have no unambiguous past tense: the past-tense forms of modals, for example, would, have subjunctive functions rather than unambiguous past-time reference. There are, however, other ways of establishing that a clause denotes a state, one of which involves temporal reference. Present-time adverbials, including now and at this moment, are compatible only with stative predications, for the reasons outlined in Section 10.3: the present is conceived as a moment, and only states are verifiable on the basis of a single momentaneous "sample."

Conclusion

We have explored a variety of tense misconceptions in our overview of English tenses and tense usage. One of these is that the present tense locates circumstances. As we have seen, tense just locates reference time, but aspect specifies how the signified circumstance interacts to reference time. Another common misunderstanding concerning tense is that the present tense is useless or, at most, defines a far larger period than the current interval. This point of view stems from the fact that the present tense may be used with both state verbs and event verbs. However, as we have shown, the flexibility of the present tense to combine with event verbs should not be interpreted as proof that it lacks semantic constraints. This combinatory flexibility, on the other hand, demonstrates the English present tense's aspectual sensitivity and, as a result, its potential to modify the aspectual type of verbs with which it combines. The present tense, as a state selector, can pick state phases within temporal representations of events. The fact that many auxiliary verb constructions with tense like functions, such as the perfect construction, also operate as satirizers emphasizes the relevance of aspect in comprehending the English tense system. In such constructions, the state denoted by the tensed auxiliary verb is ordered relative to the event denoted by its complement in a manner similar to the ordering relations encoded by tense, and as a result, type shifting constructions such as the perfect aspect are frequently functionally indistinguishable from tense constructions such as the past tense.

We acquired insight into the semantics of tense by investigating the relationship between tense and aspect, both within a specific grammatical structure and within the English temporal reference system. The complexity of these relationships, however, should not be interpreted as proof that tense and aspect are inextricably linked at the semantic level.

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