

Tense and Aspect in Discourse



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Introduction

Co Vet – Carl Vettters

Tense and aspect are no doubt some of the most intriguing phenomena in natural language. They reflect the different ways time is conceptualized by a speech community. It remains unclear, however, why there exists such an amazing variety of ways to express these concepts and why tense and aspect distinctions generally constitute the most difficult part of the language system for non-native language learners, even if the target language is genetically very close to the native one.

For the linguist tense and aspect distinctions constitute an important field of research, both from a descriptive and a theoretical point of view. First, it turns out to be very difficult to coin adequate instruments that are refined enough to state the idiosyncrasies of the particular languages in general terms. A second problem is that a considerable part of the meanings of tense and aspect forms strongly depends on contextual factors and probably on the type of text as well, so that tense and aspect cannot be properly studied if their contribution to text cohesion is not taken into account.

This book contains a selection of papers that were first presented at the Conference on Tense and Aspect organized by the Belgian Society of Linguistics in Louvain-la Neuve (December 1990) and that were all thoroughly revised afterwards. They all deal with two closely related themes which constitute considerable problems for discourse interpretation rules. First, one and the same tense form often has to be interpreted in very different ways (e.g., the English Progressive can signal that the eventuality is ongoing or that it lies in the near-future). Second, many languages have more than one tense form for the same basic function: anteriority can, for example, be expressed by Simple Past and Present Perfect in Dutch and German, and by two different simple past tenses in French; many languages have two or more tenses to refer to future events, and sometimes verb forms and adverbs seem to have the same function (prospective aspect and *not yet*, for example). Most often the semantic differences between such pairs cannot be stated in truth-functional terms and have to be attributed to such factors as temporal orientation, text type, degree of evidence at the moment of utterance, and so forth. Some of the authors explicitly derive the different meanings of a tense or aspect

form from its prototypical or basic meaning. Other papers are more implicit on this point and concentrate on the mechanisms underlying the interpretation process, while at the same time trying to grasp the basic concepts which guide the interpretation.

We begin this volume with three papers that focus on interpretation problems encountered by Discourse Representation Theory. Caenepeel and Moens' paper addresses the matter of the so-called reverse order in discourse (as in *Max fell. John pushed him*). They argue, against recent proposals, that inference rules based on world knowledge and reasoning are not capable of explaining an important class of exceptions. They show that it is not sufficient to take into account the relations between eventualities, but that interpretation rules also have to take into account the relations between the segments of a discourse. These discourse relations are, at least partially, determined by the discourse type (narrative versus non-narrative, for example).

Molendijk argues that the difference between the two past tenses of French, the *imparfait* and the *passé simple*, can be best stated in terms of "global simultaneity" versus "absence of global simultaneity". The main outcome of his analysis is that the uses and interpretations of these tenses depend mainly on the identification of the fact or time interval which serves as the orientation point from which the eventuality is viewed. It is also shown that a class of apparent counter-examples can be handled if non-overtly expressed (i. e., presupposed or implied) facts is taken into account as well.

Vet's paper presents a description of the meaning and uses of the Simple Future, the Periphrastic Future and the Futurate Present in French. It is argued that the meaning of all these tense forms have an attitudinal component, but that they differ with respect to the kind of evidence for the future eventuality the speaker has at his/her disposal at the moment of utterance. The attitudinal component of the future tenses explains why, in past contexts, they behave exactly like verbs of belief. Finally, Vet shows that *Aktionsart* has an important role to play in the interpretation rules for discourse containing future tense(s).

Starting from more varied theoretical backgrounds, the second set of papers (by Declerck, Thieroff, Janssen, van Baar and Goossens) tackles traditionally problematic areas of the description of the tense systems of three different languages (English, German and Dutch). Declerck provides a discussion of the so-called "tense simplification" by which many traditional English grammars try to explain, for example, the seemingly special use of the Present in conditional clauses and temporal clauses referring to the future and the use of the Simple Past where one would expect a Pluperfect. He demonstrates that the idea of tense simplification can be abandoned if it is accepted that

the tense system of English consists of four absolute time spheres and that other time spheres are temporally subordinated to them. The special uses of some tenses can then be explained by the fact that they can be used to refer to absolute and/or relative time spheres.

Thieroff's contribution is a confrontation between the traditional view according to which the Perfects of German are aspects and his own proposal in which they are regarded as tenses. In the "aspectual" view both forms express "termination", and exclude progress in time. In traditional grammar Present, Past and Future Perfects are described as having the same time reference as the corresponding simple tenses (Present, Simple Past and Simple Future). According to Thieroff, this view is wrong, because it cannot explain why the Present Perfect in German can replace the Simple Past. Thieroff also contests Wunderlich's claim that the Present Perfect has two meanings: a "perfectic" and a "non-perfectic" one. He shows that the perfectic and non-perfectic meanings of this form depend mainly on contextual factors. The outcome of Thieroff's analysis is that the Perfects of German can be defined by the fact that the eventuality is anterior to the reference point and that the latter is not (entirely) before the moment of utterance.

Janssen claims that the meaning of the Present Perfect is built up in a compositional manner from the auxiliary in the Present and the past participle of the main verb. This leads to the assumption that, as far as tense is concerned, there is no difference between Present and Present Perfect nor between Preterit and Past Perfect. Present and past tenses present eventualities respectively as being of the speaker's focal concern and of his/her disfocal concern. Disfocal can be understood temporally (i. e., the eventuality is outside the speech situation); it can also be used for the expression of potentiality, politeness, and so on. The contrast between focal and disfocal concern also explains the differences between Simple Past and Present Perfect.

Van Baar's paper deals with the notions of prospectivity, perfect, and backward and forward perspectivity (expressed in English by the particles *already* and *still* respectively). Van Baar argues, against recent proposals in which the difference between aspect and perspectivity is blurred, that prospectivity and perfect are aspectual categories: they presuppose the existence of explicit transition points between situations, whereas perspectivity presupposes the existence of implicit transition points. Crucial to the difference is that aspect and perspectivity behave quite differently with respect to the scope of negation.

The last paper in this group, by Louis Goossens, proposes an analysis of the English Progressive in terms of the Functional Grammar model of the layered structure of the clause. Within this framework he discusses two op-

tions: Progressive is either a realization of the category “progressive” (ongoing), which develops in the direction of a more abstract category “imperfective”, or a restricted realization of the category “imperfective”, whose prototypical realization is the Progressive. Goossens chooses the latter option and argues that the interpretation of the prototypical Progressive depends on the feature “dynamicity” of the predication and that the basic prototypical meaning is extended metaphorically to express near-future meaning.

The last three papers of the volume address more varied descriptive and theoretical issues. Vetters provides a broad discussion of free indirect speech in French. The main difficulty for the interpretation of this kind of discourse is its ambiguity: it can be understood as reporting the thoughts of one of the protagonists or as the author’s comment on previously reported events or facts. The analysis of a large number of fragments leads to the conclusion that the relations between direct, indirect, and free indirect speech are not straightforward and that the latter resists any description in syntactic terms. The outcome of Vetters’ analysis is that the only clues for the interpretation of free indirect speech are provided by contextual and world knowledge.

Filip explores the influence of Czech aspect on the interpretation of noun phrases, which have no article in Czech. She shows that the perfective aspect is responsible for the bounded and specific reading of mass and plural noun phrases in direct object position. She proposes a revised version of Krifka’s recent theory in which the aspectual prefixes are regarded as quantifiers which operate on the domain of quantification provided by the direct object of the sentence. Filip claims that the aspectual contour of sentences is the result of the unification of the features “bounded/unbounded” and “quantized/cumulative”, which originate from the sentence’s *Aktionsart*, aspect and Incremental Theme NP.

Alex Housen is concerned with the question whether the acquisition of the temporal system of Dutch by a native speaker of English is guided by the principles of the learner’s native language and/or by perceptual and semantico-cognitive universals. According to the latter view, foreign language learners develop aspectual notions (responsible for the contrast between foreground and background) before tense distinctions (the “defective tense hypothesis”). He compares the temporality systems that were operative at two stages of the acquisition process. This material reveals, quite unexpectedly, the dominant role of the Dutch verb *be* as a primary marker of tense at both stages of the acquisition and the slightly more frequent use of the past tense with dynamic verbs. On the whole, however, his material does not support the defective tense hypothesis: at both stages the temporal systems of the learner turn out to be tense-prominent rather than aspect-dominant.

Temporal structure and discourse structure*

Mimo Caenepeel – Marc Moens

1. Temporal ordering in discourse

1.1. The role of tense and aspect

It is by now generally accepted that the truth-conditions for a discourse consisting of more than one sentence cannot simply be formulated as the sum of the truth-conditions of each of the sentences in isolation. For instance, to specify the truth-conditions of a sequence such as

- (1) *John came in. He sat down. He poured himself a cup of coffee.*

it does not suffice to state that each of the states of affairs occurred at some time in the past, as in a traditional Priorian analysis. The fact that the state of affairs described in the second sentence occurs after the one described in the first (the order of the sentences in the discourse reflects the temporal ordering of the states of affairs) forms part of the semantics of the discourse. Recent discourse-oriented work in the area of natural language interpretation has formulated proposals setting out how features of a sentence's context can be taken into account in its interpretation. This was one of the novel aspects of, for example, Discourse Representation Theory, which drew attention to the discourse role of tense: "... the significance of the tenses lies primarily in the temporal relations which they establish between the sentences in which they occur and the sentences which precede those in the texts or discourses in which those sentences figure." (Kamp–Rohrer 1983: 250)

The Discourse Representation Theory approach to tense views tense as an anaphoric device.¹ The anaphoric nature of tense lies in the fact that a tensed sentence has to be interpreted with respect to a particular, previously established reference time which functions as its antecedent. If the sentence contains a definite temporal adverbial, that adverbial will be taken as identifying the reference time, and the tensed expression will be interpreted as co-referential with it. In the absence of such an adverbial the temporal antecedent is to be recovered from the sentence's context.

In such an approach, aspectual information serves as input for the discourse construction rules which specify how temporally unmodified sentences are to be ordered temporally. Sentences are classified as belonging to one of three aspectual types, namely events, processes, or states, and, depending on the aspectual type of the sentences concerned, different discourse construction rules will apply.

More specifically, depending on the aspectual types of the sentences, the reference times that their tenses refer to will be manipulated in a particular way. Thus, an event sentence will introduce a new reference time “just after” the current reference time (which is usually provided by preceding discourse); and the state of affairs described by the sentence is interpreted as temporally included in this reference time. This procedure is invoked to account for the fact that successive event sentences create the impression of narrative movement. Consider the following example:

- (2) *John got up. He poured himself a cup of coffee.*

The first sentence in this discourse is an event sentence. The state of affairs it describes (soa_1 : John got up) is interpreted as occurring inside some contextually given reference time r_1 . The next sentence is also an event sentence. It introduces a new reference time r_2 after r_1 , and the state of affairs it describes (soa_2 : He poured himself a cup of coffee) is interpreted as temporally included in r_2 , resulting in the interpretation that soa_2 occurred after soa_1 .

Process or state sentences, in contrast, are interpreted as describing a state of affairs which surrounds the current reference time, without introducing a new reference time. As a result they do not create the impression of temporal progression. The following example illustrates this:

- (3) *John got up. He was in a bad mood.*

The event sentence introduces a new reference time r and the state of affairs of getting up is interpreted as temporally included in r . The next sentence is stative; no new reference time is introduced, and the state of affairs described by the stative sentence is interpreted as surrounding r , thus resulting in the interpretation that John’s being in a bad mood temporally surrounds the event of John’s getting up.

Combining the notion of tense-as-anaphor with an aspectual analysis thus allows Discourse Representation Theory to account for temporal ordering phenomena in discourses such as the ones in examples (1) and (3). While the approach makes it possible to account for a great many cases, however, there

are some instances where the discourse construction rules proposed by Discourse Representation Theory will yield incorrect or imprecise results. For instance, the second of two consecutive events may be interpreted as forming part of the first (as in example 4) or as simultaneous with it (as in example 5):

- (4) *We went to London yesterday. We took the 10:30 train.*
- (5) *The man ordered her to give him her money. He said the words in a slow, deliberate manner.*

Partee (1984) acknowledges this problem, and proposes that a solution to it might lie in the introduction (by discourse-construction rules) of a free context-dependent variable over temporal relations, and deferring until later the decision whether the reference time of the clauses has moved forward or not.

Potentially more problematical for Discourse Representation Theory, however, are discourses such as the following:

- (6) *Frank caught the early train back to London. I gave him a lift to the station.*
- (7) *Jane left me. She fell in love with somebody else.*
- (8) *Annie broke her leg. She fell off her bicycle.*
- (9) *I left the party early. My babysitter phoned up in a bit of a panic.*

In all these example discourses, the second event is most plausibly interpreted as coming before, rather than after, the first one. If the standard Discourse Representation Theory rules for the processing of narrative are applied to these discourses they will receive the wrong temporal interpretation. To remedy this, we need to be able to specify why a reverse order interpretation offers itself in the interpretation of discourses such as the ones in (6)–(9) above.

1.2. The role of world knowledge

At first blush, there is an obvious answer to this question: two events will be interpreted in reverse order if world knowledge tells us that such a temporal interpretation is most plausible. This is the approach adopted by a number of

Artificial Intelligence-based accounts. For example, Dahlgren et al. (1989) argue that in interpreting discourses such as:

- (10) *Levine was found guilty. He broke the law.*

the principle of the updating of reference times is overridden by scenario-based knowledge about court cases. This knowledge tells us that breaking the law comes before being tried, resulting in the interpretation that the second event in (10) must have occurred before the first (Dahlgren et al. 1989: 166). A similar idea is embodied in the episodic logic of Schubert–Hwang (1989): in their semantics, episodic variables are introduced into the representation of narrative clauses so that implicit, context-dependent relationships between events can be made explicit. The successive description of two events is taken to imply that the first event caused the second – an assumption which is treated as defeasible by episodically organized world knowledge. If the causal link is not defeated, then a temporal progression between the time of occurrence of the two events is assumed (Schubert–Hwang 1989: 452).

Lascarides (1990) adopts a similar point of view, but integrates it into a belief-based non-monotonic logic in which knowledge about causality plays a central role. As Lascarides proposes a fairly elaborate and detailed account of the reverse-order phenomenon it is worth summarizing its central claims. Essentially, she proposes an account based on defeasible narrative and causal rules. In some cases, such as example (11), the narrative rule applies, but the causal one does not. Hence we will infer unproblematically that the events happened in sequential order:

- (11) *Max turned round. John hit him.*

In contrast, in a discourse like example (12):

- (12) *Max fell. John pushed him.*

both the narrative rule and a causal rule may apply. The causal rule, in this case, would be based on a causal law which stipulates that if one believes a pushing and a falling occurred² then one may assume that the pushing caused the falling. This assumption interacts with the defeasible narrative rule which stipulates that the events happened in the order in which they are described. Neither of these assumptions is favored, Lascarides claims, so both conclusions about the temporal order between these events are possible, resulting

in a weakly disjunctive interpretation for the temporal relations expressed in (12).

Finally, in example (13)

(13) *Max died. John poisoned him.*

both the narrative rule and a causal rule may again apply. But this case differs from example (12) in that the narrative rule is overruled by indefeasible world knowledge: it is impossible to poison someone who is already dead. As a result, in the case of example (13) we can draw the conclusion that the second event happened before the first one.

1.3. Problems

There can be no doubt that world knowledge plays an important role in the temporal interpretation of discourse: without the support of pragmatic plausibility the reverse temporal interpretation of consecutive event sentences cannot be sustained. Attempting to specify and formalize this role therefore constitutes an important task. Nevertheless, accounts of temporal ordering in discourse which concentrate primarily on reasoning and world knowledge leave a number of linguistic problems unaddressed.

One such problem concerns some striking differences in intuitions about reverse- order discourses. For example, in the case of examples (6)–(9) Lascarides would draw weakly disjunctive conclusions; but an informal survey of native speakers' intuitions reveals a strong preference for the reverse order interpretation in such cases. Moreover, many people do not agree with Lascarides' assumption that in example (14) a reverse- order interpretation is not available.

(14) *Max turned round. John hit him.*

Since language users presumably share the same world knowledge about events (or certainly the type of knowledge Lascarides' account would incorporate into an event ontology) it is not clear why this difference in intuitions should arise.

Moreover, if we assume that world knowledge alone licenses a reverse order interpretation for simple past sequences it is not clear why the following sequences sound odd:

- (15) ? *Everyone laughed. Fred told a joke.*
 (16) ? *The committee applauded. Nigel announced his promotion.*

There is quite a strong causal or scenario-based link between someone telling a joke and people laughing, or between someone's promotion being announced at a meeting and people applauding, but that does not make these discourses acceptable.

These observations suggest that the acceptability of reverse order event discourses is not merely a matter of world knowledge. In the rest of this paper we will try to show that a language user (reader/hearer) brings another important type of knowledge to the temporal interpretation of discourse, namely knowledge about discourse structure and discourse type. We will argue that making inferences about these constitutes an inherent part of the interpretation of reverse-order discourses; indeed, that without it, the acceptability of such discourses cannot be assessed. We will also give some examples of clues which, in decontextualized discourses, aid the reader or hearer in making such inferences.

2. Structuring the discourse

Let us start by addressing the notion of discourse structure in a very simple way. In an approach which draws upon preferred causal relationships between events in an event ontology, it is not clear what the difference is, if there is one, between narrative-(or sequential-) order and reverse-order sequences. What, for instance, distinguishes the (a) discourse in the following example from the (b) discourse, given that the semantic content of both states of affairs, and the relationship (of causality) between them, are the same?

- (17) a. *Annie fell off her bicycle. She broke her leg.*
 b. *Annie broke her leg. She fell off her bicycle.*

The most manifest difference between the two discourses concerns the staging of the information, or the way in which

... the linear organisation [of the discourse] can be manipulated to bring some items and events into greater prominence than others.

... The notion of “relative prominence” arising from processes of thematisation and “staging” devices has led many researchers, particularly in psycholinguistics, to consider staging as a crucial factor in discourse structure because, they believe, the way a piece of information is staged must have a significant effect on the process of subsequent recall. (Brown–Yule 1983: 134)

Thus, a language user would opt for the (b) discourse if the state of affairs *Annie broke her leg* is to be given greater prominence, for example if it constitutes the discourse topic.³ The second state of affairs is added to provide further information the hearer might subsequently require. The (b) discourse might thus occur in a context such as the following:

- (18) A: *Is Annie not coming to the meeting today?*
 B: *No. She broke her leg. She fell off her bicycle.*

Now consider the following discourse:

- (19) *Annie raced home eagerly, to tell her mother the good news. When she reached the corner, however, she took too sharp a turn, and she fell off her bicycle. She broke her leg, and cried out with pain.*

In this discourse, none of the events achieves the prominent status of a discourse topic followed by clauses providing subsidiary information. Instead, the discourse is propelled by the implicit question *and then?* which, with each new clause, leads the hearer/reader to the next event.

Thus, while the semantic/referential relationship between the clauses *She broke her leg* and *She fell off her bicycle* is the same in examples (18) and (19), the structure of the discourse is crucially different.

This difference becomes most clear when we look at the structure of discourse at a more abstract level – for example by invoking the tree-like structures proposed in Scha and Polanyi’s *Dynamic Discourse Model*. This model represents the structure of a discourse as a tree, in which discourse constituent units are related to each other through a relationship of either coordination or subordination (Scha–Polanyi 1988). Each relationship is embodied by different kinds of discourse structure.⁴ The relationship in (17a) is narrative – a (binary, in this case) relationship of coordination; the one in (17b), on the other hand, is one of explanation – a binary relationship of subordination. In such an approach, the logical form of a sentence remains the same, irres-

pective of the type of discourse it appears in. What does differ are the manipulations the discourse- grammar rules perform over these logical forms.⁵

It follows from this that we need to distinguish eventuality relations between states of affairs in a discourse, and discourse relations between the discourse segments. Temporal structure and discourse structure should be studied as separate but interrelated aspects of discourse.

3. Discourse type and context

3.1. Contextualizing discourse

In the previous section we discussed the profile of reverse-order discourses in terms of staging and the relative prominence or subsidiary nature of the information conveyed by the sentences concerned. But now another problem arises: if a language user wants to express that an event in the past occurred before another already mentioned event in the past, he has a specific and unambiguous means at his disposal, namely the use of the past perfect. Consider the following examples:

- (20) a. *Jane left me. She fell in love with somebody else.*
 b. *Jane left me. She had fallen in love with someone else.*

As in the case of (17) above, the semantic content of the states of affairs in the two discourses is the same; moreover, the two discourses exhibit the same eventuality relationship (cause) and the same discourse relationship (explanation). Does this mean they are identical and interchangeable?

The difference between both discourses is hard to assess. The reason for this lies, we believe, in the fact that they are offered in a decontextualized manner. While a reverse-order simple past sequence will be acceptable (and processed easily) in one type of context, in another type of context the same discourse will be perceived as puzzling or odd. To see this, both example discourses in (20) need to be assessed in context.

While context is a complex notion which has many parameters, the distinction relevant for our purposes can be captured in terms of a contrast between narrative and non-narrative contexts.⁶ We propose a definition of this contrast in terms of the relationship between the utterance and the situation of speech.

If the utterance is deictically related to the actual situation of speech, so that the situational features of the latter contribute directly to the understanding of the utterance, the discourse is embedded in a non-narrative context.⁷ In a non-narrative context, two events can be described in reverse order.⁸ Thus, the use of the two simple pasts in example (20a) is appropriate in a context like the following:

- (21) context: A runs into B, an old friend he has not seen for a long time.
He asks B how he's doing. B replies:
Not great. Jane left me. She fell in love with someone else.

If a simple past reverse-order discourse is offered in isolation – i. e., without information about the context it is embedded in – it will be easier to process if it contains linguistic elements which cannot be interpreted except with reference to the situatedness and the perspective of the speaker, such as deictic, expressive, and/or communicative elements. If the discourse contains such elements the reader will spontaneously construct the type of non-narrative context required for the interpretation of a simple-past reverse-order discourse, since the elements are to be related to the situational features of the speech point. This is illustrated by example (22), where the relevant situational elements have been romanized. Note that in the type of context evoked here the use of the past perfect seems inappropriate:

- (22) *Jane left me.* Just imagine, *she fell in love* with that stupid
??had fallen in love biologist

Although in principle every utterance originates in a situation of speech, a discourse may be presented as distanced from the actual time/space coordinate at which it is produced. This can be achieved by construing the material which makes up the discourse as a narrative, or a story.⁹ In a narrative, states of affairs are presented in a self-contained temporal continuum in which they are anaphorically related to each other, instead of deictically to the actual situation of speech. In example (23), the discourse in (20b) has been incorporated into a narrative context:¹⁰

- (23) *Three months after that, Jane left me. She had fallen in love with someone else. I was terribly upset at first, but eventually got over the shock, and started to go out with other people again. That was when I met Annie.*

This type of context requires the use of the past perfect for the expression of an explanatory relation of temporal precedence: it appears that, in the absence of the support of a direct link with the situation of speech, a relationship of temporal precedence has to be marked explicitly.¹¹ Indeed, if the past perfect is substituted with a simple past in such a context, we will infer narrative movement:¹²

- (24) *Three months after that Jane left me. She fell in love with someone else, and moved to the States. I never saw her again.*

It follows from this that the ease with which decontextualized simple-past reverse- order discourses are processed depends on the ease with which the appropriate context can be constructed. As already pointed out earlier, the occurrence of expressive or communicative elements facilitates this construction. Another factor which affects comprehension concerns the medium: often reverse-order discourses which seem odd or unacceptable in written form are more readily understood and accepted when they are offered as spoken discourse. This is in line with our hypothesis: the spoken medium contributes to suggesting the appropriate discourse type, and prosody constitutes an enabling, or supporting, device for simple-past reverse-order discourses. Thus, informants tend to frown at the written version of the following reverse order sequences:

- (25) *? John went into the flower shop. He promised his wife some roses.*
 (26) *? Joe was discharged from hospital. He recovered completely.*

If spoken, or if sufficient contextual information is added, however, the reverse- order interpretation becomes unproblematically acceptable:

- (27) context: A meets B in the street. He asks where their mutual friend C is. B answers:
He went into that flower shop over there. He promised Mary some roses.
- (28) context: Someone is at the hospital to visit her nephew, and asks a nurse for more information. The nurse answers:
Your nephew was discharged from hospital earlier this morning, Mrs Jones. He recovered completely.

In this light it becomes clear why example (14) (repeated here as 29a) meets with mixed intuitions: its acceptability depends on the context in which

it occurs. In a non- narrative context the reverse-order interpretation is easily accessible; example (29b) illustrates this. But in a narrative context the second simple-past sentence will be interpreted as introducing a temporal update, as in (29c). To convey explanatory temporal precedence in such a context a past perfect has to be used (29d):

- (29) a. *Max turned around. John hit him.*
 b. non-narrative context:
 A: How come John saw what happened behind them?
 B: He turned around. Max hit him.
 c. narrative context:
 At that point John stopped, and turned around. Max hit him. John fell, and...
 d. narrative context:
 At that point John stopped, and turned around. Max had hit him.

The distinction between narrative and non-narrative contexts also enables us to explain why the examples in (15) and (16) are odd, despite the obvious causal relation between the events: it is very difficult to construct the non-narrative context required for their interpretation. But the following discourses show it is not impossible:

- (30) context: A is waiting outside a seminar room. Suddenly a lot of noise comes from inside the room. Two seconds later B steps out of the room.
 The following conversation ensues:
A: Good heavens! What was all that noise?
B: The audience applauded. Keith announced his promotion.
 or:
B: Everybody laughed. Fred told his parrot joke.

3.2. Discourse phenomena and discourse types

Our discussion in the previous section shows that while supporting world knowledge constitutes a necessary condition for two simple-past sentences to be interpreted in reverse order, it does not constitute a sufficient one. A reverse-order interpretation of two simple-past events also requires the support of a non-narrative discourse context.

More generally, our analysis suggests that different discourse types have different phenomena associated with them. Because of this it is important to clearly separate out, on the one hand, rules for the semantic analysis of sentences, and, on the other, interpretation principles for different types of discourse. If rules for the processing of narrative discourse are applied to non-narrative discourse, for instance, important distinctions in the use of tense and aspect will be missed. Thus in the following two discourses, which belong to the non-narrative type, the aspectual profile of the second state of affairs (which is a state in the (a) example, and an event in the (b) example) has little impact on the structure of the discourse – the discourse relation is, in both instances, one of explanation:

- (31) a. *Jane left me. She was dissatisfied with our relationship.*
 b. *Jane left me. She fell in love with someone else.*

In the following discourses, however, the difference between the choice of a stative expression in the (a) example and an event in the (b) example, has a more pervasive effect on the structure of the discourse: in the (a) case the discourse relation is one of elaboration (or background); in (b) it is one of narration:

- (32) a. *Two hours later Jane left the house. She was in good spirits.*
 b. *Two hours later Jane left the house. She hailed a taxi, and...*

A similar point is made in Reichman's (1984) discussion of an instructive discourse:

- (33) *There's an automatic control device – you can do it by hand. In fact, initially when you light off it is – when you turn on the steam plant – it's done by hand. But after you get going there is an automatic system that is sensing the flow of steam out of the steam generator. It's sensing the level in the steam generator, and it's also sensing the flow of the water through the feed reg valve. Okay? ... That's a separate system... And I didn't mean to tell you about that now, but as long as you asked about it. (Reichman 1984: 356)*

In this discourse the expert briefly embarks on a subdiscourse (closed off with *and I didn't mean to tell you about that now*). He signals this to the listener by switching to progressives in the subdiscourse. Clearly, if one were

to apply the rules for the processing of narrative discourse to such a discourse, one would miss this important function of the progressive, by postulating a non-existent temporal relation between the sentences in the progressive and the events described in the preceding discourse. Clearly, this is a different type of discourse, and different processing rules are in order from the ones used to process narrative discourse.¹³

A number of people working in the area of discourse, like Reichman, explicitly opt for making a principled distinction between different discourse rules for different discourse types. Dowty (1986), for instance, proposes a discourse interpretation principle specifically for narrative discourse. In other work, the distinction is adopted more casually: thus Partee (1984) acknowledges in passing that her theoretical observations apply only to narrative discourse, but she does not discuss what motivates this claim, nor what its implications are. One of the implications for Discourse Representation Theory is that, as long as the approach restricts itself exclusively to narrative discourse, it need not deal with simple-past reverse-order sequences, since they do not constitute a phenomenon that belongs to narrative discourse.

4. Conclusions

We have tried to show in this article that world knowledge about relationships between events by itself is not sufficient to explain when simple-past reverse-order discourses are acceptable; knowledge about discourse structure and discourse types also plays an important role.

Event structure and discourse structure constitute separate (albeit inter-related) aspects of discourse, and the interaction between the two deserves further exploration. A full account of temporal relations in discourse should observe the division of labor between sentence semantics and discourse rules, and it is important to determine what work is done at what level.

Different types of discourse require different processing rules. Narrative discourse is only one such type, albeit the one that within the Discourse Representation Theory literature has received most attention. It would be a mistake to assume that rules for narrative processing automatically apply to other types of discourse as well, or to complicate the same set of rules further so as to make them fit non-narrative discourse as well.

Notes

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- 1. This idea was first suggested in McCawley (1971) and Partee (1973), but it was only developed fully in a number of approaches couched in a Discourse Representation Theory framework (e.g., Hinrichs 1986, Partee 1984, Vet 1987). More recently a number of other accounts have been suggested in different theoretical frameworks (e.g., Dowty 1986, Webber 1988).
- 2. Presumably involving the same participants in the same participant roles, at roughly the same time and roughly the same place.
- 3. For a discussion of the notion of discourse topic see van Kuppevelt (1991).
- 4. Thus narratives, lists, and adjacency pairs constitute examples of co-ordination; while rhetorical subordination (generalization, explanation, comment, etc.), topic/dominant chaining and interruption constitute examples of subordinated relationships. Only narrative embodies a principle of narrative time progression; the other discourse relations embody very different manipulations of the semantic structures associated with the sentences that make up the discourse.
- 5. In case more than one rule applies to a given discourse, preferences are stated over the discourse-processing rules.
- 6. This is probably an oversimplification; it is likely that in a fuller exploration of the effect of types of context on temporal ordering more fine-grained distinctions need to be made; but this is beyond the scope of this article.
- 7. Most conversational exchanges belong to this type of context, although it is possible to introduce a narrative context into a conversation.
- 8. Always provided this is pragmatically plausible, of course.
- 9. Note that while a story is by no means necessarily imaginary in character, the term tends to be suggestive of fictionality. This is due to the fact that fictionality constitutes an unambiguous distancing device.
- 10. As the distinctive character of a narrative context lies precisely in the fact that it does not interact directly with the actual situation of speech, there is little point in describing such a context as we have done for example (21). Instead, we have marked the narrative context through the use of the anaphoric temporal adverbial in the first sentence. A similar procedure to indicate that a decontextualized discourse belongs to a narrative context is suggested by Sandström (1990).
- 11. A flashback initiated by a past perfect may well be continued in the simple past. This is quite a common phenomenon, especially in American English. But even in such cases, at least the starting point is explicitly indicated.
- 12. Or if narrative movement is pragmatically implausible, the discourse will sound odd.
- 13. Apart from the actual situational features of a discourse, a discourse will usually contain other clues which will enable the reader/listener to decide what type of discourse she is dealing with. The role of syntactic information in this respect

depends on the language concerned. As we have seen, the simple past tense in English has both a narrative and a non-narrative use. But in other languages, such as Dutch, French, or German, the use of a simple past tense often acts as an indicator of narrativity (cf. Weinrich 1964; Janssen 1990). In these languages it is virtually impossible for simple past sentences to be interpreted in reverse order.

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Tense use and temporal orientation: The *passé simple* and the *imparfait* of French

Arie Molendijk

Introduction¹

Those whose native language does not mark in an overt way what distinguishes the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* of French have as a rule great difficulty in using these tenses properly. This is even true for speakers who have acquired a relatively high degree of perfection in French. One might think that the problem is due to the fact that the meaning of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* is a complex one. This position is adopted by Kamp (1981), among others, who states that the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* have several semantic features, none of which is absolutely permanent. Thus, the *passé simple* normally drives the narrative's action forward, but this situation does not necessarily occur. Similarly, the *passé simple* often conveys punctuality, but there exist non-punctual uses of this tense. The *imparfait* describes facts that obtain while other facts occur, but this is not a necessary condition for its use, and so forth.²

It will be argued in this paper that the source of the problem concerning the use of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* does not reside in the meaning of these tenses itself: the *passé simple* only differs from the *imparfait* in that the latter invariably conveys global simultaneity, whereas the former never does. Other characteristics of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* are merely symptoms of this underlying difference, and do not necessarily manifest themselves. For reasons of simplicity, certain problems related to the so-called picturesque use of the *imparfait* are disregarded here.

Why is the use of these tenses so problematic then? The answer to this question can be illustrated by an example like (1):³

- (1) *The old man lit the lamp (S1). The feeble light gave the room an appearance of sadness (S2)*

Should S2 of (1) be rendered in French by a *passé simple* sentence (*la faible lumière donna à la pièce ...*) or an *imparfait* sentence (*la faible lumière don-*

nait à la pièce ...)? The following (theoretical) considerations are relevant with respect to this question. In (1), *the feeble light* indicates that S2 talks about what is temporally implied (i. e., “created”) by S1, the temporal implication being something like *there be light*. Temporal implications are implications that have a temporal dimension. X temporally implies Y if (i) X implies Y and (ii) Y denotes something that is (immediately) posterior to what is referred to by X (cf. Molendijk 1990: 84–91). As S2 speaks about what is temporally implied by S1, it refers to a fact that is posterior to E1, i. e., E2 is posterior to E1. One might conclude from this fact that S2 of (1) “should” be read as (exclusively) expressing posteriority, which would exclude the use of *donnait* ‘gave’ (*imparfait*) in the French equivalent of this sentence.⁴

But this conclusion does not necessarily impose itself. There is another theoretical possibility. The definite article *the* in the subject-NP of S2 tells us that this sentence is about an existing light, i. e., about a light that is presented as “being already there” before the appearance of S2. So S2 could be said to express simultaneity with respect to an already existing fact. This fact, then, would correspond to what is temporally implied by S1: *there be light*. To put it another way, (1) could be considered (almost) identical to (2), the main difference between the two examples being that (2) explicitly mentions a fact that corresponds to a “hidden sentence” in (1):

- (2) *The old man lit the lamp* (S1). *There was light (in the room) now* (S2). *The feeble light gave the room an appearance of sadness* (S3)

This would imply that S2 of (1) “should” be read as expressing (global) simultaneity, which would exclude the use of *donna* ‘gave’ (*passé simple*) in the French translation of S2 of (1).

It is clear that the choice between the two (theoretical) possibilities mentioned above depends on what can be legitimately considered to be the (temporal) orientation point of a sentence. Defending the idea that S2 of (1) expresses posteriority rather than simultaneity is tantamount to saying that S2 is directly oriented to the fact explicitly reported by S1 rather than to *there be light*. But claiming that S2 of (1) expresses simultaneity rather than posteriority would presuppose that S2 is to be interpreted as oriented to *there be light* rather than to the event mentioned in S1.

The linguistic or pragmatic motivation of the choice between the two possibilities presented above will not concern us in this section (but see 3–3.1). Whatever factors play a role here, it can be argued that the question of the proper use of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* is not primarily about the

meaning of these tenses itself, but about temporal orientation. In order to know what is the appropriate tense form for a given sentence S, it is necessary to identify the exact fact or moment of time that serves as orientation point for S.

This topic will receive considerable attention in this paper (3–4). We will see that there are conditions under which a sentence (preferably) takes as its orientation point a fact that is not explicitly mentioned (3–3.1), whereas in other cases the orientation point of the sentence is a fact that is explicitly mentioned (3.2). In some cases, both possibilities exist at the same time (3.3). We will also see that the question of the orientation point of a sentence may be dependent of its syntactic context. Temporal clauses provide interesting evidence for this claim (4).

But first it will be shown that the difference between the *imparfait* and the *passé simple* is a purely temporal one (global simultaneity vs. absence of global simultaneity; 2–2.2), and that traditional and more recent descriptions of these tenses cannot be maintained (section 1).

The claims that will be made with respect to the use and the interpretation of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* and with respect to the regularities existing in the field of temporal orientation can be seen as additions to, and modifications of, some of the proposals put forward by Kamp–Rohrer (1983) and Smith (1978). The facts that will be discussed here will not, however, be explicitly related to the theories elaborated in those papers. Judging the claims that will be made in this paper does not require familiarity with the theories in question.

1. Descriptions of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait*

The descriptions that will be briefly examined in this section are listed in (3):⁵

(3)	<i>Passé simple</i>	<i>Imparfait</i>
	foreground information	background information
	perfective aspect	imperfective aspect
	punctuality of the fact	durativity of the fact
	narrative	descriptive
	non-anaphoric	anaphoric
	distantiation and	absence of distantiation
	dimensionalisation	and of dimensionalisation

None of the characteristics given in (3) are fundamental to the *passé simple* and the *imparfait*. For instance, if the distinction between these tenses would essentially concern the “importance” of the information contained in sentences (foregrounding vs. backgrounding), then the occurrence of *passé simple* sentences reporting background information and/or *imparfait* sentences containing foreground information should be excluded. But this is not the case, as can be shown by (4) and (5):⁶

- (4) *La Guerre de Cent Ans – qui dura d’ailleurs 116 ans* (S2) – *fut surtout amenée par ...* (S1)
 ‘The Hundred Years’ War – which actually *lasted* (PS) 116 years (S2) – was primarily provoked by ... (S1)’
 (*dura*: background information, as formally indicated by *d’ailleurs* ‘actually’)
- (5) *Je vis* (S1) *que, brusquement, Jean sortait un revolver* (S2)
 ‘I saw (S1) that John suddenly *drew* (IMP) a gun (S2)’
 (*sortait*: foreground information, as indicated by *brusquement* ‘suddenly’)

Similarly, if the difference between the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* were fundamentally aspectual (perfectivity vs. imperfectivity), then the use of the *imparfait* in sentences that refer to “completed” facts should be impossible. But (6) shows that this is not what actually happens:

- (6) *Quand j’atteignis la forêt* (S1), *une heure sonnait* (S2)
 ‘When I reached the woods (S1), the clock *struck* (IMP) one (S2)’
 (*sonnait*: perfective, “completed”)

As for the alleged punctuality of the *passé simple* and the so-called durability of the *imparfait*, consider (7):

- (7) *Jean prit la parole* (S1). *Il ne nous parlait que de ses affaires* (S2).
Il ne nous parla que de ça (S3)
 ‘Jean took the floor (S1). He *talked* (IMP) about nothing but his work (S2). He *talked* (PS) about nothing else (S3)’

S3 refers to a fact that is temporally more extended than the one mentioned in S2: *he talked about nothing but his work* (S2) *and continued doing so all evening/during the whole party* (S3). Uses of the *passé simple* and the *imparfait* like the ones illustrated by (7) are clearly incompatible with the hypoth-

esis about the punctuality of the *passé simple* and the durativity of the *imparfait*. If this hypothesis were correct, *imparfait* facts should “take more time” than *passé simple* facts in contexts like (7), in which the same fact is reported both in a sentence in the *imparfait* and in a subsequent sentence in the *passé simple*. But in these cases, the *passé simple* fact is as a rule more extended (temporally) than the *imparfait* fact.⁷ If the *passé simple* were fundamentally punctual, this tense form should not be possible, in (7).

It can also be shown that sentences in the *passé simple* are not invariably used for narration, and that *imparfait* sentences are not necessarily descriptive. Intuitively, S2 of (5) is clearly narrative, despite the (obligatory) use of the *imparfait*, and S2 of (4), which only allows the use of the *passé simple*, is descriptive.

Linguists who call the *imparfait* an anaphoric (temporal) element (cf. Vet 1985, Veters 1989) relate the expression “temporal anaphora” to the notion of simultaneity. (For an interesting discussion about the applicability of the notion of anaphora to temporal elements, see Kleiber (1993); cf. also Molendijk (1993). So, according to them, the *imparfait* expresses simultaneity, whereas the *passé simple* does not. One of the problems with this analysis is that it does not distinguish between several types of simultaneity. We will see in 2–2.2 that it is not primarily the absence or presence of a relationship of simultaneity that determines the (im)possibility of using the *passé simple* or the *imparfait*, but the existence of certain types of simultaneity rather than others. Thus, in an example like (8):

- (8) *Pierre se promenait avec sa femme* (S1). *Il expliquait à sa femme les conditions de vie sur Vénus* (S2) *et lui indiqua Mars* (S3)
 ‘Pierre and his wife were taking a walk (S1). He *explained* (IMP) to her the conditions of life on Venus (S2) and *indicated* (PS) Mars’

both *expliquait* (*imparfait*) and *indiqua* (*passé simple*) indicate simultaneity with respect to the walking. (This interpretation clearly has a pragmatic aspect: facts like E2 and E3 commonly occur while facts like E1 are taking place). But they do not do so in the same way. *Expliquait* (*imparfait*) qualifies the walk as a whole, whereas *indiqua* (*passé simple*) only refers to a specific moment of the walk (see 2–2.2).

Let us finally consider the claim that *passé simple* facts differ from *imparfait* facts in that the former facts, but not the latter, are to be conceived of as having clear-cut dimensions and as being (physically, psychologically, or otherwise) distant from the moment of speech (cf. Waugh–Monville-Burston