

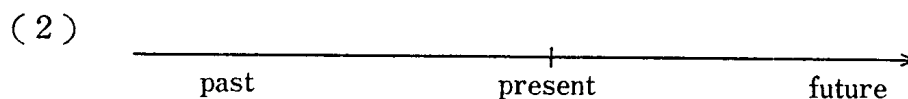
TENSE and TIME in English

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1. TENSE is said to be, c. f., Jespersen (MEG IV, p. 1), *the linguistic expression of time-relations* indicated in verb forms. It has long been maintained, e. g., by traditional or school grammarians, that English has three tenses: past, present and future. Paradigms in (1) are those referring to future, present and past events respectively.

- (1) a. The bell *will ring* soon.
 b. The bell *rings* at noon.
 c. The bell *rang* ten minutes ago.

The three divisions of tense seem to reflect the flow of real time, which can be arranged as follows;



We think it possible to indicate time one-dimensionally like (2), i. e., time flows continuously from left to right. Present is the time at the moment of speech and continuously moves to the right. Past is the time prior to present; future is the time subsequent to present.

Looking at the paradigms in (1), we seem to be able to say that real time is reflected in verbal forms. But does this remain true in other examples? The aim of this article is to examine whether real time is reflected in tense, and, if not, to explore how we should redefine the

concept of tense.

2. The first problem that we must consider is the so-called FUTURE tense. Exemplified in the paradigm (1 a), the future tense is accompanied by the verbal form *will* (or sometimes *shall*)+infinitive; modal auxiliary *will* (or *shall*) must coöccur with an infinitive, which is quite different from both the present and past tenses. The latter tenses are accompanied only by the inflection of a verb. Why must we admit this different verbal form only for the future tense?

When we describe a future event, we have several ways of expressing it as in (3)-(7).

- (3) a. It'll *rain* tomorrow.
- b. I'll *come* and *see* you tomorrow.
- (4) a. It's *going to rain* tomorrow.
- b. Nancy *is going to lend* us her camera.
- (5) a. The train *leaves* at seven tomorrow morning.
- b. The Queen *visits* Canada next spring.
- (6) a. Ted and Nancy *are coming* this evening.
- b. I'm *taking* the children to the zoo tomorrow.
- (7) a. The Prime Minister *is to visit* Canada.
- b. The train *is about to* leave.

We have several ways of describing future events, as in (3)-(7), yet why do we call only the verbal form in (3) the future tense? We don't seem to have any strong rationale for accepting only the *will*+infinitive form as the future tense.

The next problem we should consider here is the past form of *will*, i. e., *would*+infinitive.

- (8) a. They believe that their son *will* soon be back.
- b. They believed that their son *would* soon be back.
- (9) a. He *would* be there.

b. I think it *would* be Turner as well.

—F. R. Palmer 1979, p. 48—

If the meanings of *would* are all parallel to those of *will*, it could be possible that *would* expresses ‘future-in-the-past.’ ‘Future-in-the-past’, however, is possible only in limited cases, such as the sequence of tenses, i. e., *would* in (8 b) expresses future-in-the-past meaning. *Would* in (9) does not express this meaning. It indicates the speaker’s mood or the speaker’s present opinion toward the proposition, that is, the speaker says ‘it is probable that he might be there (or it might be Turner as well).’ The *would* works as a modal auxiliary and does not have a past time reference at all. Perhaps we can say that *would* as in (9) does not really have a tense, but is it possible for us to conclude this? Thus, if we admit the future tense in syntax, we will encounter the difficulties enumerated above.

3. Next let us study present tense and examine whether it always shows real time, i. e., coincide with the moment of speech.

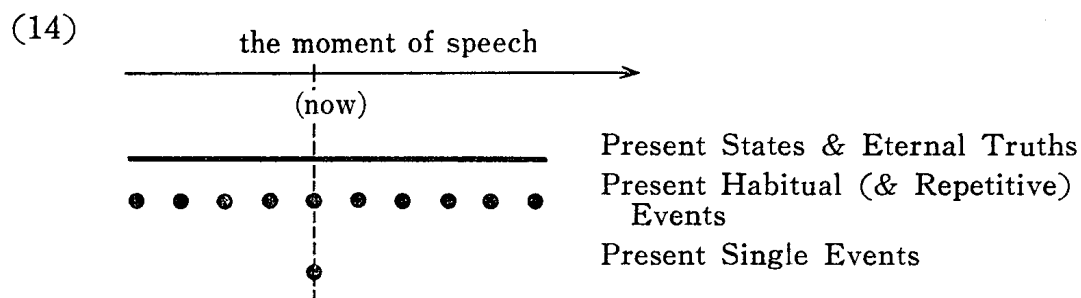
We generally use present tense when we describe a present state (e. g., (10)), a present single event (e. g., (11)), a present habitual or repetitive event (e. g., (12)), or an eternal truth (e. g., (13)).

- (10) a. I *know* her very well.
- b. She *loves* being admired.
- (11) a. Nappier *passes* the ball to Attwater.
- b. I *declare* the meeting open.
- c. Here *comes* our train!
- (12) a. I *get up* at seven every morning.
- b. The train *starts* at noon.
- (13) a. The sun *rises* in the east.
- b. Light *travels* faster than sound.

When the present tense is used with stative verbs as in (10), there

is no inherent limitation on the extension of the state into the past and future (c. f., Quirk, et. al. 1985, p. 179 f). The same situation is true of habitual or repetitive events shown in (12) and eternal truths shown in (13). There is a difference, however, between them. Habitual or repetitive events occur continually in the time span extending between past and future, while eternal truths occur continuously. Single events rarely occur simultaneously with the moment of speech.

To sum up the cases referred to so far, all of the present tense forms coincide with the moment of speech in such a way that they can be diagrammed in (14) (c. f., Quirk, et. al. 1985, p. 180).



All the present forms, however, do not always reflect real time, i. e., we have several cases in which the present tense does not coincide with the moment of speech.

- (5) a. The train *leaves* at seven tomorrow morning.
b. The Queen *visits* Canada next spring.
- (15) a. I'll leave after Mother *comes* back.
b. Give my love to Lawrence if you *see* him.¹⁾

All the sentences in (5) and (15) have a present tense but they do not have a present time reference. Rather, they refer to future events. Other examples which illustrate that present tense does not necessarily have a present time reference are those called HISTORIC present.

1) In imperatives, main verbs, e. g., *give* in (15 b), do not carry tense, rather they are infinitives. c. f., Asakawa & Kamata 1986, p. 148 f.

- (16) But gradually in her letters she *tends* to confuse me with her other friend, the Buddy who died in 1880s; more and more thirteens *are* not the only days she *stays* in bed.....
 ——Asakawa & Kamata 1986, p. 119——

The three italicized verbs do not have a present time reference. They refer to the events and a state in the past. The historic present describes past as if it is happening now (c. f., Quirk, et. al. 1985, p. 181).

Paradigms in (17) also show that the present tense does not have a present time reference, but a past time reference.

- (17) a. I *hear* that he was engaged.
 b. Bacon *writes* that revenge is wild justice.

As we have shown, present tense does not always have a present time reference. We have examples in which the present tense indicates a future or past time relation.

4. This section is concerned with the past tense. The past tense generally indicates a past event or a past state, i. e., it generally has a past time reference, yet we have several examples in which the past tense does not refer to past time.

- (18) In the year A. D. 2201, the interplanetary transit vehicle Zeno VII *made* a routine journey to the moon with thirty people on board.

——Leech 1971, p. 10——

(18) is an example of fictional narratives. The past tense does not refer to past time, but rather to future time since it was written in 1987. By using past tense in cases like (18), Leech (1971, p. 10) says, we are invited to look at future events from a vantage point even further into the future.

Another instance in which past tense does not refer to past time is found in examples which reflect the tentative attitude of the speaker, as shown in (19) (c. f., Quirk, et. al. 1985, p. 188).

- (19) a. *Did* you want to see me now?
 b. I *wondered* if you could help us.

Finally, in subjunctives, past tense does not refer to past time as is shown in (20).

- (20) a. If I *saw* her I would not tell her the truth.
 b. If Nicholas *were* only here, he would advise her.
 c. It's time you *went* to bed.

Past tense in these paradigms is called HYPOTHETICAL past and implies that some state or event has not occurred in the present and might not occur in the future.

5. We have thus far shown that tenses do not necessarily coincide with real time, and that the future tense is somewhat problematic. Therefore, we must consider here that tense cannot be divided in three, i. e., past, present and future, and that tense does not always reflect the flow of real time.

How, then, shall we define tense? Tense can be defined as follows : *tense is the syntactic element which decides the inflectional forms of a verb and an auxiliary verb.* We maintain that tense is composed of two parts: PAST and NON-PAST. (21) are examples of PAST tense, and (22) of NON-PAST tense.

- (21) a. She *felt* a great love for her parents and her country.
 b. The man *lost* his wallet.
 c. He *was* reading a book in his study when the telephone *rang*.

- d. I *had* lived there for two years when my first child *was* born.
- e. When we *were* children, we *would* go skating every winter.
- f. She *could* be in London or Paris or Tokyo—nobody knows.
- Swan 1980, 388—
- g. If I *had* a car things *would* be fine.
- h. If I *had* known her name I *would* have told you.
- (22) a. I *feel* a great love for my parents and my country.
- b. The man *loses* his wallet.
- c. He *is* reading a book in his study now.
- d. I *have* lived here for two years since my first child was born.
- e. He *will* be back here in December.
- f. She *cannot* be in London nor Paris.
- g. If it *rains* tomorrow, the game *will* be cancelled.
- h. If it's alright with you, *can* you come and pick me up at one o'clock?²⁾

We conclude, as is shown in (21) and (22), that tense refers only to verbal inflectional forms.

6. The problem which we should address next is how to treat the time relations shown in (2). The solution is to construe time relations, such as past, present and future, semantically. We draw the line between tense and time. The former is syntactic, and the latter semantic. The problems that we enumerated in sections 2, 3 and 4 were all caused by putting semantic and syntactic domains into the same category.

If we maintain that tense can be divided in three, we cannot distin-

2) The modal auxiliary *must* does not have past form, so we must use *had to* to refer to 'obligation' in the past. We consider here *must* is the inflectional form of NON-PAST tense.

guish between tense and time, and, therefore, encounter further difficulties. In the real world, we do have time relations such as past-in-the-past, future-in-the-past, recent-past, past-in-the-future, and future-in-the-future. These time relations are shown, respectively, in (23).

- (23) a. They *had* already *left* when we arrived there.
 b. Last time I saw you, you *were going to* start a new job.
 —Swan 1980, 258—
 c. He *has* just *arrived* here.
 d. The painters say they'll *have finished* the downstairs
 rooms by Tuesday.
 —Swan 1980, 257—
 e. He *will leave* home after his mother comes back.

We need not insist that the time relations in (23) belong to the category of tense. If we insist that they do, the tense system becomes very complicated; i. e., we have to accept not only three main tenses, but also several other sub-tenses. In other words, not distinguishing clearly between tense and time leads to an unwieldy tense system.

If we maintain that tense is composed of simply PAST and NON-PAST and refers only to verbal inflection, then time relations as in (23) can be construed semantically in terms of contextual elements, such as perfect *have*, *will*, *be going to* and the verbal inflection.

The above argument leads us to the idea that tense and time belong to different categories.

7. In what way are time relations construed semantically? The inflection of verbal forms induced by tense determines the time relation in unmarked cases as in (24).

- (24) a. We *know* her very well.
 b. I *name* this ship Swan.
 c. New school year *starts* in April in Japan.

d. Time and tide *wait* for no man.

Inflectional forms of a verb induced by NON-PAST tense suggests that the state continues ((24 a)), or the event happens ((24 b)), or the proposition (e. g., (NEW SCHOOL YEAR START IN APRIL)) is valid ((24 c, d)), at the moment of speech.

- (25) a. She *loved* being admired.
 b. William Shakespeare *died* in 1616.
 c. He *wrote* to Mrs. Carter.

In (25), verbal forms induced by PAST tense suggest that the state continued, or the events happened, at a time before the moment of speech.

Let us now examine the paradigms in (26).

- (26) a. The train *leaves* at seven in the morning.
 b. The train *leaves* at seven in the morning *tomorrow*.

(26 a) is an unmarked case and suggest that the proposition (THE TRAIN LEAVE AT SEVEN IN THE MORNING) is valid at the moment of speech. (26 b), however, is a marked case. The verb form and the adverb *tomorrow* trigger the interpretation that the train's leaving occur at a time subsequent to the moment of speech.

- (27) a. It *will rain* tomorrow.
 b. She *is going to have* a baby soon.

Paradigms in (27) have a NON-PAST tense and are construed as having a future time reference. They are marked cases and induce the meaning of future time reference by the use of the words *will* and *be going to* as well as the inflectional forms. Thus, future time readings are construed in terms of context as is shown in the examples (26 b)

and (27 a, b).

Time relations such as past-in-the-past, past-in-the-future and future-in-the-future, as discussed in section 6, can also be interpreted *markedly* in terms of context.

Let us now examine the examples of historic present.

- (28) Did you hear what happened to me yesterday? This guy *walks* up to me and *tells* me I stole his watch.³⁾

The two verbs of the second sentence in (28) have present inflectional forms, and indicate that the events happen at the moment of speech. This interpretation is cancelled, however, by context: the two events happened before the moment of speech.

The cancellation of interpretation also occurs in fictional narratives. The verb of (18) in section 4 has a past inflectional form, and indicates that the event happened contextually as a future event.

8. In this section, we shall study the so-called HYPOTHETICAL past.

- (29) a. If there *were* no evil in this world, there *would* be no good, either.
 b. If only I *knew* the answer.

Paradigms in (29) have past inflectional forms; i. e., they have tense, but they refer to situations which are, at present, unreal.

- (30) a. If I *had been* rich, I *could have* bought the car.
 b. If you *had invited* him, he *would have* come.

Although paradigms in (30) have past-participle forms, they do not refer to the state nor to the event in the past-in-the-past, but rather to

3) Akmajian and Heny. 1975. *An introduction to the principles of transformational syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, p. 117.

unreal situations in the past.

(31) If it doesn't rain this evening, we'll have the party outside.

(31) has a NON-PAST tense and refers to a future event, but not to an unreal situation. Why do we have an unreal reading only when *if*-conditionals have a PAST tense? In Joos (1964, p. 121), we can find a hint with which to answer this question.

The unmarked tense will be called *actual* and the marked one *remote*.
 The modern English remote tense has the categorial meaning that *the referent* (what is specified by the subject-verb partnership) *is absent from that part of the real world where the verb is being spoken*.
 English treats future time as not remote from the present occasion, and remoteness in time in English is always categorically past time.

We cannot call PAST tense remote tense, as Joos does, but we can say that past time has the property of 'remoteness' in its meaning. As is indicated in (2), present time continuously moves toward the future, so a point of time in the past gradually grows further away from the present. In this respect, past time has the property of remoteness.

Joos goes on as follows (1964, p. 122);

Unreality specified by using remote tense consists in a posited substitute for accepted reality being essentially in conflict with reality. The conflict is mutual—each contradicts the other absolutely. But in that conflict the accepted reality of course prevails.....we do not live in a dream-world but rather in a world of accepted realities..... This normal resolution of the conflict banishes the posited substitute into the kind of remoteness called 'unreality.'

As Joos suggests, remoteness from reality bears the meaning of unreality. Past inflectional form induced by the PAST tense can refer to either past actuality (e. g., (25)) or unreality derived by the property of remoteness.

Unreality is *markedly* expressed by the PAST tense. The property of remoteness holds in *if*-conditionals as in (29) and (30).

(32) carries a PAST tense, but the property of remoteness does not apply to this example, and the meaning of unreality is not given.

(32) If he said so, he was a fool.

As can be seen from (29) and (30), the property of remoteness works in the context of *if* and a modal auxiliary.

The property of remoteness also works in other contexts, such as in (33).

(33) a. I wish I *hadn't said* that.
b. It's time we *left* here.

When the PAST tense appears in the subordinate clause *I wish* or *It's time* sentences, the property of remoteness works and the meaning of an unreality is given. Thus, we have shown that the property of remoteness induced by the PAST tense is always context-dependent.

If-conditionals like (29) refer to an unreality in the present or in the future, while those like (30) refer to an unreality in the past. What causes this situation? We cannot express an unreality with a NON-PAST tense. Only a PAST tense can refer to an unreality. Past-in-the-past is further distant from the present than past. Therefore, past time closer to the present refers to an unreality in the present or in the future, and past-in-the-past, which is more distant from the present, refers to an unreality in the past.

We have other cases in which the property of remoteness holds. The first is a case of the speaker's anticipation.

(34) a. He *comes back* next week.
b. He *will come back* next week.
e. He *would come back* next week.

(34 a) refers to a scheduled future event, while (34 b, c) refer to the speaker's anticipation of a future event. The probability of his returning next week is greater in (34 b) than in (34 c), though the distinction is subtle. The property of remoteness holds and a hypothetical meaning is added in (34 c).

The second is a case of 'request.'

- (35) a. Open the door for me, please?
 b. Will you open the door for me?
 c. Would you open the door for me?

Among the three paradigms in (35), (35 c) is the most polite usage. When the property of remoteness holds and a hypothetical meaning is added, the volition of a hearer is indirectly requested (c. f., Leech 1971, p. 120).

The last is a case indicating 'politeness.'

- (36) A: *Did* you want me?
 B: Yes, I *hoped* you would give me a hand with the painting.

—Leech 1971, p. 11—

What is important in (36) is that speaker B uses the PAST tense to express his present wishes. Leech explains, as follows, why the effect of the past form makes the request more polite (*ibid.*, p. 11);

We may explain the polite connotation here as a hint that the speaker is no longer necessarily committed to the feelings mentioned; that he is quite prepared to change his own attitude in the light of that of the listener.

Speaker B's request is asked for indirectly by using the PAST tense, and is therefore more polite for the reason given by Leech. Thus, as (35) and (36) show, the property of remoteness induced by the PAST

tense makes a request indirect and more polite. The same is true in paradigms in (19).

9. In this article, we have come to the following conclusions :

First, we have illustrated that tense does not necessarily coincide with real time. Hence we conclude that tense and time do not belong to the same category.

Secondly, we have proposed that tense is syntactic. Tense, we conclude, is composed of two parts: PAST and NON-PAST, and refers to only the inflectional forms of a verb or an auxiliary verb.

Thirdly, we have concluded that time relations are construed semantically, i. e., that time is semantic. Past inflectional forms induced by the PAST tense, and present inflectional forms induced by the NON-PAST tense assign past and present time reference, respectively, to unmarked cases. To marked cases, time references are assigned in terms of context. For example, future time references are assigned contextually to cases with a NON-PAST tense, and past time references are assigned contextually to cases of the so-called historic present. Therefore, construal of time relations is context-dependent.

Finally, we have discussed that past inflectional forms induced by the PAST tense impose the property of remoteness on certain cases, such as *if*-conditionals and sentences containing a request. If the remoteness property is imposed on an *if*-conditional, we construe it as describing an unreality, i. e., as a subjunctive. If the remoteness property is imposed on a request sentence, politeness is implied because the request is asked for indirectly.

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