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# THE TENSE IN ENGLISH INDIRECT SPEECH CLAUSES: AN ATTEMPT TOWARDS A TYPOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Hirakawa (2015) we observed the behaviour of tenses in English indirect speech clauses with special emphasis on the interaction of tenses between main and subordinate clauses. The most intriguing behaviour noted in the paper was that the time reference of the tense in subordinate clauses does not necessarily coincide with the actual tensed form in the clause, especially when the tense in the main clause is marked with the future. In spite of this apparent irregularity, Comrie (1985) does not pay any attention to the future-marked main clause, and solely discusses the tense interactions in the cases where the main clause is in past tense, only to describe them as idiosyncratic. This is because he questions the occurrence of the future marker (in the past tense form, i.e. *would*) in the subordinate clause of the past-tensed main clause, where the tense in the relevant subordinate clauses should, in theory, be realized in the past. Thus he tried to explain this ‘idiosyncrasy’ by establishing ‘syntactic’ rules named “sequence of tense rules,” in which the tense in a subordinate clause is determined by (autonomous) syntactic rules, rather than (cognitively) motivated ways. Therefore, these rules are problematic in that they are lacking in the motivation which provides some explanation to the question why the tense of subordinate clauses in particular is affected by the rules.

In order to give an appropriate solution to the “mystery” of the tense behaviour in question, this paper introduces a notion of ‘viewpoint’ into its explanation and argues that the speaker’s viewpoint is located in the present domain when the main clause is either present or past, while it is placed in the future domain when the main clause is tensed with future. This dichotomy in the location of speaker’s viewpoint is due to the missing future tense in English. Basically ‘tense languages’ such as English should have the viewpoint of the speaker fixed in the present domain regardless of which tense the speaker chooses to use. English, however, exploits speaker’s present intention to express future time reference, and this is why the tense in English

subordinate clauses should not be in the future when a main clause has a future marker. In fact, the future marker in English originally denotes present situation and is closely related to the speaker's deictic centre.

In the next section we firstly review the argument made in Hirakawa (2015), where we follow the facts and arguments Comrie (1985) suggests (2.1), and then point out his problematic explanation (2.2). In section 3 the alternative solution is posited with the introduction of the speaker's viewpoint (3.1). The English indirect speech clauses are then analysed in accordance with the new solution (3.2), and Japanese data support this explanation (3.3). Section 4 is for concluding remarks.

## 2 BRIEF REVIEW OF HIRAKAWA (2015)

In this section we briefly review Hirakawa (2015) in order to make clear again what Comrie argued in his 1985 textbook and how and why his explanation is problematic.

### 2.1 *Tense in English indirect speech*

Let us begin with Table 1 provided later in this section, which was originally shown in Hirakawa (2015), based on Comrie's data and argument. Note that the parenthesised R of the formulation in the rightmost row is added by the present author. This inclusion of R will be discussed in the next subsection.

The points observed from the table below are; 1) for each of the three tenses in the main clause, i.e. past, present, and future, there are three different finite forms in the subordinate clause in accordance with the three different time references, 2) the three finite forms in the subordinate clause co-occurring with the past main clause have a shared property which is consistent with the past time reference; all of the three forms are common in having past time denotation, 3) in contrast, two out of the three finite forms in the subordinate clause with the future main clause do not have overt future tense property. Moreover, all of the finite forms in the subordinate clause in question do not refer to the reference time (= R) located in the future, which contrasts to the fact that all of the finite forms in the subordinate clause with past main clause, i.e. pluperfect, past and 'future in the past,' clearly refer to R in the past. The last observation leads us to a generalization that tensed forms in the subordinate clause with the future main clause behave just the same as those with the present main clause; the only difference between them is that S coincides with R in the cases of the present main clause while S does not in the future main clause, i.e. R always comes after S.

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main clause	subord. clause	time reference	realised form	E/S/R formulation
PAST	PAST	some time before past	pluperfect	E before R before S
	PRES	past	past	E (= R) before S
	FUT	some time after past	'future in the past'	E after R before S
PRES	PAST	past	past	E before S (= R)
	PRES	present	present	E simul S (= R)
	FUT	future	future	E after S (= R)
FUT	PAST	some time before future	past	E before R after S
	PRES	future	present	E (= R) after S
	FUT	some time after future	future	E after R after S

Table 1

## 2.2 *Issues in Comrie's explanation*

In this section two major issues in Comrie's explanation are pointed out, in the light of the observations made above, with regard to his 'syntactic rules,' which are posited in order to explain the occurrence of 'future in the past' (2.2.1) as well as his formation with Event time (E), Speech time (S), and Reference time (R) based on Reichenbach (1947) (2.2.2).

### 2.2.1 *Syntactic rules*

Comrie weighs the fact that in some languages grammatical categories are neutralized when they carry identical values across a series of clauses within a single sentence. For example, English modality is expressed overtly on the first verb while the other verbs remain unmarked.

- (1) I must go out and buy some bread. (Comrie 1985: 102)

This rule seems to apply for the tense as well in some languages, where the tense is

marked only on the first verb and the subsequent verbs occur unmarked (e.g. marked with present tense) when there is a sequence of verbs. Comrie refers to Bahinemo example, in which the first verb is in the remote past tense and all the other verbs are in the present.

- (2) Nem na ya-tagiya-m, du-qi-yasinu,  
 we sago eat-satisfy-remote:past neutral-repeat-get:up:present  
 de-tenowa-u, niba la-hina-fanel,  
 neutral-ascend-present ridge immediate-upstream-arrive:present  
 idu du-wei  
 to:right neutral-walk:along:ridge:present

‘After we ate sago until we were satisfied, we got up again, we ascended, immediately we went up the stream bed and arrived at the ridge, we walked along the ridge to the right.’

(ibid: 103 cited from Longacre 1972)

The analysis in this line leads Comrie to the conclusion that in the case of English indirect speech there is also the same rule applied, so that, as for present and future main clauses, subsequent verbs in subordinate clauses are unmarked, i.e. in present tense. Comrie summarises this regularity as the “sequence of tense rule.”

For the past main clause, however, data show that the same rule does not work and there is no explanation for this except for claiming that they are exceptional cases. Thus Comrie sets up a rule which specifically applies to English indirect speech.

- (3) sequence of tense rule for English indirect speech  
 English simply takes over into indirect speech the tense of the first speaker’s original words, however superimposing on this a sequence of tense rule whereby after a main clause verb in the past tense the verb in the subordinate clause must be shifted back into the past relative to the tense used in direct speech. (ibid: 111)

Comrie claims in this rule that English, like other languages, has the shared syntactic rule, i.e. sequence of tense rule, in its indirect speech, but its application of the rule is limited to the subordinate clause with the past main clause and when applied, the subsequent tense is not neutralized but marked with the tense relatively prior to the tense in the main clause.

This explanation might be descriptively adequate in that it can describe the tense behaviours in the English subordinate clause observed in the last section. However, it is not explanatory adequate because it raises many anomalies that it cannot explain. Firstly there is no motivation or fundamental reason why the sequence of tense rule applies only to subsequent tenses of the past main clause. Even if it might be plausible to restrict its application to the past tense cases since, under the rule in the normal version, those subsequent verbs are neutralized, which means the rule cannot apply to

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the present tense cases, he still needs some additional explanation why it cannot be applied to the future-tensed main clause cases either, as Comrie divides English tense into three values, e.g. past, present, and future.

The second problem is that Comrie provides no explanation why subsequent tenses are ‘shifted back,’ even when the sequence of tense rule is applied, while tenses are neutralized in other languages. Moreover, the process of this shift in English is not so straightforward as those in other languages under the application of the rule; English is more complicated in that the speaker has to calculate the relative time point (= E in the E/S/R formulation) with respect to the tense in the main clause (= R). In other languages, however, subsequent tenses are changed into unmarked (c.f. Bahinemo in 2.1), or remain unchanged from the original (all the cases of Russian, Japanese, German, and those of English in the cases with the present and future main clause).

These problems indicate that the interaction between the main and the subsequent tenses in indirect speech cannot be explained in a unitary fashion if we regard that Comrie’s explanation is appropriate. Rather, we need, for English at least, language-specific rules and explanations and they should be listed independently. We will attempt to solve this problem in section 3.

#### 2.2.2 *E/S/R formulation*

Remember that in section 2.1 we are notified that R in the parentheses in Table 1 is added by the present author. In his 1985 book Comrie excludes the reference point when R coincides with E or S, in other words when the time reference (and the realised form) is simple past/present/future. His formulation is problematic in relation to the following two aspects; one is concerned with the distinction between tense and aspect, and the other is with the relative/absolute tense distinction.

In order to depict the former problem, it is effective to start with comparing simple past tense and present perfect. According to Comrie (1985), simple past tense is formulated with the E/S/R formulation as follows:

- (4) simple past: E before S (ibid: 123)

Comrie does not posit any formulation for present perfect, although he provides the formulations for every other tense-aspectual category as Table 1 indicates. If we try to formulate the precise approach for present perfect, considering the formulations of pluperfect and future perfect, R should be located on the same time point as speech time. However, Comrie argues that “[a] reference point coinciding with the present moment simply gives absolute time reference (Comrie 1985: 65),” which means that R of present perfect should be omitted and the formulation should be the same as those for other absolute tenses in English, i.e. simple past/present/future tense. Thus, the E/S/R formulation of the present perfect should be like that in (5) and it happens to be the same as the formula in (4): simple present.

- (5) present perfect: E before S

This analysis indicates that Comrie does not properly distinguish between tense and aspect, for he classifies present perfect into the same category as simple tenses and, at the same time, separates it from the other perfect category, which is obviously counterintuitive. In order to classify present perfect as one of the three tense-aspectual (i.e. TENSE + perfect aspect) categories, present perfect should also have R in its formulation, contrasting the other perfect forms, with respect to the location of R on the time line.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the latter problem, we will get clearer pictures if we take the present perfect into consideration. Present perfect is, as was discussed in Hirakawa (2015), classified into absolute tense according to Comrie's argument, in which he claims that when there is a case where R coincides with S in the E/S/R formulation, that case does not have relative tense, but absolute tense. Thus the present perfect would be regarded as an example of absolute tense.

- (6) present perfect: E before S (= R)

If we follow this line, however, past and future perfect are classified as relative tense simply because R does not coincide with either S or E.

- (7) pluperfect: E before R before S  
 (8) future perfect: E after R after S

This analysis is, therefore, undoubtedly problematic descriptively as well as intuitively in that tense-aspect combinations which should be of the same kind are segregated differently; one is analysed as absolute tense and the others are as relative-absolute tense only because they are given different formulations. However, if we consider them as the constructions with TENSE + ASPECT property, they certainly are of the same kind in that they all have the aspectuality of perfect aspect, but each of them differs in having different tense values (i.e. past, present, and future).

In order to solve this problem, in other words in order to classify present perfect into the same class as the other two perfect constructions, R is also needed in the formulation of present perfect even though R in this case is located at the same time point as Speech time. The formulations with explicit R is appropriate in that it captures the fact that the three TENSE + perfect constructions contrast in terms of the location of R in relation to that of S, which perfectly fits our intuition.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the problem still remains even if we add R to the formulation of present perfect (and to that of simple past). Under our proposal that every formulation should include R even when R coincides with S or E, simple past and present perfect have the same formulation.

(i) simple past: E before S simul R  
 (ii) present perfect: E before S simul R

This problem might be brought about by the lack of some device which can help distinguish the difference in their time references; present perfect indicates 'current relevance' while simple past does not. This problem itself is intriguing and should be solved, but since it is a matter solely concerned with the nature of grammatical aspect, it will not be pursued further in this paper.

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### 3 ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION

In this section an alternative solution is posited which explains the behaviours and interactions of tenses in English indirect speech. To give a unitary explanation this section introduces a notion of viewpoint, which is roughly equivalent to the speaker's standpoint on the time line (3.1). Later in this section we apply this device to English and Japanese data (3.2 and 3.3 respectively).

#### 3.1 *Viewpoint*

Here, the term 'viewpoint' means the speaker's standpoint on the time line from which the speaker looks out at events and situations, and on the basis of which he/she chooses tense and aspect. Note that this notion is restricted to the relation between the speaker and the time, and thus it is not like the one Langacker posits as 'vantage point' (Langacker 1987). The vantage point in his use refers to a synchronic variety of the standpoint the speaker takes, from which the speaker views his/her surrounding events and situations. His argument on the vantage point is known in connection with his argument of subjectification.

- (9) I am sitting in front of Sarah across the table.
- (10) Sarah is sitting across the table.

In (9) the speaker's vantage point is located "outside" of the speaker. In other words, the speaker is looking at a picture in which the speaker and Sarah is sitting face to face across the table. In that case the speaker is standing as if he/she were outside of the situation, viewing objectively its participants including the speaker itself. In contrast, in (10), where the speaker expresses the situation as if he/she were there inside, the speaker's vantage point is located inside the speaker. Langacker claims that in that case the speaker assumes subjective construal and thus the speaker's linguistic expression (as well as his/her vantage point) is more subjective.

Although Langacker's definition of 'viewpoint' can explain many interesting syntactic phenomena such as the choice of the subject of the sentence as in (9) and (10), his definition has little to do with the tense phenomena argued in section 2, since his main concern is with spatial and physical location of the speaker's viewpoint rather than its temporal location. Remember that it is the latter — the temporal location of the speaker — that this paper argues, and here we call it the speaker's viewpoint. We are also interested in its synchronic variations, not diachronic or historical aspects as Langacker is keen on in his explanation of language change over time in relation to his vantage point. Thus in our term of viewpoint, it has synchronic nature and is distributed along the timeline according to the speaker's choice.



### 3.2 *Explanation for English data*

As argued in Hirakawa (2015), English is basically a tense language and therefore it has, in general, absolute tense, which is characteristic to the tense language. In the case of tense languages the speaker's viewpoint is fixed at the time of utterance, i.e. Speech time, which consequently gives strict tense distinction in the temporal construal in a ternary (past-present-future) way. If a given language has ternary tense distinction, each tense is described in terms of the viewpoint as follows;

- (11) past: a situation temporarily located before viewpoint
- (12) present: a situation temporarily including viewpoint
- (13) future: a situation temporarily located after viewpoint

In tense languages like English, as argued above, viewpoint is fixed at speech time, thus the speaker's tense choice relies on the relative location of the situation on the timeline with respect to speech time.

The cases of indirect speech are not, however, as straightforward as those described above. To be more strict, the tense choice in the subordinate clause is not as simple as that in the main clause; The tense in the main clause is described just the same as in (11)-(13) in accordance with its time reference, while the subordinate tense, as Table 1 indicates, does not match its time reference regularly. When we try to find some regularity in the interaction between main and subordinate tenses, there seem to be the possibilities which are twofold. One possibility is Comrie's analysis; regarding tense neutralization as default in the subordinate clause and explaining, relying on the syntactic rules, that the subordinate tenses with the past main clause are idiosyncratic. The other possibility, which is the claim here, is that in the cases of past and present main clauses the speaker's viewpoint is fixed at the time of speech (= S) while with the future main clause it shifts to reference time (= R).

Under the analysis based on the latter possibility, the cases of past-tensed main clauses as well as those of present-tensed main clauses are given unitary explanation; in any of these cases, which tense to choose is determined on the grounds of the relative location of E with respect to the speaker's viewpoint (in this case, fixed at S) and R. This analysis can also uniformly explain 'future in the past,' which Comrie claims would be most problematic. The English future marker *will* has originated from a main verb denoting the intention for a future action. This means that in indirect speech *will* in the subordinate clause denotes the agent's (here, the subordinate subject's) intention at reference time. Since the time point at which the subject has its intention is located in the past in the case of 'future in the past,' it is no wonder the speaker chooses past tense to express the situation where the subject has its intention at reference time in the past.

Note that Comrie defines *will* as a future tense marker. His analysis is erroneous in that he wrongly claims that *will* directly refers to a future event. Rather, what he refers to as a 'future marker,' i.e. *will* functions as a reference point on the timeline which helps the speaker/hearer to locate the event onto the later phase of the time line than the reference point. Our analysis also explains the following facts with the future

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main clause.

- (14) a. John will say, "I am singing now."  
       b. \*John will say that he will be singing at that time.  
       c. John will say that he is singing at that time.

The event expressed by the subordinate clause, John's singing at some time in the future, is located in the future domain on the timeline. The 'future tense marker,' however, cannot occur in the subordinate clause as (14b) indicates. This is because will in the subordinate clause of (14b) functions as a reference point in the future located at the same time point as John's speech time, and thus puts the event of John's singing into the further future than the reference point. It follows that these analyses give validity to our claim that the past tense form of will in a subordinate clause with past time reference denotes not 'future in the past' but the subject's intention in the past (= a reference point in the past).

The facts in (14) as well as Table 1 indicate that in the subordinate clause with the 'future-tensed' main clause the speaker's viewpoint is shifted to the reference point which is located in the future because of the future time reference in the main clause. When the viewpoint is sitting in the reference time located in the future, ternary tense distinction is made with respect to the future reference point. Remember the definition posited in (11)-(13), where it was explained that in English the viewpoint coincides with speech time. In the subordinate clause in (14), however, the viewpoint coincides with future reference point. Thus, in theory, when an event is located temporarily before the reference point (= viewpoint) but still in the future in comparison to the time of utterance, the past tense form is chosen by the speaker, rather than future tense, which seems appropriate for the time reference in a strict sense.

The present analyses can explain why Comrie argues that tense neutralization is default for the tense in the subordinate clause. Since the speaker's viewpoint is shifted in the subordinate clause with the future-tensed main clause, the actual realization of tense in the subordinate clause looks perfectly parallel to the other cases on the surface. But in fact, the cases of present and past tenses in the main clause share the same viewpoint and, in contrast, the case of the future-tensed main clause fundamentally differs from the other two cases in that it has a shifted viewpoint.

### 3.3 *Comparison with Japanese data*

This subsection compares data in English indirect speech with those in Japanese in an attempt to pursue a universal mechanism in tense interactions. Japanese language contrasts strikingly to English in that it is basically an 'aspect language.' Formally there are both temporal and aspectual distinctions (past vs. non-past, and perfect vs. imperfect respectively), but practically its temporal distinction sometimes does not

matter while its aspectual distinction always rigidly applies.<sup>2</sup>

- (15) a. Boku wa benkyou wo shiteita. Haha ga  
 I TOP study ACC do-IMP-PAST Mother NOM  
 denwa wo shiteiru node Boku wa “shizukani  
 telephone ACC do-IMP-PRES so I TOP “quiet  
 shite!” to okotta.  
 do-JUS COMP anger-PERF-PAST
- b. Boku wa benkyou wo shiteita. Haha ga  
 I TOP study ACC do-IMP-PAST Mother NOM  
 denwa wo shiteita node Boku wa “shizukani  
 telephone ACC do-IMP-PAST so I TOP “quiet  
 shite!” to okotta.  
 do-JUS COMP anger-PERF-PAST

‘I was studying. Mother was talking on the phone, so I got angry and said, “quiet!”’

Both (15a) and (15b) have the same interpretation. Note that the tense of the second sentence (underlined) can be alternated. In other words, it does not make difference when the tense is changed from past into present. On the other hand, aspect should not be changed, otherwise the interpretation will also be changed.

Indirect speech in Japanese language is actually hard to define, for there is practically no formal difference between direct and indirect speech in Japanese. However, it is possible to define a Japanese indirect speech sentence as ‘a sentence with the main and subordinate clauses which obligatorily has its subject and complementizer.’ Observing relevant data from Japanese indirect speech sentences, we obtain Table 2, which has the same scheme as its English counterpart, Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in the gloss are:

ACC: accusative

COMP: complementizer

IMP: imperfective

JUS: jussive

LOC: locative

NOM: nominative

PRES: present

PAST: past

TOP: topic

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main clause	subord. clause	time reference	actual form	E/S/R formulation
PAST	PAST	some time before past	past	E before R before S
	PRES	past	non-past	E (= R) before S
	FUT	some time after past	future/non-past	E after R before S
PRES	PAST	past	past	E before S (= R)
	PRES	present	non-past	E simul S (= R)
	FUT	future	future/non-past	E after S (= R)
FUT	PAST	some time before future	past	E before R after S
	PRES	future	non-past	E (= R) after S
	FUT	some time after future	future/non-past	E after R after S

Table 2

The important point here is the fourth column, ‘actual form.’ Note that the realized tense form for each of the three types of the subordinate clause and its time reference are completely parallel to each other. This indicates that the speaker’s viewpoint in Japanese subordinate clauses always shifts in accordance with the tense in the main clause. This explanation is plausible, for it can explain the data in (15). If we assume that the speaker’s viewpoint is moved to the time point at which the subject in (15) was studying and his mother was talking on the phone, it is no wonder the speaker chooses the present (non-past) tense form.

The phenomenon of viewpoint shift in Japanese is presumably because, for an aspect language, it is the simultaneity denoted by imperfect aspect that is significant for the speaker/hearer to encode/decode the relation between the temporal locations of the events in the main and subordinate clause. On the other hand tense is indicated covertly by shifting the viewpoint instead of by overt tense marking. If the present argument is valid, viewpoint shift in English in the subordinate clause with the future-tensed main clause is explained in that English denotes subordinate future tense covertly, i.e. viewpoint shift, as it is lacking in a grammatical future tense marker; will is not a full fledged grammatical tense marker.

#### 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we examined the tense behaviour of subordinate clauses and the interaction between main and subordinate tenses in indirect speech. Comrie’s previous

study treated the subordinate tense with a present-tensed main clause and that with a future-tensed main clause together in the same group, claiming that their parallel behaviours are the results of tense neutralization. He also argued that the behaviours of the subordinate tense with a past main clause are idiosyncratic because they are 'shifted back' further into the past. This paper, however, claimed that the tense in the subordinate clause with a past main clause and that with a present main clause share the same type of the viewpoint of the speaker; in both cases the speaker stands at the time of speech and chooses the subordinate tense on the basis of the relative location on the time line from speech time and event time (and reference time). The tense in the subordinate clause with a future main clause, on the other hand, is irregular in that it is determined on the basis of a shifted viewpoint of the speaker; the viewpoint is moved to the reference time in the future and the speaker chooses the tense form in accordance with his/her viewpoint located in the future. This shift causes apparent resemblance on the surface forms between subordinate tenses with a present main clause and those with a future main clause, but, as argued in this paper, the subordinate tense behaviours with the future-tensed main clause are not the result of tense neutralization. Rather, the shift of the speaker's viewpoint is a means of denoting future tense which is missing in the English language.

There still are several issues which need further investigation. The biggest is that there is no explanation for why the lacking grammatical tense (i.e. the English future tense) in particular invokes viewpoint shift. As argued above, aspect languages such as Japanese tend to express the tense covertly by shifting speaker's viewpoint, which looks as if those languages do not see tense marking compulsory. English is, however, a tense language and has a significantly different tense marking system from that of aspect languages. Yet English employs the shifted viewpoint, which is characteristic to aspect languages. Focusing these same maneuvers, this paper pointed out the similarity between the property of grammatical aspectuality and the property of (partially) missing grammatical tense, but did not find any explanation for this phenomenon. If we can find some root for this correlation, it will not only shed new light on our understanding about what tense is like but also give implications to the nature of grammatical aspectuality. The second issue is that the operation of viewpoint shift is confined to subordinate clauses, and is not applied to future main clauses. If there is some answers to these questions, the present analyses will be more sufficient and bring some meaningful findings to the English tense-aspect marking system.

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