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A NOTE ON THE TENSE IN ENGLISH INDIRECT SPEECH CLAUSES

1 INTRODUCTION

In this preliminary paper we try to describe some idiosyncratic behavior of tense in English indirect speech clauses. Tenses in this type of clauses show complicate interaction between main and subordinate clauses. This intricate nature of tense was explored in Comrie (1985), where he exhibited various, possible combinations of tenses in English indirect speech clauses and posited some syntactic rules to explain the irregularities the phenomena exhibit. We do not make any critical argument on his claim here; rather we try to see how Comrie analyses tense phenomena and explains some of its behaviors.

Through the analyses we find out that 1) in the interaction of tenses between the main clause and the subordinate clause, the cases with a future main clause and subordinated present or the past tense are more problematic than Comrie thought in that the time reference of a subordinate clause is totally incompatible with the tense in a main clause, i.e. future, 2) Comrie's classification of present perfect as absolute tense is problematic when we try to give an unitary explanation for the phenomena in question, which means that English simple tense and present perfect potentially fall into the category of absolute-relative tense in his classification.

In the following section we first introduce briefly Comrie's analytic tools for tense phenomena: the distinction between Speech time, Event time, and Reference time (2.1), and then his typological classification of tense: absolute tense and relative tense (2.2). The first subsection of Section 3 reviews some arguments in Comrie (1985) which is related to tenses in English indirect speech clauses, sorting out his rather complicated description in a more organized way. Then in 3.2 we discuss his data and point out some of the problems in his analyses and explanation. Section 4 is for concluding remarks.

2 ARGUMENTS IN COMRIE (1985)

Comrie (1985) features specific arguments about the cross-linguistic property of

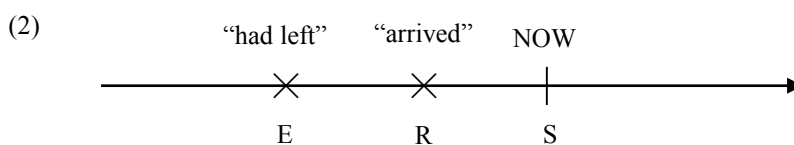
tenses in order to establish a systematic, theoretical explanation for various phenomena of tenses. In this section we briefly review his argument in terms of Speech/Event/Reference time (3.1), and absolute/relative tense (3.2).

2.1 *Speech/Event/Reference time*

Based on the argument of Reichenbach (1947) and Comrie (1981), Comrie explains tense phenomena in terms of Event time (E), Speech time (S), and Reference time (R). Event time is the time when an event referred to in a clause actually occurred, occurs, or will occur. Speech time is the time of utterance i.e. the temporal deictic center (= now). Reference time is the time in relation with which an event or situation in a clause is located on the time line. These three types of time are exemplified in an English sentence as in the following;

- (1) The train had already left when I arrived at the station.

In (1) Speech time is, of course, the time of utterance i.e. now, although it is implicit in this sentence. The event that the speaker wants to express is in the main clause and thus Event time of this sentence is the time when the train left the station. The event in the subordinate clause, in contrast, functions as a temporal reference point and the time when the main event occurred is defined in relation to this Reference time. The relation of these three types of time in (1) is schematically depicted in (2) and formulated with the notations as in (3).



- (3) E before R before S

Note that the Event time is not directly related to the Speech time. Instead, its temporal location is determined only when the temporal location of the Reference time is set on the timeline. Therefore, if there is no explicit reference to the time of the speaker's arrival in (1), the event of the train's leaving will be expressed in simple the past tense.

- (4) The train left (yesterday/ three hours ago/ just now).

The sentence (4) indicates that there is no explicit Reference time in its temporal structure. Its Event time is simply determined in relation with the Speech time (= deictic center, now). Thus in the example (4) simple the past tense denotes that the time when the train left is located somewhere on the time line before the Speech time, in other words, somewhere in the leftward from the Speech time (now) on the time line. In terms of E, S, R, these time relations are formulated as below.

- (5) sentence (4): E before S

2.2 *Absolute/relative tense*

In addition to the notional devices discussed above, Comrie introduced two types of tenses in his analyses: absolute tense and relative tense. Absolute tense is a somewhat traditional term in the linguistic literature, but Comrie argues that there is no “absolute tense” in its real meaning in that absolute tense always includes the speaker’s deictic center (Comrie 1985: 36). Thus, absolute tense is always located on the time line in relation to the speech time, and this invariable indication (i.e., deictic center) included in the temporal structure of absolute tense inevitably assigns to its semantics an “absolute” nature. Some plain examples of absolute tense include expressions of simple the present tense in English such as follows.

- (6) I declare the conference open.
- (7) ANU is located in Acton, ACT.
- (8) My sister goes swimming every Saturday.

Each of these sentences is different from the others in terms of the length of time it indicate. The sentence in (6) denotes a time point that coincides with the time of utterance, and so the sentence uses a performative verb (Austin 1962), and thus the utterance of this sentence directly performs a particular action, i.e., a declaration. On the other hand, a stative sentence such as the one in (7) indicates a length of time that is (much) longer than in (6). The statement in (7) is true in the past and the future, and hence there is no need to use the the present tense. Nevertheless, since the speech time is present, i.e. now, we use the the present tense. In contrast, in (8), the time the subject is going for swimming may not necessarily be the very time of speech (i.e., the time of utterance can be on a day other than Saturday). However, based on the same logic as in (7), the speaker chooses the the present tense, as the speaker’s habitual situation denoted in the sentence holds at the time of the utterance; even if the sentence is uttered on a day other than a Saturday, the fact that the subject has the habit of going swimming on Saturdays is true at the time of the utterance.

As the argument so far indicates, the present tense is invariably used when the situation expressed in a sentence stands at the time of utterance regardless of whether the situation actually occurs at the time of speech and how long the situation

continues along the time line. This property concerning the present tense is summarized by Comrie in terms of E/S/R notation as in (9) below (Comrie 1985: 123):

- (9) present *E simul S*¹

On the basis of the the present tense property above, it is possible to define the past tense and the future tense as absolute tense because both of them are located in the time line in relation with Speech time, and thus they include the speaker's deictic center as an essential part of their semantics. These two types of tense are also formulated by Comrie with the same notational device (ibid: 123). Note that these representations as well as that of (9) clearly show that the event time is defined in relation to the time of utterance; it is the relation between E and S that distinguishes the three types of absolute tenses.

- (10) past *E before S*

- (11) future *E after S*

In contrast to absolute tense, relative tense is the tense where the temporal location of E is defined in relation to R, not S. Since almost all examples of English tensed clauses have some nature of absolute tense, in other words, every tensed sentence includes the deictic center, it is hard to find a tensed clause which is distinguished as having an exclusively relative tense. The English non-finite clause, however, shows typical characteristics of relative tense.

- (12) The children playing in the oval went to Dickson College after the recess.

In (12) the participle playing itself does not denote any particular time point, which means it is lacking in absolute tense. Instead, its temporal location is specified in relation to the time referred to in the main clause, i.e. the time of went. Thus the sentence (12) can be paraphrased as in (13), where the time reference of playing coincides with that of went.

- (13) The children who were playing in the oval went to Street Theater after the recess.

There is, however, another interpretation in which the time reference of playing coincides with the speech time. In this interpretation, we can paraphrase (12) into

¹ The terms *before*, *after*, and *simul(taneous)* refer to temporal relation between the time notations in question. *Before* and *after* are used in the meaning of their ordinary language use. The relation *simul* is, according to Comrie (1985), defined as follows;

X *simul* Y means that each time point in X is also in Y and vice versa.

(ibid: 123)

(14).

- (14) The children who are playing in the oval went to Street Theater after the recess.

This flexibility of the participle in terms of temporal reference indicates that the choice of time reference is under the influence of the speaker's setting of Reference time; in (13) the speaker sets the Reference time in the past in accordance with the (absolute) tense in the main clause, and in (14) he/she sets it in the Speech time in accordance with the time of utterance.

Apart from English non-finite verbs, there are actually some types of tense which include Reference time in its semantics, i.e. tenses in combination with perfect. Remember that we argued about the relative location of E with respect to R in (2) and (3) above. Comrie defines English tenses in combination with perfect as "absolute-relative tense" which is formulated in (15) and (16) (ibid. 125, 126).

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| (15) pluperfect | <i>E before R before S</i> |
| (16) future perfect | <i>E before R after S</i> |

Note that Comrie excludes present perfect from absolute-relative tense simply because R coincides with S, which means present perfect is classified as absolute tense. Likewise, he argues that E is located at the same point as S because R is not distinguishable from absolute time reference, either (ibid: 65).

3 ENGLISH INDIRECT SPEECH CLAUSES

In this section, we explore the phenomena of tense in English indirect speech. Comrie actually analysed some cases in his 1985 book, but his explanation is not very well organized and, in addition, he does not use his notational device in his analyses of the phenomenon in question. Thus we first try to sort out the interaction of tenses between main and subordinate clauses and formulate each of the cases in terms of the notations of S/E/T, then we compare time reference and the actual realisation of tense form in subordinate clauses.

3.1 Analyses with S/E/T notation

In his analyses of English indirect speech clauses, Comrie conducts interesting case studies where he sets an imaginary deictic center on a particular date and tests each combinations of past, present, and the future tense in main and subordinate clauses. In

this section, we follow his method of the analyses, setting our deictic center on 15th May, which is the same date as Comrie sets in his 1985 book².

► **Main clause: FUT**

- (17) a. John will say (on 16th May) that he is singing (at that time on 16th May).
- b. John will say (on 16th May) that he will be singing (*at that time on 16th May).
- (18) a. John will say (*on 20th May) that he will arrive on 16th May.
- b. John will say (on 20th May) that he arrived on 16th May.
- (19) a. John will say (on 20th May) that he is absent (*on 15th May).
- b. John will say (on 20th May) that he was absent (on 15th May).
- (20) John will say (on 16th May) that he will be absent (on 20th May).

In (17) tense in a subordinate clause is, if in direct speech, present. With the same condition, in (18) and (19) it should be past, and in (20) future. From these attested data, tenses in direct speech are converted as follows in a subordinate clause with a the future tensed main clause:

- (21) direct: PRES => indirect: PRES
- (22) direct: PAST => indirect: PAST
- (23) direct: FUT => indirect: FUT

► **Main clause: PAST**

- (24) a. John said (on 8th May) that he is singing (*at that time on 8th May).
- b. John said (on 8th May) that he was singing (at the time on 8th May).
- (25) a. John said (on 14th May) that he was absent (?on 8th May).
- b. John said (on 14th May) that he had been absent (on 8th May).
- (26) a. John said (on 8th May) that he is absent (*on 15th May).
- b. John said (on 8th May) that he would be absent (on 15th May).
- (27) a. John said (on 8th May) that he would arrive (on 14th May).
- b. John said (on 8th May) that he arrived (*on 14th May).

These tense relations between main and subordinate clauses are also formulated as follows.

- (28) direct: PRES => indirect: PAST
- (29) direct: PAST => indirect: PULPURF
- (30) direct: FUT => indirect: would + INF ('future in past')

² Although all the examples below are grammatically acceptable, asterisk (*) is used to indicate a pragmatically unacceptable reading, instead of the conventional hash (#), following Comrie (1985).

When tense in a main clause is present, there is no change in converting a direct speech into an indirect one. Thus the formulations in the cases of main clause with the present tense are straightforward as in (31)-(33) below.

(31) direct: PRES => indirect: PRES

(32) direct: PAST => indirect: PAST

(33) direct: FUT => indirect: FUT

Note that the converted tenses in subordinate clauses of indirect speech are not always absolute tense. For example, in (17a) the time referred to in the subordinate clause is future i.e. 16th May. The actual realisation in the clause in question is, however, present (is singing). Likewise, the tense of a subordinate clause in (18b) is past although the time reference of the clause is future i.e. 16th May. In order to capture these unexpected behaviors it is significant to list one by one the time references and converted forms, as well as the combinations of tenses in both main and subordinate clauses. These components are summarized in the following chart with an additional column for E/S/T formulation.

main clause	subord. clause	time reference	actual form	E/S/T formulation
PAST	PAST	anywhere before past	pluperfect	E before R before S
	PRES	past	past	E (= R) before S
	FUT	anywhere after past	'future in 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	anywhere before future	past	E before R after S
	PRES	future	present	E (= R) after S
	FUT	anywhere after future	future	E after R after S

Table 1

3.2 Discussion

As noted in the last section, tense in subordinate clauses of indirect speech does not always show absolute tense nature in spite of the fact that English tense is basically absolute. Table 1 above indicates that this idiosyncrasy is especially prominent when a future main clause is combined with a subordinate clause in indirect speech. There are irregularities in the interaction between future main tense and time reference in a subordinate clause in that the realized finite (i.e. tensed) form does not refer to the actual time point denoted by the temporal adverb, e.g. future is referred to by the present tense or the past tense in subordinate clause (cf. (17) or (18) respectively). Comrie, however, puts a focus on the idiosyncrasy found in the occurrence of ‘future’ in the past time reference and devotes a relatively large part of his discussion to ‘future in past’ in a subordinate clause with a past main clause. ‘Future in the past’ is, however, not so problematic in that it still has some property of past time reference. In contrast, tenses in subordinate clauses with a future main clause need a specific explanation since past and the present tense in those subordinate clauses are totally incompatible with their actual time reference, i.e. future. This problem should be explored in my subsequent work.

The second problem is that it is doubtful that English tense is truly absolute. Comrie argues that if E or S coincides with R, it is not a relative tense but an absolute tense, and he excludes present perfect from the category of relative tense even when the other perfect forms (future perfect and pluperfect) are classified as absolute-relative tense (cf. 2.2 above). He has to explain the motivation or mechanism for this irregularity in his analyses although there is no mention of it. It is plausible, however, that three of these tenses should be analysed in terms of R as well as E and S. Note that in Table 1 every component is explained in terms of E, S, and R, and it is not until we include R into the formulation that we can give a unitary explanation to these phenomena. Taking a further look into this problem should also be necessary.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this preliminary work we first introduced the analytic tool and classification for tense phenomena based on Comrie (1985), and then looked into how tenses interact between main and subordinate clauses in parallel with Comrie’s discussion concerning this subject. What is most notable in this analysis is that, although he regards ‘future in past’ is the most problematic irregularity in these interactions, the output of the interaction of main the future tense with subordinate present and the past tense needs a specific explanation in terms of the gap between the actual time reference and realised forms. Another problem is that Comrie does not admit cases for (absolute-)relative tense in which R coincides with S or E. His explanation is, thus, incinsistent in that one and the same language has two different types of tense even in the same category: the tense combined with perfect.

In order to seek a unitary explanation for the phenomena in question, classifying

these behaviors by taking Reference time into consideration in each of tense combinations as posited in Table 1 is essential. Then, assuming that every English tense has E, S, and R in its semantics, it will be possible to classify those behaviors into two types. We need to take a different stance from that of Comrie. This classification will lead us to finding an intriguing nature of tense which is shared with other languages, and will give some syntactic explanation as well.

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