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15 October, 1999

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

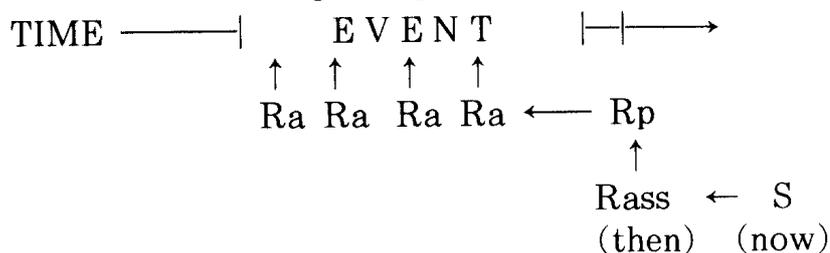
This theory relieves us from the hard task of explaining the many different uses of the present tense, such as expressing all-time states, all-time events, habitual acts, instantaneous events, future events, etc., while being unable to deny the fact that the present tense is morphologically “present tense” all through its uses.

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(iv) Past Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Perfect Phase
of the Imperfective Aspect

He had been reading newspapers for two hours then.



This last is the past tense of the perfect phase ‘his having read all the newspapers for two hours’ at the time specified by “then.” The past tense does not indicate the time of event of “reading,” but rather the time of factuality of the existence of the result of reading the newspapers for two hours, the result being an achievement of having done some part of the daily routine. This result is presented as a fact which existed in the past time.

We will not give diagrams of the Past Tense of the Modal Assertions, because they are all the same as with the Factual Assertions.

4. Conclusion: Tense Does Not Express the Time of Event

We have seen that the finite verb phrase is specified by the categories of VOICE, ASPECT, PHASE, ASSERTION, and TENSE in this order. The non-finite verb phrase is specified by VOICE, ASPECT and PHASE. The verb phrase specified up to this level makes a proposition. The categories ASSERTION and TENSE are applied to the proposition.

Each of the categories is applied to the result of the specification made by the immediately preceding category. VOICE is applied to the verb, which is generally called Main Verb. Tense is applied to the result of ASSERTION specification. The five categories with their order of specification make up the English verb system.

This multi-layered system of verb phrase specification gives a theoretical basis for our thesis that TENSE does not indicate the time of event, but that it indicates the time of ASSERTION, the time of validity of the Factual Assertion or the Modal Assertion.

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

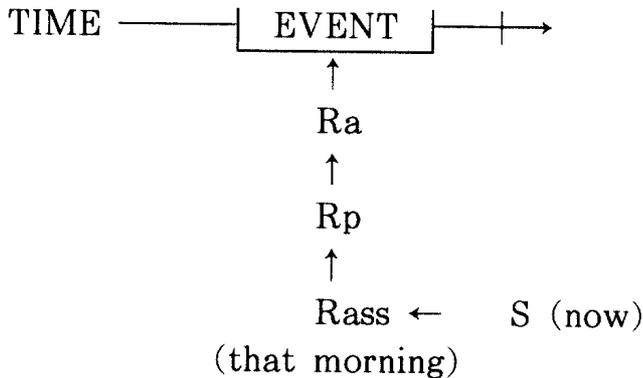
We shall omit here the diagrams of the Present Tense of Modal Assertion, because they are the same as those of Factual Assertion given above.

(2) 5.(b) Past Tense

In the cases of the Past Tense specification, S is placed at a point later than Rp and Rass.

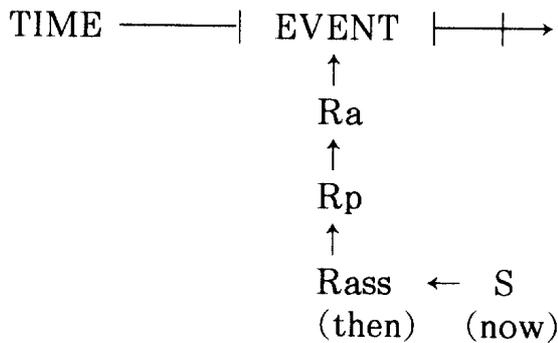
- (i) Past Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Current Phase of the Perfective Aspect

He read newspapers from 10 to 11 that morning.



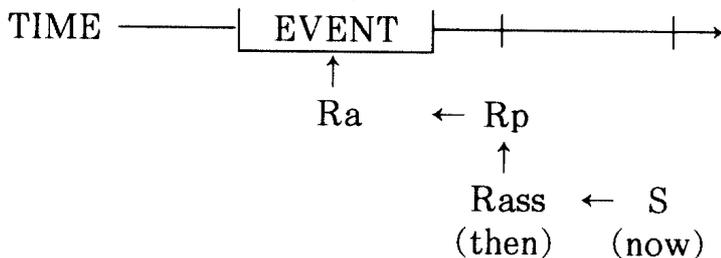
- (ii) Past Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Current Phase of the Imperfective Aspect

He was reading newspapers then.



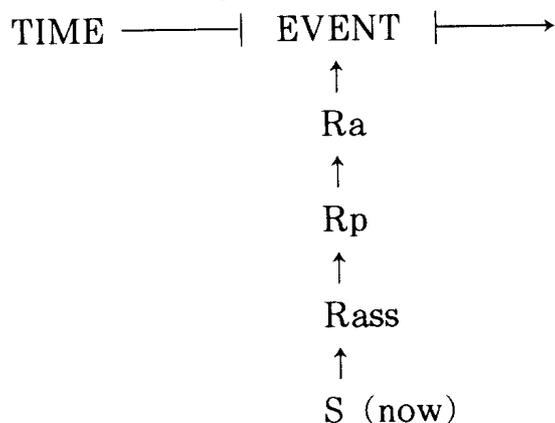
- (iii) Past Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Perfect Phase of the Perfective Aspect

He had read newspapers for two hours then.



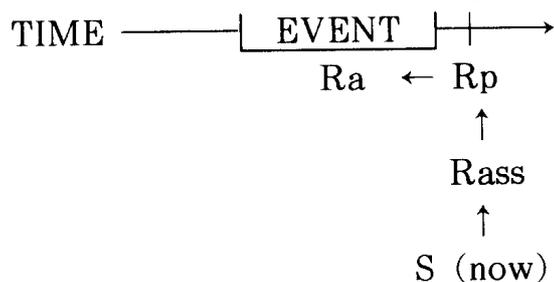
- (ii) Present Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Current Phase
of the Imperfective Aspect

He is reading newspapers now.



- (iii) Present Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Perfect Phase
of the Perfective Aspect

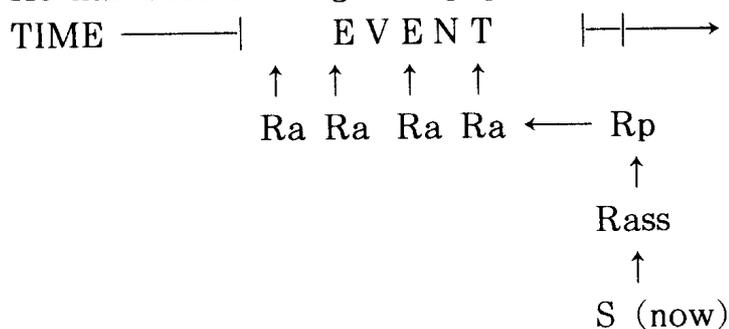
He has read all the newspapers now.



The event took place sometime before “now”. What is present at S is the perfect phase of having read all the newspapers and its factualness. The result of having read all the newspapers exists now. The fact of the existence of the result applies to the present time.

- (iv) The Present Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Perfect
Phase of the Imperfective Aspect

He has been reading newspapers for two hours now



WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE ?

(b) Past Tense: — D: *wrote, was/were written, was/were writing, was/ were being written/might write, might be written, might be writing;*

(ii) Reference Time for TENSE

(a) Present Tense:

R_{ass}
↑
S

R_{ass}: reference time for ASSERTION
S: speaker's moment of speaking
=reference time for TENSE=R_t
=moment of speaking
(simultaneous with R_{ass})

(b) Past Tense:

R_{ass} ← S

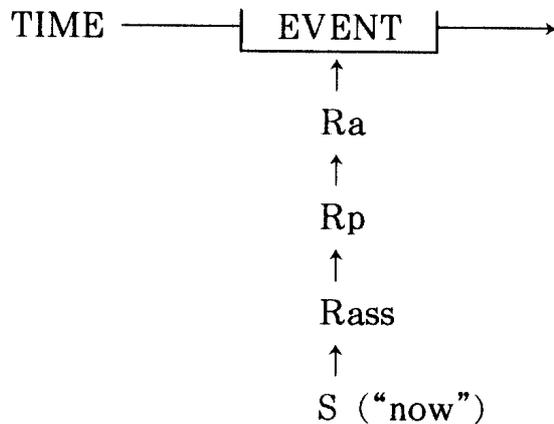
R_{ass}: reference time for ASSERTION
S= R_t=reference time for TENSE
(follows R_{ass}.)

(2) 5 . (a) Present Tense

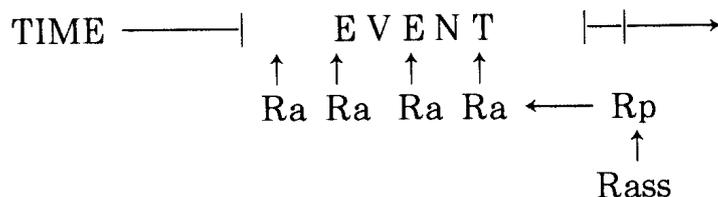
All types of Factual Assertion can be presented as valid at S. In all these cases S is simultaneous with R_p and hence with R_{ass}.

(i) Present Tense of the Factual Assertion of the Current Phase of the Perfective Aspect

He reads newspapers from 10 to 11 every morning.



- (iv) Modal Assertion of the Perfect Phase of the Imperfective Aspect
MAY have been reading newspapers for two hours



EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 (any time within the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (at a point of time later than Ra)
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)
 (the same as with factual assertion)

The Modal Assertion is a category which specifies the factuality status (or modality) of the speaker's view of the temporal situation of the given event. The temporal specification of the event by ASPECT and PHASE has to be made before ASSERTION is applied.

(2) 5. TENSE

TENSE expresses the time of assertion, whether the assertion is factual or non-factual. TENSE is the last category of verb phrase specification. This is the category which specifies whether the factual or modal assertion is presented as valid at the present moment or as valid at some time in the past.

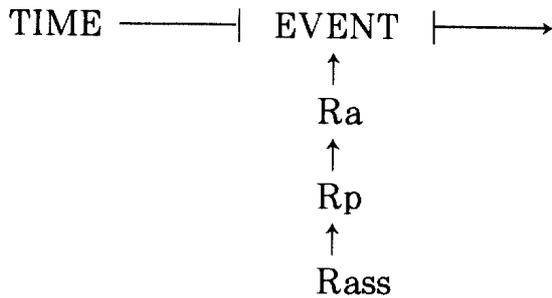
The reference time for TENSE is the speaker's present moment, and this can be represented by S, which can also be labelled Rt. Tense then is the question of temporal relationship between S and Rass. It is the question of whether S is simultaneous with Rass or follows Rass. This can be shown by the following scheme:

(i) Forms of TENSE Specification

- (a) Present Tense: — : e.g. *write, is written; am/are/is writing, /being written; have written, have been writing/ been written, may write, may be written, may have written, etc.*

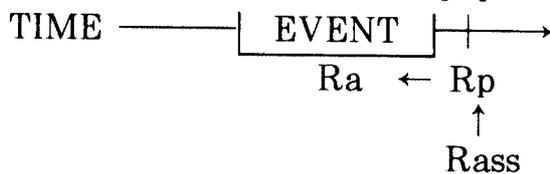
WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

- (ii) Modal Assertion of the Current Phase of the Imperfective Aspect
MAY be reading newspapers at 11



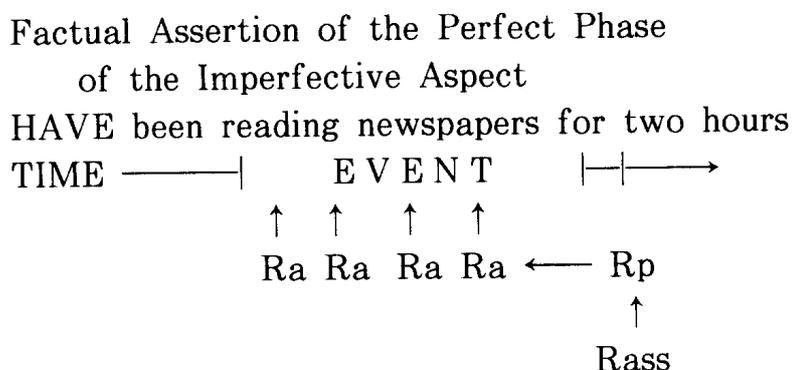
EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 (placed within the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (coincides with Ra)
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)
 (the same as with factual assertion)

- (iii) Modal Assertion of the Perfect Phase of the Perfective Aspect
MAY have read newspapers for two hours



EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 (coincides with the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (at a point of time later than Ra)
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)
 (the same as with factual assertion)

Or the proposition specified as being in the Imperfective Aspect (at plural Ra's) and in the Perfect Phase (at Rp) can be specified as a fact by Rass as in the following.

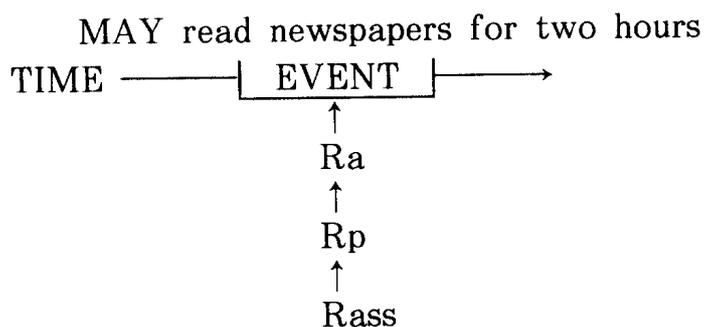


EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
Ra: at any time during the time of event
Rp: reference time for PHASE (e.g. "now")
Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
(coincides with Rp)

(2)4. (b) Modal Assertion

The same propositions as in (2)4.(a) (Factual Assertion) can be presented as Non-factual, as Modal, as in the following. The diagrams are the same because the time relations are the same:

(i) Modal Assertion of the Current Phase of the Perfective Aspect



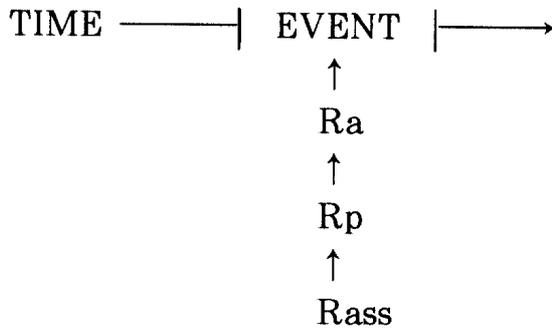
EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
Ra: reference time for ASPECT
(coincides with the time of event)
Rp: reference time for PHASE
Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
(coincides with Rp)
(the same as with factual assertion)

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

Or the proposition specified as being in the Imperfective Aspect (at Ra) and in the Current Phase (at Rp) can be specified as a fact by Rass as in the following.

Factual Assertion of Current Phase of Imperfective Aspect

BE reading newspapers at 11

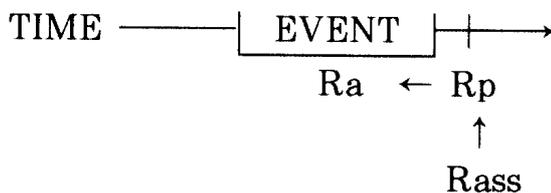


EVENT: read newspapers
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 = "at 11" (placed within the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (coincides with Ra)
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)

Or the proposition specified as being in the Perfective Aspect (at Ra) and in the Perfect Phase (at Rp) can be specified as a fact by Rass as in the following.

Factual Assertion of Perfect Phase of Perfective Aspect

HAVE read newspapers for two hours



EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 (coincides with the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (e.g. now, then, etc.)
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)

process at any time during the two hours still exists at “now,” for instance. The continuance of the state for two hours is a form of result of the event.

(2)4 . ASSERTION

PHASE is still concerned with the event and the situation resulting from it, while ASSERTION is concerned with whether the speaker is presenting his view of the event (a proposition as specified by ASPECT and PHASE) as a fact (factual assertion) or as a matter of possibility and probability (modal assertion). It is a category for expressing the speaker’s judgment of the likelihood of the proposition being true (Cp. Quirk et al.: 219).

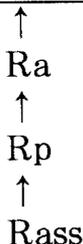
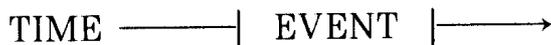
The morphologically unmarked Assertion, i.e. the form without any modal auxiliary verb, indicates that the speaker presents the proposition as a fact, while the morphologically marked assertion, i.e. with a modal auxiliary verb, indicates that the speaker presents the proposition as in the modus of some level of possibility and probability.

(2)4.(a) Factual Assertion

The proposition specified as being in the Perfective Aspect (at Ra) and in the Current Phase (at Rp) can be specified as a fact by Rass as in the following.

Factual Assertion of Current Phase of Perfective Aspect

READ newspapers for two hours



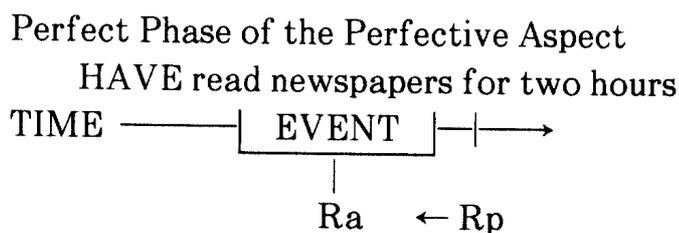
EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 = “from 10 to 12”
 (coincides with the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 Rass: reference time for ASSERTION
 (coincides with Rp)

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

The event is taken as in process at a time within it, at Ra, and this situation is taken as it is (as current) at Rp.

(2) 3.(b) Perfect Phase

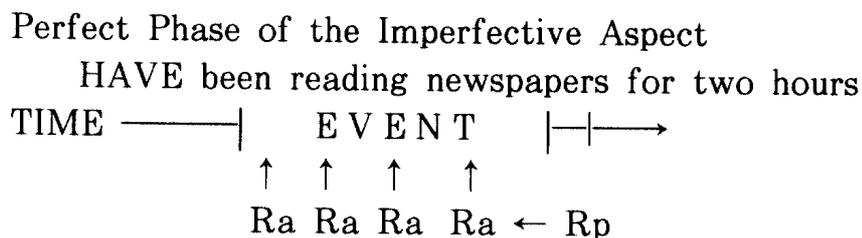
The Perfect Phase can be applied to the result of the Aspect specification. When it is applied to the perfective aspect, the entire event at Ra is taken as having a result at a certain later point of time at Rp.



EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 (coincides with the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (e.g. "now", "then", etc.)

The event "read newspapers for two hours" is conceived in its entirety in the perfective aspect, and to this perfective aspect is applied a perfect phase, which means that the perfective aspect is conceived of as having some form of result at a later point of time.

Or the Perfect Phase can be applied to the result of the Imperfective Aspect as in the following:



EVENT: read newspapers for two hours
 Ra: at any time during the time of event
 Rp: reference time for PHASE (e.g. "now")

The imperfective aspect of "be reading newspapers" — the aspect of the event being in process — is conceived of in the perfect phase, as having some result at a later point of time. The state of being in

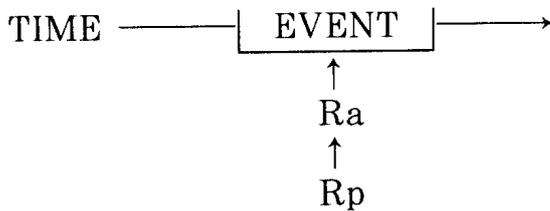
a later point of time in terms of its result existing at that later point of time. The time concerned is a relationship between the time of situation and a later point of time, while ASPECT is concerned with the time of the event itself. ASPECT therefore must be applied before PHASE.

(2) 3.(a) Current Phase:

The Current Phase can be applied to the result of the perfective aspect as in the following:

Current Phase of the Perfective Aspect:

READ newspapers from 10 to 12



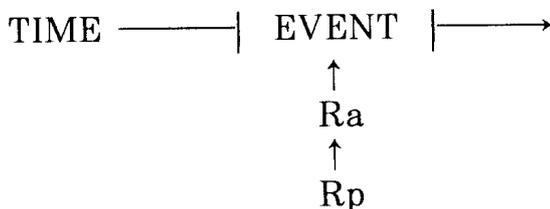
EVENT: read newspapers
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 = "from 10 to 12"
 (coincides with the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE

The event is taken as a whole by Ra and this whole is taken as it is (as current) at that point of time at Rp.

The Current Phase can also be applied to the result of the Imperfective Aspect as in the following:

Current Phase of Imperfective Aspect

BE reading newspapers at 11



EVENT: read newspapers
 Ra: reference time for ASPECT
 = "at 11" (placed within the time of event)
 Rp: reference time for PHASE
 (coincides with Ra)

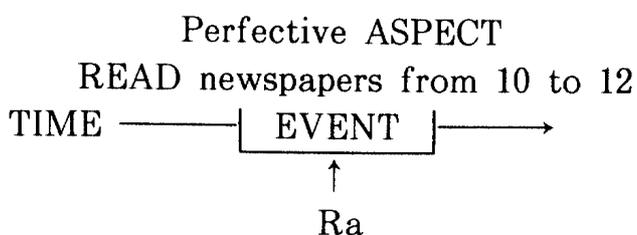
WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

radically different events, although the same main verb is used. VOICE is a device to create two types of verb from one lexical verb — an active verb and a passive verb. It is a device to save the linguistic waste of having two groups of verbs of the same basic meaning.

(2) 2 . ASPECT

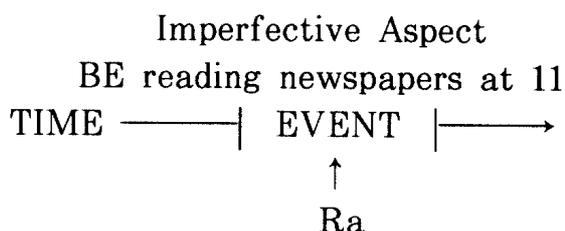
Aspect indicates whether the event is conceived in its entirety (the default view of the event) or conceived in its process at a certain point of time before its full realization. The time in question in ASPECT is the whole or part of the time of event. This contrast can be seen in the following pair.

(2) 2 . (a) Perfective Aspect:



EVENT: “read newspapers” Ra: reference time for ASPECT = “from 10 to 12” (coincides with the time of event)
--

(2) 2 . (b) Imperfective Aspect:



EVENT: read newspapers Ra: reference time for ASPECT = “at 11” (placed within the time of event)

(2) 3 . PHASE

PHASE indicates whether the state of affairs as specified by ASPECT is taken as it is at its time as a situation itself or taken at

It is impossible to follow orders other than this. We cannot follow the reverse order, in particular. Suppose we start with TENSE. We apply it to WRITE to produce a past tense, for example. Then we will have *wrote*. This is the simple past tense.

What do we do then? We can go no farther. We can no longer produce *may write*, or *have written*, or *was written*, or *is writing*. The form *wrote* is already in the active, non-progressive, non-perfect, non-modal past tense. When we turn WRITE into *wrote*, we have made a decision about all the preceding categories at the same time.

(2) Logical Order of Specification

The logical order of application of the five categories also follows the morphological order. The logical order is:

Logical Order of Application of the Five Categories

TENSE ← ASSERTION ← PHASE ← ASPECT ← VOICE

In the below we shall see how the five categories are applied and how they specify the meanings of the verb phrase.

(2)1. VOICE

Voice is a category which signals two different types of event expressed by the same verb:

(2)1. a. Active Voice

Active Voice
HIT Mary

TIME ———| EVENTa |————→

EVENTa: Active event: HIT MARY

(2)1. b. Passive Voice

Passive Voice
BE hit by Mary

TIME ———| EVENTb |————→

EVENTb: Passive event BE HIT BY MARY

To the subject "John," HIT MARY and BE HIT BY MARY are

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

Morphological Processes of Verb Phrase Specification

Specification	Resulting Form
0 . The Given Verb	WRITE
1 . VOICE specification	BE written
2 . ASPECT specification	BE being written
3 . PHASE specification	HAVE been being written
4 . ASSERTION specification	MAY have been being written

The 1st specification: The VOICE category is applied to the verb. The verb WRITE is turned into a past participle form and is placed after the passive auxiliary verb BE, and we have “BE written.”

The 2nd specification: The ASPECT category is applied to “BE written,” and this is turned into “being written,” and is placed after the auxiliary verb BE, and we have “BE being written.”

The 3rd specification: The PHASE category is applied to “BE being written.” The leftmost item BE is turned into “been” to produce “been being written,” and this is placed after the Perfect Phase auxiliary verb HAVE, and we have “HAVE been being written.”

The 4th specification: the ASSERTION category is applied to “HAVE been being written.” The leftmost item is turned into a bare infinitive form “have” and produces “have been being written,” and this phrase is placed after the ASSERTION auxiliary verb MAY, and produces “MAY have been being written.” In this stage a choice has not yet been made between the present tense and the past tense of MAY.

The 5th and last specification: the TENSE category is applied to “MAY have been being written.” The leftmost item MAY is turned into “might” to produce “might have been being written,” and we have reached the final stage of verb phrase specification.

The above process of morphological specification shows that the five categories are applied to the verb in the following order, starting with VOICE and ending with TENSE.

Morphological Order of Application of the Five Categories

TENSE ← ASSERTION ← PHASE ← ASPECT ← VOICE
--

view which says that the present tense denotes all time or any time or no time. The present tense has its own function, which is different from that of the past tense — in a similar way that the active voice has a function different from that of the passive voice.

The unmarked form of ASSERTION is the non-modal form, the form without any modal auxiliary verb. This form expresses a factual assertion instead of a modal assertion.

The unmarked form of PHASE is the non-perfect form, without the HAVE + -ED form. Its unique function is to express the given situation as it is, as a situation itself, instead of as in the state of having realized and caused some kind of result.

The unmarked form of ASPECT is the non-progressive form, without the BE + -ING form. Its unique function is to present the given event as it is, as a whole, instead of as being only partially realized, as being in the process of realization.

The unmarked form of VOICE is the simple form, the non-passive form, traditionally and rightly called the “active”. Its unique function is to present the given event as an act performed by the referent of the subject.

Thus each of the five categories consists of the unmarked and marked forms, and the function of each category also consists of the default function performed by the unmarked form and the non-default, special function performed by the marked form. The default function could be called “unmarked” function, on condition that it should not be understood as having no function and no meaning at all, as have been erroneously believed in the privative theory originating Jakobson. (Jakobson, 1932: 22.)

3.2.2.1.2. Order of Specification

(1) Morphological Order of Specification

The morphological structure of the verb phrase shows that it is produced by the process as shown below. The reverse process, or any other random process, is impossible.

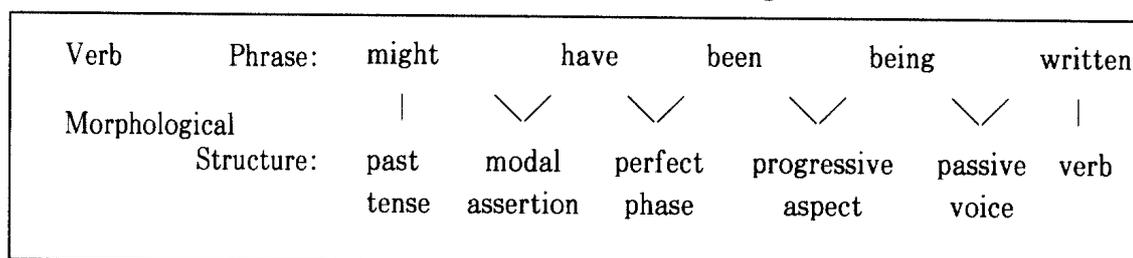
The VERB: First we have a verb as a lexical item (WRITE, e.g.), which shows what kind of event we are going to talk about in the first place.

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The book *might have been being written* around that time.

The five categories are easy to see in this most complex type of verb phrase. The verb phrase is in the passive VOICE, progressive ASPECT, perfect PHASE, modal ASSERTION, and past TENSE. The morphological structure of this verb phrase can be shown as in the following diagram:

The Morphological Structure of the English Verb Phrase



The diagram shows that the verb categories in English are realized in periphrastic forms except for tense, and that they are concatenated and serialized from one category to another unidirectionally.

(3) The Five Categories

The five categories are not obvious in the simplest type of verb phrase, but they are there all right, performing their functions properly. They are there in their unmarked forms, and perform their “unmarked” functions all right — functions different from those of the marked forms. The forms and functions of the five categories can be represented as in the following table:

The Five Categories of Verb Phrase specification

CATEGORY	TENSE	ASSERTION	PHASE	ASPECT	VOICE
Unmarked	—	—	—	—	—
FORM	—	—	—	—	—
Marked	-D	Mod Aux-	HAVE-N	BE-ING	BE-N
FUNCTION	Present	Factual	Current	Perfective	Active
	Past	Modal	Perfect	Imperfective	Passive

The unmarked form of tense is the present tense, and its unmarked function is to indicate the present time. We do not subscribe to the

1958: 14)

“an assertion has a truth-value” (Joos, 1958: 17)

“the function of asserting is a monopoly ... of the partnership of finite with subject; and conversely the only function of that partnership is assertion..., or finite predication...” (Joos, 1958: 72)

ASSERTION is SENTENCE minus TENSE; it is a statement of a situation of the event in relation to a subject; a statement of how the speaker views the type of existence of the event.

Sentence, Proposition, Assertion and Tense:

SENTENCE = TENSE [ASSERTION [PROPOSITION]]
PROPOSITION = Subject + PHASE + ASPECT + EVENT

When we say that TENSE indicates the time of ASSERTION, we need to explain how the category of TENSE is related to the category of ASSERTION. In the following sections, I shall explain how TENSE is related to ASSERTION, and also how it is related to the categories PHASE, ASPECT and VOICE. In other words, I shall explain the status of tense in the English verb system.

3.2.2. The Status of TENSE in the English Verb System

3.2.2.1. TENSE as the Last Category of Verb Phrase Specification

3.2.2.1.1. The Five Categories

The finite verb phrase in English undergoes specifications by five different categories. It can be very simple or very complex in form depending upon how it is specified by each category.

(1) The Simplest Type of Verb Phrase

He *writes* interesting books.

It might not be immediately obvious how many and what kind of categories we have in this verb phrase. However, we have all the categories realized in this verb phrase. This becomes evident when we contrast it with the most complex type.

(2) The Most Complex Type of Verb Phrase

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

the assertion is made.” (Klein, 1994: xii.)

and:

“In these sentences [declarative sentences], 'FIN - time [i.e. the time of the finite component of the sentence] is the time for which an assertion is made —the topic time of the utterance.” (Klein, 1994: 58.)

However, we doubt the validity of his view when he restricts his distinction to declarative sentences, to the exclusion of many other “clauses with a finite verb, ... whose function is not to make an assertion — for example imperative clauses, interrogative clauses, and, of course, all sorts of subordinate clauses.” (Klein, 1994: 58). The meaning of his “assertion” is different from ours, which we shall be discussing in the following sections.

3.2. “Tense as Time of Assertion” Theory

3.2.1. Tense Denotes the Time of Assertion

Tense does not indicate the time of event. It indicates the time of ASSERTION. Tense is a category which indicates the time of validity of the assertion contained in the sentence.

ASSERTION is the speaker's statement of the factualness (either as fact or non-fact) of the event. The Present Tense says that the speaker's assertion of the factualness (or truth-value) of the proposition (e.g. HE WRITE a letter) is valid at the moment of speech. The Past Tense says that the statement about the proposition is no longer valid at the moment of speech, or simply that it was valid in the past time.

This means that there is no future tense, because factualness is a matter of the present time or the past time: we cannot speak of factualness about future events, because they are not matters of actuality but matters of a possible world. Because future events are matters of possibility, we can only speak about their possibility existing at the present moment or having existed in the past time.

ASSERTION has been defined by Joos (1958) as follows:

“assertion is exclusively a function of finite verbs...” (Joos,

“These examples [“He is hungry,” “Twice two is four,” .. “All men are lyers(AV.),” etc.] show a gradual transition from what is more or less momentary to “eternal truths” or what are supposed to be such. *If the present tense is used, it is because the sentences are valid now; ...the linguistic tense-expression says nothing about the length of duration before or after the present moment.*” (Jespersen, 1933: 238. Italics mine.)

He also says as follows in his bigger volume on time and tense:

“These examples show a gradual transition from what is more or less momentary to “eternal truths” or what are supposed to be such — one might feel tempted here to speak of an “o-minipresent” time or tense or better of generic time, but no special term is needed, and *it is wrong, as is often done, to speak of such sentences as timeless. If the present is used, it is because they are valid now; the linguistic tense-expression says nothing about the length of duration before or after the zero-point.* The definition given above covers the whole range of sentences adduced, and similarly expressions of intermittent occurrences (habits) like: I get up every morning at seven (even when spoken in the evening) | the steamer leaves every Tuesday in winter, but in summer both on Tuesday and Friday: the present moment falls within the limits of what is spoken about, *for the saying concerns the present arrangement.*” (Jespersen, 1954: 17. Italics mine.)

What is particularly important for us here is his contention that “the present tense is used because the sentences are valid now.” He understands that the function of the present tense is to state the present validity of the assertion.

More recently, Klein (1994) seems to relate tense to the time of assertion when he says:

“Tense does not directly specify the ‘time of the situation’; rather, it imposes a temporal constraint on the time for which

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comes from the concept in phonology by Trubetzkoy (1939; 1958).

In this view, the present tense is a privative category, which has nothing to say about time-spheres while the past tense is not privative, because it is a marked tense and clearly refers to a past event.

However, I maintain that the present tense in these uses still expresses the present time. The time expressed by the present tense is not the time of event, but the time of something else, something about the factualness of the statement. "The sun rises in the east" is in the present tense because the fact that the sun rises in the east is true at the present moment, although the sun does not necessarily rise at the moment of speech.

3. "Tense as Time of Assertion" Theory

3.1. Some Predecessors

The view that the present tense is always concerned with the "present moment" can date back to Jespersen (1933). He says that the present tense is used about the present time, and that the present time is strictly a zero-point, a time without any dimension. The "zero-point" here means the present moment, the moment of speech. He says that when the present tense is used about the present time, it should always be about the present moment in the first place.

"The Present Tense is first used about the present time. In the strict sense as a point without any dimension the present has little practical value, and in the practice of all languages "now" means a time with appreciable duration, the length of which varies greatly according to circumstances, the only thing required being that the theoretical zero-point falls within the period alluded to. This applies cases like:

He is hungry | he is ill | he is dead.. She plays wonderfully well..." (Jespersen, 1933: 237. Italics mine.)

He is more explicit about this in the following passage. He says that even in statements of eternal truths the present tense is always concerned with the present moment and its function is to state that the statement is valid at this moment:

time in the future. The present tense here says something about the present, and not about the future. That is why the present tense is used here.

2.2.5. Summary: Tense Does Not Denotes Time of Event

We have seen that most of the situations referred to by sentences in the present tense do not necessarily take place at the present time. Some of them are states which exist at the present moment because they are long-lasting states, but most others do not necessarily exist at the present moment, at the moment when the sentence is uttered. They are rather situations which *can* take place at any time or at a certain time in the past, present, and future. Their time is not restricted; it is “unrestrictive” and “all-time.” The situations are “timeless.” Therefore, we cannot say that the present tense expresses the time of these events. The “presentness” of the present tense and the time of event have nothing to do with each other.

In view of these facts, many grammarians have given up finding a clear-cut definition of the functions of the two tenses, and they have to say that the present tense is a timeless tense. (Bolinger, 1947, for instance) or that it is an “unmarked” tense or at least the “non-past” tense, while the past tense is definitely for past time events. This situation is summarized for instance as in the following:

“In terms of meaning, the present tense is ... defined as the unmarked tense, which is timeless in the sense that it can embrace any time that does not exclude the speaker’s time (hence its use for general truths) and any time that the speaker does not want to distance himself from. The past tense is then defined as the marked tense, marked for separation from the speaker’s ‘now’, or to indicate the hypothetical nature of the statement, or to convey social distanceing.” (Chalker & Weiner, 1998: 395)

This “unmarked” and “marked” distinction in tense follows the concept of the “privative” opposition in grammatical categories, which originates from Roman Jakobson (1932), and which further

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going to say is valid at the present moment. The present tense does not require the event or state to be located at the present moment. This is why events referred to by the present tense can sometimes be a general fact having been happening from the past to the present or a present-moment act. The present tense is non-committal about the time of event itself.

It is also important to note the difference between what the present tense indicates as its grammatical function and what the present tense refers to by way of the use of the present tense. This can be clearly seen in the use of the present tense in relation to future events. The present tense indicates the present time of something in relation to a future event.

2.2.4. Present Tense Referring to Future Events

2.2.4.(A) The General View

It is also generally said that the present tense sometimes express future time events:

He *comes* tomorrow.

I *leave* for Tokyo the day after tomorrow.

Tomrrow *is* Wednesday.

The events take place in the future time, and this is clearly shown by the adverbials of future time attached. This would appear to be a clear case of the present tense not indicating the present time. Why do we use the present tense for future events?

We usually say that this is because the future event is part of an already fixed schedule or chronology and therefore certain to occur in the future.

2.2.4.(B) Discussion

Just saying that the event is part of a fixed schedule, however, does not really explain the use of the present tense for future events. The schedule may be a present plan, but the event is still a future event; *the present plan does not turn the future event a present event.*

The present tense in these examples does not denote the time of event; it denotes the time of the schedule. It indicates that it is true at the present moment that the event is scheduled to occur at some

(It is interesting to note here that in Japanese sports commentaries, the present perfect rather than the simple present tense is regularly used.) In demonstrations, on the other hand, the event usually follows the commentary. The demonstrator first explains the procedure in words and then demonstrates what he has explained. Therefore, in both cases, the present tense does not indictae the time of event in the strict sense. It indicates the time of something else. The present tense is used in order to indicate that something exists at the present moment. This something is the validity of the statement. The present tense indicates that what the speaker asserts is true at the moment of speech. It indicates that the statement is true at the present moment as a confirmation of what the speaker has witnessed (in sports commentaries) or as a prediction of what he is going to do (in demonstrations).

2.2.3. Performative Present

2.2.3.(A) The General View

Perhaps the only case where the present tense truly refers to present events can be found in performative speech acts. This is because “the event and the act of speech are simultaneous simply because they are identical.” (Leech, 1987: 3)

We *accept* your offer./ I *deny* your charge.

I *name* this ship... / I *sentence* you to ... (Leech, 1987: 7)

In this use at least, we must say that the present tense truly refers to the present time event.

2.2.3.(B) Discussion

In performative sentences, the event of time coincides with the moment of speech. Both are at the present moment. Should we then say that the present tense denotes the time of the event here? It does, but as a coincidence. The present tense says that something is located at the present moment, and the event happens to be located at the present moment, too. However, that ‘something’ is not the performative act. It is not that the present tense is used because the performative act takes place exactly at the present moment. The present tense is used in order to indicate that what the speaker is

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It is true indeed that habitual events take place repeatedly over a long stretch of time. However, we cannot say that the simple present tense *go* in “We go to Brussels every year” represents repeated events. The meaning of repetition comes from the implication — from our interpretation of the sentence as a whole. If it is true that something happens ‘every year’, then the same thing must have happened in the past, and will happen in the future as well. This is an implication rather than denotation.

What the present tense really denotes is that the fact of this possibility of conditioned happening is true in the view of the speaker at the moment of speech. The presentness denoted by the present tense is the presentness of the validity of the statement, not the time of event.

2.2.2. “Instantaneous Present”

2.2.2.(A) The General View

The present tense appears to denote the present moment in so-called “Instantaneous Present.” (Leech, 1987: 6) “It signifies an event simultaneous with the present moment” (Loc. cit.), and could be called the true present tense. There are a few types of this use according to Leech (1987).

(a) In Sports Commentaries:

Napier *passes* the ball to Attwater, who heads it straight into goal!

(b) In Demonstrations (of magic, cooking, use of machines, etc.):

I *take* this card from the pack and place it under the handkerchief.

Now I *put* the cake-mixture into this bowl and *add* a drop of vanilla essence. (Leech, 1987: 6–7)

2.2.2.(B) Discussion

In both (a) and (b), however, as Leech rightly admits, the event does not take place exactly at the instant it is mentioned. In sports commentaries, events obviously precede the commentaries. The commentator cannot describe an event before he has witnessed it.

She *makes* her own dresses.

Bill *drinks* heavily.

(Quirk et al., 1985: 179.)

It is true that the present tense in these sentences is used to refer to habitual acts. What the speaker wants to say is that the acts are habitual with the people in question.

2.2.1.(3).(B) Discussion

In these cases, however, the events do not necessarily take place at the moment of speech. Neither is there any guarantee in the present tense itself that the people have done the acts recently or will do them in the very near future. In the first sentence, the habituality is indicated by the adverbial phrase “every year”, but apart from such, there are no expressions in these sentences to indicate that the events occur habitually.

What the present tense says explicitly is that there is, at the present time, the possibility of the act occurring whenever certain conditions are satisfied, the conditions being, for instance, “when summertime comes,” or “when she needs a new dress,” or “when he drinks,” etc. The present tense simply represents “one” event which is supposed to take place whenever certain conditions are met. The meaning of habits comes from the context.

We should note that the present tense merely says that the event has, at the present moment, the possibility of happening under certain conditions. It does not say anything about the time other than the present moment, either about the stretch of time or unrestrictive time in which the event can be repeated.

It is true that habitual events are a kind of iterative event (Cp. Leech, 1987: 7-8). Therefore, it is possible to think that they represent “a series of individual events which as a whole make up a state stretching back into the past and forward into the future.” (Leech, 1987: 9) I have used this idea of a series of individual events making up one whole *state* or *event* when I analysed the Russian and the English aspect. (Cp. Miyahara, 1996: 115-49: Chapter 6, “Habitual Actions in Russian,” and Chapter 7, “Habitual Actions in English.”)

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events (in contrast with “states”) which do not necessarily exist or take place at the moment of speech or all time either, but which have often taken place in the past and therefore are expected to take place in the future. These can be called “all-time” events.

The sun *rises* in the east.

Water *boils* at 100°C. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179. They regard this as a case of “habitual present”, which is not quite correct.)

The sun to rise in the east and water to boil at 100°C are not states. They are events which begin at a point in time and end after some time. The sun does not necessarily rise at the moment the speaker utters the sentence above. It did so yesterday, the day before yesterday, or 10 million years ago, and will do so tomorrow and 1,000 years hence, but it does not have to take place just at the moment of speech.

This type of the present tense could also be labelled “all-time” present or “unrestrictive” present, because people believe that these events have the possibility of taking place at any time or all time.

2.2.1.(2).(B) Discussion

It is true that there is something in these statements that can be regarded as existing all time. What is this ‘something’? It is the “fact” that the sun rises in the east whenever the time for it to do so comes, or that water boils at 100°C whenever it is heated to that degree. The idea of ‘events existing all time’ comes from our assumption about the type of event, the assumption that the event has the possibility of taking place at any time whenever certain conditions are met. What the present tense explicitly indicates is the present existence of this possibility, and nothing more.

2.2.1.(3) Habitual Present

2.2.1.(3).(A) The General View

It is also generally said that the present tense often expresses habitual acts.

We *go* to Brussels every year.

He *does* not believe in hard work. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

She *knows* several languages. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

Everyone *likes* Maurice. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

We *live* near Toronto. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

Sentences in (a) are statements of scientific facts, geographical facts and other types of generalizations, which can be called “timeless”, “unrestrictive,” etc. in the truest sense of the words, because “there is no limitation on their extension into past and future time” as Quirk et al. say. Sentences in (b) are statements about personal states which exist for an extended time during a person’s lifetime. In both cases, however, it is true that the states are not restricted to the present time: they are regarded as existing in the past and the future as well to a certain extent.

2.2.1.(1).(B) Discussion

In spite of the general views seen above, I would like to contend that the present tense in these examples does not explicitly (i.e. linguistically) say anything about the existence of the state in the past time or future time. It is noncommittal about the past time or future time. We cannot add to it adverbs of past time like “yesterday”, “last year,” etc. What it explicitly says is merely that the state exists at present.

When we say that the state exists all time, we are merely talking about implications. If honesty is the best policy in the present time, it must have been true in the past and future time as well because of the nature of the state. This comes from a mere conjecture or common sense view, not from the tense itself. The present tense does not guarantee the existence of the state in the past time or future time. The present tense as a grammatical device simply speaks about the present time — about the moment of speech, not about the past or future. Therefore, it is not correct to call this use of the present tense as “all time,” or “unrestrictive” present.

2.2.1.(2) “All-Time” Events

2.2.1.(2).(A) The General View

Different from the “all-time” states treated in 2.2.1.(1) above are

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2.2.. Present Tense Uses

2.2.1. “Unrestrictive,” “All-Time, or “Timeless” Present

2.2.1.(1) The State Present

2.2.1.(1).(A) The General View

It is generally said that the Present Tense expresses a state or situation which exists all time — in the past, present and future.

“...the present is used without reference to specific time: i.e. there is no inherent limitation on the extension of the state into the past and future... The STATE PRESENT, as we may call this category, includes general timeless statements, or so-called ‘eternal truths’.” (Quirk et al., 1985: 179. Also cp. Leech, 1987: 5)

This use of the present tense is called “state present” by Quirk et al. as quoted above. It might also be called “unrestrictive” present, “timeless” present, or “all-time” present.” (Cp. Leech, 1987: 5, Quirk et al. 1985: 179 and Palmer 1987: 61, respectively.)

This use is generally found with so-called “stative” verbs. These all-time states and situations expressed by the present tense can be divided into two types according to the size of extension of the state into the past and future, i.e. whether they are matters of eternity (eternal truths) or matters of a person’s lifetime (personal states, or life states, or personal facts):

(a) Eternal truths

Honesty *is* the best policy. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

Water *consists* of hydrogen and oxygen. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

Hydrogen *is* the lightest element.

The Nile *is* the longest river in Africa. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

Men *are* mortal.

(b) Personal States (or Life States)

Margaret *is* tall. (Quirk et al., 1985: 179)

time..., present tenses can refer to the past..., etc.” (Chalker & Weiner, 1998: entry “tense”.)

And it refers to the possibility of abandoning the correspondence between tense and time:

“1975 T.F. Mitchell Some linguists argue quite plausibly that there is no coherent relation between tense and time and would rather relate distinctions to speech function and attitude.” (Chalker & Weiner, 1998: loc. cit.)

I am not going that far. I will still stick to the view that tense indicates time, but I shall explain the complexities of tense by relating it to the time of assertion instead of event.

2. The “Tense as Time of Event” Theory

2.1. The Theory

The theory which advocates that tense indicates the time of event can be labelled “Tense as Time of Event” Theory. This is a view commonly found in treatises of tense which attempt to distinguish and classify various uses of tense — the present tense in particular.

The various uses of the present tense are classified according to whether they refer to present events or not. The most insightful and detailed analyses, perhaps, of these uses of the present tense can be found in Leech (1987) and Quirk et al. (1985). They have offered a firm basis for the discussion of the function of tense and for a redefinition of the category of tense as presented in this paper.

In the following sections, I shall examine various uses of the present tense as recognized and classified by these linguists, and demonstrate that the primary function of tense is not to indicate the time of event, but to indicate the time of something else.

WHAT TIME DOES TENSE INDICATE?

“TENSE refers to the grammatical expression of the time of the situation described in the proposition, relative to some other time.” (Bright, William (ed.). 1992, entry “Tense, aspect, and mood”.)

In this definition, the word “situation” is used to refer to an event or a state.

In another dictionary of linguistics more recently published, tense is defined in a similar way as:

“Inflectional category whose basic role is to indicate the time of an event, etc. in relation to the moment of speaking. Divided notionally into present (at the moment of speaking), past (earlier than the moment of speaking), and future (later than the moment of speaking). Thence extended to any forms distinguishing these, whether or not they are inflectional: e.g. English has an inflectional distinction between past (*loved*) and present (*love*), but in addition the auxiliary *will* is often said to mark a future tense (*will love*).” (Matthews, 1997: entry “tense (1)”.)

However, it is also known that the present tense does not necessarily express present-time events. It often expresses future events; it also often expresses events which take place at any time, or all time through past, present and future.

In a recently published dictionary of English grammar, tense is also defined as:

“A form taken by a verb to indicate the time at which the action or state is viewed as occurring: the quality of a verb expressed by this. Traditionally tense is defined in terms of time. But labels such as PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE tense are misleading, since the relationship between the tenses is more complicated than the labels suggest. Past and present tenses can be used in some circumstances to refer to future

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—STATUS OF TENSE IN THE ENGLISH VERB SYSTEM—

Fumio Miyahara

Abstract: TENSE does not indicate the time of EVENT. It indicates the Time of ASSERTION — the time of the factuality of what is asserted. Factuality is a situation's status of being either a fact or a non-fact. The Present Tense indicates that the factuality of the content of assertion applies to the moment of speech. The Past Tense, in contrast, indicates that the factuality applies to a certain time before the moment of speech.

ASSERTION is the fourth category of verb phrase specification; it is applied after the application of VOICE, ASPECT and PHASE. TENSE, on the other hand, is the fifth category of verb phrase specification, and it is applied to the result of the application of ASSERTION. This is why TENSE indicates the time of ASSERTION.

Keywords: Tense, Time, Assertion, Event, Verb, System, Categories, Voice, Aspect, Phase

1. Introduction: Does Tense Refer to the Time of Event ?

It is generally taken for granted that tense indicates the time of the event expressed by the verb phrase — that the present tense expresses events which take place in the present time, and that the past tense expresses events which took place in the past.

This general view is found in the definition of tense in an authoritative encyclopedia of linguistics as in the following: