No explanation for the historical present: Temporal sequencing and discourse
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The study of how we infer temporal sequencing from a series of event descriptions has had a long and contentious history. To revisit a common chestnut, consider the contrast in (1).

1. a. The administration fired\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} Mike. He lost\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} his house. \hspace{20mm} forward moving: e\textsubscript{1} < e\textsubscript{2}
b. The administration fired\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} Mike. He met\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} with the ambassador. \hspace{20mm} backward moving: e\textsubscript{1} > e\textsubscript{2}

Cases like (1a) motivated reference time theories (e.g., Partee 1984, Hinrichs 1986, Kamp & Reyle 1993), wherein past perfective events push forward an index that anchors following event descriptions. Problematic cases like (1b) inspired pragmatic approaches (e.g., Kehler 2000, Asher & Lascarides 2003), where the e\textsubscript{2}-sentences are anchored to the discourse via different rhetorical relations (Narration & Explanation), which restrict temporal sequencing.

We discuss a novel contrast involving the historical/narrative present tense (HP). Unlike the simple past (1b), bare sentences in the HP do not allow backward sequencing (2b), surprising if the HP is, informally, present morphology with past interpretation. (Crucially, such backshifting is allowed under a habitual interpretation for the present, a question we do not engage with here.)

2. a. The administration fires\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} Mike. He loses\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} his house. \hspace{20mm} e\textsubscript{1} < e\textsubscript{2}
b. The administration fires\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} Mike. He meets\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} with the ambassador. \hspace{20mm} *e\textsubscript{1} > e\textsubscript{2}

We argue that the contrast in (1-2) follows from bicontextual accounts of the present tense (Schlenker 2004, Anand & Toosarvandani 2016) and a salience constraint on how bicontext parameters update. The data thus provide support for approaches that semantically unify non-canonical and canonical uses of the present tense, as well as evidence that backshifting is subject to pragmatic restrictions beyond selection of the appropriate discourse relation.

No going back! Despite the term “narrative present,” (2b) does not indicate that HP texts as a “genre” only countenance Narration relations. First, present perfect and simple past continuations (all licensed in HP discourses; Schiffrin 1981) permit Explanation relations (3a).

3. a. The administration fires\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} Mike. He \{met, has met\}\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} with the ambassador. \hspace{20mm} e\textsubscript{1} > e\textsubscript{2}
b. Donald has\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} a lovely meal that night. He eats\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} lots of salmon. \hspace{20mm} e\textsubscript{1} \supset e\textsubscript{2}
c. Senecal opens\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} the door. The room is\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} pitch black. The fan is running\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{3}}. \hspace{20mm} e\textsubscript{1} \circ s\textsubscript{2} \circ s\textsubscript{3}
d. I offer\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{1}} him a drink with dinner, but \{he refuses\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}}, #he drinks\textsuperscript{e\textsubscript{2}} one earlier\}. \hspace{20mm} e\textsubscript{1} < e\textsubscript{2}

HP also permits Elaboration (3b) and Background (3c) relations as well as Violated Expectation, but not if e\textsubscript{2} precedes e\textsubscript{1} (3d). In short, in the HP, an event can follow or overlap a previously mentioned event, but cannot precede it. Statives (both lexical or derived), which by default overlap (3c), but which sometimes follow (Dowty 1979), never precede (e.g., He returns to the gym. #He has a broken leg.) However, a backshifted interpretation is available when the sentences are linked by an overt connective (e.g., after, because, even though), as in (7) below.

Bicontextual semantics. We take the HP to arise via pragmatic flexibility in a bicontextual semantics (Schlenker 2004, Anand & Toosarvandani 2016, pace Bary 2016, Eckardt 2015). Following Doron (1991), MacFarlane (2003), and Sharvit (2008), a.o., expressions are interpreted relative to contexts of utterance (u) and assessment (a), with the present indexical to a
Different uses of the present arise from different relations between \( a \) and \( u \). If \( \text{TIME}(a) = \text{TIME}(u) \), the CP arises, and if \( \text{TIME}(a) < \text{TIME}(u) \), the HP arises. In the HP, \( \text{TIME}(a) \) can be wider than an utterance, permitting non-stative eventualities (Anand & Toosarvandani 2016).

(4) a. \( \text{[PRES]}_{a,g} \) is defined iff \( g(i) \subseteq \text{TIME}(a) \). When defined, \( \text{[PRES]}_{a,g} = g(i) \)
   b. \( \text{[PAST]}_{a,g} \) is defined iff \( g(i) < \text{TIME}(a) \). When defined, \( \text{[PAST]}_{a,g} = g(i) \)

**Updating.** How is \( \text{TIME}(a) \) updated across sentences? Typically (5a), such as the canonical present (CP) or past (CPast), \( \text{TIME}(a) \) moves forward in lockstep with the utterance time.

(5) a. \( \text{TIME}(a) := \text{TIME}(u) \)  
   b. \( \text{TIME}(a) := \tau(E_i) \)  
   c. i. push(A, \( a_i \)), s.t. \( \text{TIME}(a_i) > \text{TIME}(A_0) \)  
   ii. \( \text{TIME}(a) := \text{TIME}(A_0) \)

(6) a. \( E = \langle e_0, \ldots, e_n \rangle \) event stack  
   b. \( A = \langle a_0, \ldots, a_n \rangle \) assessment stack

We propose that \( \text{TIME}(a) \) updates in two other ways. First, it can be anaphorically backshifted to a salient time interval (5b). We encode salience via an update semantics ranking discourse referents by prominence (e.g., Bittner 2001). As discourse unfolds, described events are pushed onto a stack, \( E \) (6a). In backshifting (5b), \( \text{TIME}(a) \) updates to the run-time of \( E_n \), the top of \( E \). Thus, for the past sentences in (1b), \( \text{TIME}(a) \) is updated to \( \tau(e_i) \); (4b) consequently requires that \( \tau(e_i) \subseteq g(i) < \tau(e_i) \), permitting Explanation. By contrast, Explanation is incompatible with the HP discourse in (2b), as the condition in (4a) forces an overlapping interpretation, \( \tau(e_i) \subseteq g(i) \subseteq \tau(e_i) \). However, when a past tense or present perfect sentence follows an HP sentence, this inference *can* arise: in (3a), \( \text{TIME}(a) \) is not updated, so that \( \tau(e_2) \subseteq g(i) < \text{TIME}(a) \). (In general, simultaneous interpretations with events or states (3b, c) arise when \( \text{TIME}(a) \) is not updated.)

**Narrative progression.** For forward moving discourses like (2a), we assume the update in (5c), which makes reference to a stack of assessment contexts, \( A \) (6b). Paralleling approaches that analyze narrative progression as locating one event in the consequent state of another (Webber 1988, Bittner 2009, Altscher 2016), \( \text{TIME}(a) \) is updated to the time of a novel assessment context, \( a_i \), whose time coordinate follows the previous assessment time. Since the assessment time itself advances, (5c) is not simply a mechanism for sequencing events. Rather, it encodes a forward moving temporal perspective, one that proceeds lockstep with the described events. We take this as responsible for the vividness of the HP, i.e., the sense of narrating something unfolding before one’s eyes (Palmer 1965). As (7) shows, overt connectives admit backshifting in the HP. We suggest that here, \( \text{TIME}(a_i) \) is set wide enough to contain both events. Thus, although in (7) \( e_i \) is backshifted relative to \( e_4 \), it still follows \( e_3 \), as (5c) demands of \( \text{TIME}(a_i) \).

(7) Mike is nominated\(^{e_1}\) and confirmed\(^{e_2}\). Controversy swirls\(^{e_3}\). Then the administration fires\(^{e_4}\) him because he meets\(^{e_5}\) with the ambassador (#before his nomination). \( e_1 < e_2 < e_3 < e_4 \)

**Future Prospects.** The surprising restrictions in (2) illustrate how tense can constrain discourse relations, as long discussed for aspect (Partee 1984, a.o.). This arises because the HP neither strongly relates \( \text{TIME}(a) \) to \( \text{TIME}(u) \) like the CP, nor weakly relates it to the tense’s time like the CPa. The HP and other noncanonical tenses may thus furnish ideal grounds for exploring how tense, overt discourse connectives, discourse relations, and temporal modifiers interact.