

No explanation for the historical present: Temporal sequencing and discourse

Pranav Anand and Maziar Toosarvandani
University of California, Santa Cruz

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^{e1} Mike. He lost^{e2} his house. forward moving: $e_1 < e_2$
b. The administration fired^{e1} Mike. He met^{e2} with the ambassador. backward moving: $e_1 > e_2$

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_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^{e1} Mike. He loses^{e2} his house. $e_1 < e_2$
b. The administration fires^{e1} Mike. He meets^{e2} with the ambassador. $*e_1 > e_2$

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^{e1} Mike. He {met, has met}^{e2} with the ambassador. $e_1 > e_2$
b. Donald has^{e1} a lovely meal that night. He eats^{e2} lots of salmon. $e_1 \supset e_2$
c. Senecal opens^{e1} the door. The room is^{s2} pitch black. The fan is running^{s3}. $e_1 \circ s_2 \circ s_3$
d. I offer^{e1} him a drink with dinner, but {he refuses^{e2}, #he drinks^{e2} one earlier}. $e_1 < e_2$

HP also permits Elaboration (3b) and Background (3c) relations as well as Violated Expectation, but not if e_2 precedes e_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*

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