

OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRAGMATICS OF TENSE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the use of Relevance Theory can simplify traditional analyses of a range of temporal phenomena. First, it is argued that logical descriptions of the past which treat it as ambiguous can be replaced by a pragmatic analysis which treats the past as univocal. Second, it is shown that the temporal progression characteristic of the so-called narrative past falls out from relevance-theoretic considerations, without the need for logical stipulation. Moreover, it is claimed that the 'narrative' past is anyway not a natural kind. Third, it is argued that a partial explanation for the interpretation of present tense sentences containing dynamic verbs can be derived from the exploitation of the idea of 'interpretive use'.

1 Introduction

This paper¹ aims to show how the judicious use of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) can on the one hand solve certain perceived problems in the analysis of tense by logicians (cf. e.g. Kuhn, 1988) and, on the other, flesh out the programmatic appeals to 'contextual factors' by linguists (cf. e.g. Baker, 1989; Comrie, 1985; Partee, 1984). I shall look in particular at the status of definite and indefinite time, the narrative past, and at the interpretation of the simple present as used with dynamic (non-stative) verbs.

The aim of standard logical analyses is 'to make explicit the truth conditions of (English) tenses' (Kuhn, 1988: 514)²; the aim of standard linguistic analyses is to characterize 'the grammaticalization of location in time' (Comrie, 1985: vii); the aim of Relevance Theory in this domain is to explain how utterances are interpreted, *inter alia*, how one determines the time(s) of the

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² Neither tenses nor the sentences in which they occur actually have truth conditions, so this rather inaccurate locution is presumably to be interpreted as indicating Kuhn's desire to make explicit the contribution of morpho-syntactic tenses to the truth conditions of propositions derived from sentences containing those tenses.

event(s) reported in those utterances, the relation of such time(s) to the time of utterance, and the role of such time(s) in guiding the interpretation of the rest of the utterance.

I presuppose Sperber & Wilson's (1986) theory of Relevance. In particular, I assume that sentences of Natural Language underdetermine representations in the Language of Thought (in the sense of Fodor, 1975). 'Semantic representations are ... at best fragmentary representations of thoughts' (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:193). Much of the complexity of tense-logical analyses seems to me to be a function of their attempting to build into the logic a range of descriptive devices sufficient to capture representations in the language of thought rather than the literal meaning of natural language sentences from which the language of thought representations are derived by inference. If this is correct, it suggests that tense is not an appropriate category to postulate for mental representations: that is, there are general considerations (of retrieval from memory) for assuming that the language of thought does not contain indexicals. Rather than filing some entity as 'he' or some place as 'here', it is more plausible to assume for the language of thought some specific referring expression which can be subsequently accessed. Similar considerations pertain with regard to reference to time. (But cf. Peacocke, 1981, for an explicitly contrary view).

I make the further assumption, orthodox within Relevance Theory, that context is not determined in advance of the comprehension process (i.e. relevance is 'given', context is a 'variable'). The principle of relevance guarantees that you can expect your interlocutor to say something (he thinks is) worth your time and attention. His utterance takes place in a physical setting of which you are aware, and which makes accessible a subset of your encyclopaedic knowledge, but beyond this you can have no prior certainty about the propositional content of the context you will need to assume in order to achieve such relevance. Only when you hear your caller say 'Do you worry about the state of the world?', do you access a context including evangelical proselytization rather than a mental map of the locality.

Finally, I shall exploit the now familiar distinction between 'descriptive' and 'interpretive' use. '... any utterance can be used to represent things in two ways. It can represent some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs; in this case ... it is used *descriptively*. Or it can represent some other representation ... a thought, for instance - in virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms; in this case ... it is used *interpretively*' (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:228-9).

In addition to the general framework provided by Relevance Theory, I make two additional background assumptions. First, in descriptive use, tenses are deictic (relative to speech time) in simple main clauses, or are fixed relative to some reference time specified in subordinate clauses, or in clauses marked with particular prepositional phrases. In each case they act as generalised existential quantifiers: they assert that (/ask whether/...) there is some relatively past/ present/future time at which the situation described held/holds/will hold. Second, verb (phrase)s are lexically analysed on Vendlerian lines as states, processes or events. For current purposes, the relevant contrast is that between statives and non-statives. (The literature is vast, a good introductory survey is provided by Dowty, 1979, ch. 2). With these preliminaries out of the way we can proceed to the first of the areas mentioned at the beginning.

2 Definite and indefinite time

The standard logicians' analysis of past tense treats it as indefinite: i.e. there is some time in the past at which the event described took place. They then have to resort to sundry *ad hoc* devices to accommodate the fact that some past tense sentences appear to be definite. The standard problematic example, quoted repeatedly (e.g. by Dowty (1979), Kuhn (1988), Parsons (1980)) is Partee's (1), uttered 'half-way down the turnpike':

- (1) I didn't turn off the stove

which 'clearly does not mean either that there exists some time in the past at which I did not turn off the stove or that there exists no time in the past at which I turned off the stove' (Partee, 1973:602).

Robyn Carston has argued persuasively (1988: 160ff.) that this and comparable examples should be treated pragmatically, at the level of explicature, such that the *meaning* of (1) is precisely that of the first disjunct. What then needs to be explained is the apparent discrepancy between meaning and interpretation. If one's interlocutor chooses to say that there is some time in the past at which she did not turn off the stove, then the necessity for that utterance to have contextual effects will force the listener to enrich the semantic representation of the utterance by providing some definite temporal index against which it is to be interpreted. In the present case, the most readily accessible temporal reference will probably be the interval immediately before the speaker and her interlocutor set out down the turnpike. Provided this interpretation is found to have an adequate range of effects (suggesting, for instance, that 'we'll have to turn back', 'we'll be late for the meeting as a result'), it will meet the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. That is, the semantic content of the sentence, as usual, vastly underdetermines the thought the speaker is attempting to convey by uttering it.

Despite claims to the contrary, there is no need to put into the semantics a difference between definite and indefinite past, because this contrast can be determined pragmatically, as Partee's reference to 'a better articulated theory of context' (1984: 277) seems to concede. Yet Kuhn (1988: 533) contraposes the example in (1) with those in (2):

- (2) a. Oswald killed Kennedy
b. Columbus discovered America

suggesting that the former is necessarily definite and the latter are necessarily indefinite, with concomitant implications for the logic. But clearly, whether (1) and (2) are interpreted as referring to a specific time and date or as simply anterior to speech time will depend on the context the hearer constructs to interpret them in. Semantically, one can 'interpret the past as a quantifier over a set of possible reference times', where 'in the absence of contextual cues to the contrary the set comprises *all* past times' (Kuhn, 1988: 533), but the propositional representation of (2) would, on any occasion of utterance, be narrowed down pragmatically, as should be evident from considering the modifications in the question - answer pairs in (3):

(3) a. A: What's Dallas famous for?

B: Oswald killed Kennedy there.

b. A: What happened at 12.30 p.m. CST on 22.11.63 at the inter-section of Elm & Houston Streets in Dallas?

B: Oswald killed Kennedy there.

In (3a) it is not relevant to construct a definite time, because the increased processing costs incurred would not yield any additional contextual effects. In (3b) it would be ridiculous not to construct a definite time, because such a time has already been provided in the question and, standardly, time has to be given a matching instantiation in question and answer.

Just as many logicians treat the past as ambiguous, so does Tichy (1980) claim that the future is ambiguous between definite and indefinite readings, and Kuhn (1988:539) says that 'there appears to be some disagreement over whether the future is definite or indefinite'. However, exactly comparable observations pertain here as above, so that Kuhn's example 'Baltimore will win' could, *mutatis mutandis*, be interpreted as definite or indefinite depending on the context constructed.

Although I said above that 'context is not determined in advance of the comprehension process', it is implicit in this analysis, and explicit in Sperber & Wilson (1986), that the context always includes the interpretation of the immediately preceding utterance (if there is one). The availability of such an interpretation, including encyclopaedic information attached to concepts in the logical form decoded from the sentence, accommodates the need Kuhn perceives (ibid. p.534) 'to include the sentence itself as a part of its own context of utterance', though for him it is still not clear 'how a past tense sentence would contribute to the determination of its own reference time'. He goes on to suggest that it might be necessary to take into consideration the 'new information' communicated by the sentence, on the assumption that a declarative sentence has two functions: 'it identifies the relevant part of our mutual knowledge', and 'it supplies a new piece of information', adding that 'the range of reference times must be denoted by descriptions that speaker and audience believe ... to be non-vacuous' (ibid. pp.534-35).

It should be clear that within Relevance Theory the past tense contributes to the determination of reference time by giving a clue to the temporal reference intended (i.e. it's past, rather than present or future). But this is so vague and general that, in most contexts, the hearer is forced to narrow the reference down to some more specific interval, so that the utterance can be construed as expressing an optimally relevant proposition; that is, so that it can interact with accessible contextual assumptions to give rise to a range of effects. In the case of (2), for instance, this will vary from occasion to occasion as indicated in (3). In each case the semantic representation can be left maximally underdetermined and further specification provided by inference. No appeal to new information or 'mutual knowledge' is likely to be fruitful, for reasons discussed at length in Sperber & Wilson (1982:62-70) and (1986:202ff.). It is also worth noting that this (relevance-theoretic) treatment finesses the problem that Vlach confronts when he suggests that (4):

- (4) Max arrived today

is 'semantically anomalous' (quoted in Kuhn, p.537). The anomaly is supposed to arise because 'today' specifies a present interval, and the past tense specifies a time before this present interval. All one needs to say here is that Max's arrival took place at some time in the past -definite or indefinite according to context, here unspecified, - and that the presence of the deictic 'today' constrains the range of such past times to those falling between speech time and the preceding midnight.

The simple past as illustrated above is believed to give rise to further problems when it occurs in narrative sequences. It is to this issue that we turn next.

3 The Narrative Past

A problem for traditional analyses in terms of tense logic is provided by sequences such as that in (5):

- (5) John entered the president's office. The president walked over to him.

where the times picked out by the two verbs 'entered' and 'walked', while both past, are clearly distinct, and ordered such that the time of the first clause precedes that of the second. This presents a problem because traditional (Priorean) analyses make no distinction between different times within a general past, so the two events are predicted to be simultaneous. A number of proposals for solving the problem have been put forward, of which the most explicit is that of Dowty (1986:45) who proposes the principle in (6):

- (6) The Temporal Discourse Interpretation Principle

'Given a sequence of sentences $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$ to be interpreted as a narrative discourse, the reference time of each sentence $S_i \dots$ is interpreted to be:

- a) a time consistent with the definite time adverbial in S_i , if there are any;
- b) otherwise, a time which immediately follows the reference time of the previous sentence S_{i-1} .'

A similar effect is achieved by Cooper's (1986:33) 'Discourse Strategy', which enjoins you to 'Move forward the connection for tensed verbs in main clauses as the discourse progresses', and by Nerbonne's (1986:83-84) version of 'Reichenbach's Pragmatics', according to which 'A narration is ... simply a sequence of sentences whose tenses refer to a temporally ordered sequence of times'. In fact, the situation is somewhat more complicated than might appear from the single example in (5). When the verb of the second sentence is stative as in (7):

- (7) Mary entered the president's office. There was a bound copy of the president's budget on his desk.

it is clear that time does not 'move forward', but that the time of the budget's being on the desk includes the period before and after Mary's entrance. For such examples, Dowty argues that 'the TDIP actually tells us that the time of the budget's being on the president's desk was immediately after Mary entered the room, but that we are expected to assume in addition that this was not the first moment that it was there' (Dowty, 1986:49). This 'assumption' is presumably a matter of inference and hence pragmatic rather than part of the linguistic or logical semantics. But if it is accepted that pragmatics has a role to play at all, this suggests that the principle may be unnecessary, and that as Carston (1988:161) has suggested 'the temporal ordering of the events described ... is ... a by-product of the [pragmatic] reference assignment process involved in determining the explicature'.

It is anyway clear that (6) is simultaneously too strong, in that time does not always 'move forward' as predicted; and too weak, in that the temporal properties of narrative discourse do not constitute a natural class, being no different from those of non-narrative examples found in ordinary conversation, discussions of the future, hypothetical reasoning, and so on, in each of which time may or may not 'move forward'.

That the principle is too strong is shown not only by examples containing stative verbs, but by examples restricted to dynamic verbs of the type for which the principle was primarily designed. For instance, consider the example in (8), with either of the two continuations in (9):

- (8) John broke his leg.
- (9) a. He ski-ed over a precipice.
b. It happened in a car crash.

In both of these sequences the natural interpretation is that the event in the second clause preceded that in the first, or perhaps, in the case of (9b), that the events were simultaneous. That is, the interpretation predicted by (6), while possible, is implausible. How can we account for this? Prescinding away from irrelevant refinements, the principle of relevance can be interpreted as forcing the hearer to presume that any utterance addressed to him is optimally relevant; hence, that the alternative continuations in (9) must be construed as relevant in a context including (8). With (9a), for example, the possibilities are either that it is an 'orderly' continuation - 'as a result, he ski-ed over a precipice'; or it is an explanation for his broken leg - 'it resulted from his ski-ing over a precipice'. In the former situation it would in most contexts be even more relevant to say what happened next: spelling out whether he survived, for instance. In the absence of an immediate continuation giving such information, the natural construal (facilitated by phrase-final intonation) is one in which the sequential orderliness is destroyed, as the speaker attempts, by uttering (9a), to pre-empt a diversionary interruption by the hearer. Similarly, in interpreting (9b) the hearer first has to infer an (accessible) referent for 'it'. The 'leg' is virtually excluded by the next word 'happened', and the only salient alternative is the sentence as a whole. In this case the car-crash cannot have happened

after the leg-breaking - for reasons both of our world knowledge and of logical coherence.

These different interpretations are arrived at with minimal syntactic help, but if the speaker considers the appropriate context to be difficult of access he can give his interlocutor specific help by not leaving the sentences he utters in paratactic isolation. For instance, if they are conjoined by 'and' as in (10), the disorderly interpretation is blocked (cf. Blakemore, 1987:117) unless the subject of the second clause, 'he', is given contrastive fall-rise intonation.

- (10) John broke his leg and he ski-ed over a precipice.

If the second clause is introduced by 'nevertheless', this has the effect of cancelling the expectation raised by the preceding clause, and an orderly interpretation results. If it is introduced by 'actually' or 'well', the disorderly reading is reinstated.

- (11) a. John broke his leg. Nevertheless, he ski-ed over a precipice.
b. Actually, he ski-ed over a precipice.
c. Well, he ski-ed over a precipice.

Connectives such as 'nevertheless' give the hearer lexical guidance as to how to interpret the utterance following them. In some languages the grammar provides explicit morpho-syntactic guidance. Thus in Chinese, temporal disorderliness may be formally marked by the presence of the aspectual suffix *-guo*, as opposed to *-le*. Ilic (forthcoming, p. 13) reports that 'l'un des traits remarquables de *-guo* est donc qu'il abolit la linéarité du temps ...'. In all cases it is the optimization of relevance which is of paramount importance, and accordingly, one would expect to be able to find plausible examples in which the perceived temporal order of examples like (8-9) differs depending on the context. For instance, consider the two narratives in (12):

- (12) a. Last year John had a holiday in the Pyrenees. Unfortunately, he broke his leg. He ski-ed over a precipice and was only found two days later. He's still in plaster.
b. Last year John had a holiday in the Pyrenees. Unfortunately, he broke his leg, (he) ski-ed over a precipice and was killed.

where the relative time of the relevant clauses is reversed. Indeed, it is not difficult to find examples where our encyclopaedic knowledge forces a disorderly reading. Thus in (13) and (14) the only coherent construal is one on which death precedes the existence of a corpse, and the cause of death precedes the death itself.

- (13) John's corpse smelt terrible. He died of cholera.
(14) John died of cirrhosis of the liver. He drank four bottles of claret a day.

Such disorderly examples typically provide a (causal) explanation, though this need not necessarily be the case, as witness the purely narrative (15):

- (15) Fred married a mermaid. They were betrothed in a rock-pool. He met her in Fatu-Hiva.

Where a disorderly reading is not an explanation the temporal sequencing is forced by the explicit content of the second (or subsequent) clause. Thus in (15) our knowledge that betrothal precedes marriage, and that both are usually preceded by a meeting of the parties involved compels us to construe the story as regressing in time.

It is worth noting that a relevance-based account generalises automatically to other tenses than the past and to other genres than the narrative. Thus examples parallel to those above can be constructed just as easily for the present or future, with the sequencing being either disorderly or orderly, as in (16a) and (16b) respectively:

- (16) a. John will die of cirrhosis of the liver. He drinks four bottles of claret a day.
b. John drinks four bottles of claret a day. He'll die of cirrhosis of the liver.

In this pair of examples the respective times are overtly indicated by the present and future tenses ('drinks' and 'will die'), but it is not difficult to find cases where all the clauses are in the same morphological tense, either present or future, as in (17):

- (17) a. In this tragedy the hero dies of poison and the heroine stabs herself. He thinks she is dead when she is really asleep. She takes his dagger and kills herself.
b. In this tragedy the hero will die of poison and the heroine will stab herself. He will find her drugged and, in despair, will drink the poison; she will see him dead and will seize his dagger ...

It is not clear whether Dowty would wish to extend his analysis to non-past tenses (all his examples are past) or to non-narrative examples. It is clear that linguistically there is no justification for making either distinction. That is, the same pragmatic principles apply in all tenses and to all genres: it is not only in narrative discourse that time moves forward; it does so in conversation, in hypothesis formation, in deduction, and almost everywhere else. I restrict myself to a single example from a typical Conan Doyle story (*The adventure of the missing three-quarter*):

- (18) 'Did you take any messages to Mr Staunton?'
 'Yes, sir, one telegram.' ...
 'Where was Mr Staunton when he received it?'
 'Here in his room.'
 'Were you present when he opened it?'
 'Yes, sir, I waited to see if there was an answer.'
 ...
 'Well, was there?'
 'Yes, sir, he wrote an answer.'
 'Did you take it?' ...

in which the progression of events is exactly comparable to that in the narratives described by Dowty, Cooper and others. I conclude that -given an explicit pragmatics - the TDIP, or any comparable principle, is unnecessary and, indeed, pernicious: it frequently makes the wrong predictions, and where it makes the right ones these follow anyway from the principle of relevance.

4 The present: Descriptive and Interpretive Use

In the preceding sections we have seen that there is no need to complicate the temporal semantics provided one exploits an appropriate pragmatics. With the third domain to be addressed I adopt the same rationale, but exploit a different aspect of the theory.

The underdetermination of thoughts by the sentences of natural language is characteristic not only of the past, but of all tenses. In the case of the present, usually taken to be basic, this has led logicians to posit ambiguity where a pragmatic account would propose that a univocal sentence is differentially contextualised to give various propositional forms.

Kuhn, faithfully reporting the literature, describes the Present as being usually treated only in its 'reportive' use to describe a single event. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, in many examples this reportive reading is often 'less natural' (1988:525), so a sentence like (19):

- (19) John walks to work

will be typically interpreted as habitual rather than as the report of a single ongoing event. Second, there is a problem in that if the present tense is taken as fundamental to the logical characterization of the other tenses, the omission of a reading in the present may lead to an inadequate account of the other tenses. This is then illustrated with (20):

- (20) John walked to work

where the possible habitual reading (whose existence Kuhn seems to find surprising) would be unavailable, if the present (in terms of which the past is -defined) had only the single event interpretation.

Kuhn's puzzlement can be avoided if we distinguish the meaning of a sentence and the interpretation of an utterance of that sentence in some context. In other words, if we exploit pragmatics as well as semantics the multiplicity of uses of the present can all be derived from a single semantic representation.

For independent reasons of word meaning we need to draw a distinction among the Vendlerian categories (states, activities, achievements and accomplishments) and also between the deictic categories of past, present and future. Given this, and the contrast between descriptive and interpretive use, the multiple readings of the present can be derived pragmatically. Consider an example such as (21a), as opposed to (21b):

- (21) a. Mary climbs the Matterhorn
- b. Mary is climbing the Matterhorn

(21a) is often described as 'marked' vis-à-vis (21b), or its usage in particular contexts - such as 'in response to the question 'What is going on?' - is said to be 'infelicitous', or even ungrammatical. That these characterizations explain anything is dubious, they simply label a problem in need of solution.

Part of that solution can be derived from the possibility that all sentences, including examples like (21a), can be interpreted either descriptively or interpretively.

In English all morphosyntactic tenses can be used habitually, and in its descriptive use (21a) has a habitual interpretation, which can be forced by either context (e.g. a preceding question such as 'what does she do on holiday?') or co-text (e.g. frequency adverbials). Here, consider (21a) as a response to a question like 'What is it you admire about Mary so much?' or a continuation of a remark such as 'I'll tell you about my children'. In the process of utterance interpretation, we are given the present tense. There is no evidence (either co-textual or intonational) for interpretive use. Let us assume that it is mutually manifest (e.g. because Mary is present) that she is not at this very moment in the process of climbing the Matterhorn. What is one to make of this use of the present? The failure to use either the past 'climbed' or the future 'will climb' implies that the relevant interpretation of the present is one which extends it sufficiently widely to encompass a stretch of time in which this property predicated of Mary can be realised irrespective of past and future. Such a property is presumably one which is instantiated or instantiable on any occasion, not just on one future or past occasion: i.e. it forces a habitual (or gnomic) reading. This follows either because any other interpretation could have been more relevantly communicated by the use of a different form, which would cost the hearer less processing effort, or because the use of a different form, e.g. the progressive, as in (21b), would have other, undesirable, implications (e.g. of eventuality, cf. Žegarac, 1989).

Interpretively used, (21a) may appear in any of a number of different contexts, as exemplified in (22):

- (22) a. This is a story in which *Mary climbs the Matterhorn*
- b. (Headline): *Mary climbs the Matterhorn*

In both cases the sequence in (21a) is used interpretively: in (22a) the prelude 'this is a story' gives an explicit indication that the embedded clause is a *précis* or summary of the entire story. That is, it resembles the story by selecting the most important or most salient episode of that story and highlighting it, and hence will have partly identical contextual effects. The headline of (22b) is

interpretive in a similar way, condensing the core of the following story into a few words. It is perhaps worth pointing out that, independently of the notion of interpretive use, the exploitation of the present to represent a past state of affairs as though it obtained now heighten its relevance for the reader (on the assumption that, *ceteris paribus*, current events are generally likely to be more relevant than past ones). The use of the present tense here indicates that the event described is so important that it merits being put into a wider time-span than that of its actual occurrence.

In fact, the usage in (22b) is a special case of the historic present - a form 'used instead of the past in vivid narration' (OED), and illustrated in (23):

(23) Victor Wilcox lies awake

As a glance at some of the uses of the historic present should indicate, vividness is scarcely a defining characteristic of the historic present, especially when, as in Lodge (1988) from which (23) is taken, most of the text is written in the simple present, despite being explicitly dated (often to the minute) to the past. The aim is to force the reader to visualise the situation described as though he were there himself. That is, the historic present, by conjuring up a representation of an image of the scene described, fulfils the criterion for interpretive use given earlier.

A range of further examples, sampled in (24), is similarly best construed interpretively:

- | | | | |
|------|----|--------------------|----------------------------|
| (24) | a. | (Jokes) | Paddy walks into a pub ... |
| | b. | (Stage directions) | Persephone dusts |
| | c. | (Reports) | Grice argues that P |
| | d. | (Futurates) | The train leaves at seven |

A joke does not constitute a description of a state of affairs, but is a kind of story representing a visualisation of some possible situation; stage directions are similar to attributive imperatives (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986:251) in giving an instruction to the actor within the framework of a play; reports are partial précis of the book or article they purport to summarise. The most interesting cases are futurates like (24d), traditionally characterised as being used for *scheduled* events, where the implicit schedule constitutes the first order representation, resemblance to which characterises the (second order) interpretive use.

Such usages constitute a counter-example to Enç's (1987:649) suggestion that 'a present tense denotes the speech time', and to Salkie's claim (1989:8) that examples like (19), and similarly (21a), 'cannot be used to describe a single definite instance of [John] walking to work', because 'the present tense can only be used for states, not for events' (ibid.). Salkie goes on to say that all the apparent counter-examples to his claim are utterances which 'are only possible in special contexts characterizable by constitutive rules' (1989:9). Unfortunately this explanation for the special status of examples like (22 - 24) is neither accurate nor explanatory. Salkie gives six kinds of example: plot descriptions and headlines like those in (22), jokes, sports commentaries, conjurors' patter

and performatives, but fails to suggest what precisely the rules 'constitutive' of such utterances might be. Moreover, jokes are often indiscriminately in the past or present, so that (25a) and (25b) are equally appropriate:

- (25) a. A man walks into a bar ...
b. A man walked into a bar ...

As with the historic present, the only difference is a faint increase in immediacy, often lost by overuse.

Salkie's examples do, however, highlight the fact that not all uses of the simple present with dynamic verbs can be assimilated to interpretive use, as there are at least three types of example, illustrated in (26), which appear purely descriptive:

- (26) a. (Performatives) I promise to stop soon
b. (Quasi-performatives) I reject your argument
c. (Commentaries) Gower plays and misses

Although a number of uses of the present tense with dynamic verbs fall together under the rubric of interpretive use, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive and unified characterization of them either in these terms or in terms of their other most salient property: the fact that the present refers to the past. It is clear that having recourse to 'interpretive use' is only one strand in a complex explanation. Equally clear is the fact that here, as in the other domains discussed above, the common strategy of 'leav[ing] as little as possible to pragmatics' (Oberlander, 1989:89) is misguided.

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