

Tense and the Speaker's Attitude in English

Minako Nakayasu*

Kagoshima Women's College, Japan

This paper gives attention to the so-called Sequence of Tenses phenomenon in English and explores what sorts of factors influence tense choice. Our analysis proves that what plays the crucial role in tense choice is the reporting speaker's attitude to the message, and that he or she chooses the tense taking three simplified factors into consideration: the semantic relation between the reporting verb and the reported message, the syntactic relation between the reporting clause and the reported clause, and extra-sentential, pragmatic factors. It is shown that although the reporting speaker is the final authority in choosing tense, he or she has to resort to these factors and judge how much responsibility he or she has for the truth value of the message.

0. INTRODUCTION

When the reporting verb is in the past, the reported clause usually takes a past tense. This has often been referred to as the Sequence of Tenses. The present tense is also possible, however, as an alternative and marked choice as in:

(1) John said he was/is happy.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what sorts of factors influence tense choice with special reference to the past reporting. We will propose that what is crucial to tense choice is the (reporting) speaker's attitude, and we will analyze the phenomenon by way of three factors: the semantic relation between the reporting verb and the reported message, the syntactic relation between the reporting clause and the reported clause, and extra-sentential, pragmatic factors. We will show that the speaker dynamically employs these factors to choose a proper tense and that these simplified factors can be unified into one simple principle. Our research will cover reported thought and perception as well as reported speech, which will make our theory more comprehensive.

First we will examine the inadequacies of the previous studies and seek for the implications they can have on the present study. The second section will clarify the reporting and argue for the significance of the reporting speaker. The factors relevant to tense choice will be discussed in sections 3 and 4: the former deals with two fundamental factors, i.e. semantics and syntax, and the latter analyses pragmatic factors in great detail. The final section is a conclusion.

1. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Let us begin our discussion by making a brief survey of the major works which have been intended to explain the so-called Sequence of Tenses phenomenon.

The theory which has appeared most frequently in the literature is the one which assumes the Sequence of Tenses rule. Comrie (1986) argues that this rule covers all the cases with a single principle: the tense is backshifted into the past under a past reporting verb, "except that if the content of the indirect speech has continuing applicability, the backshifting is optional. (1986: 285)." However, there are too many exceptions which could not be handled with one single syntactic rule. Look at a typical case of "continuing applicability," for example:

(2) a. Einstein said that E ??equalled/equals mc^2 .

b. Was it Einstein who said that E equals/equalled mc^2 ? (Salkie and Reed 1997)

His rule cannot account for why the past tense in (2b) is more acceptable than in (2a), which suggests that other factors, such as pragmatic ones, are relevant to this phenomenon.

Let us now turn to attempts to explain tense choice by way of the semantic relation between the reporting verb and the reported clause. Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970) classify verbs into two categories, i.e. factive and non-factive, according to whether they presuppose the proposition in the reported clause a fact or not. Costa (1972) develops the dichotomy from the viewpoint of the Sequence of Tenses. In her analysis, A-verbs take both past and present tenses, while B-verbs do not allow present tense to occur. The following example shows that her dichotomy is dubious, though it is quite suggestive:

(3) a. Galileo believed that the earth moved/(*)moves.

b. I believed that the earth moved/(?)moves.

It cannot answer the question why the present tense is tolerable under a B-verb *believe* especially when the reporter is "I," and the judgment differs according to the speaker.

The next theory assumes that only discourse-pragmatic factors govern tense choice. Riddle (1978) postulates three factors, one of which is subject involvement. A person who cannot be contemporary with us appears in both of the following sentences:

* Department of English Language and Literature, Kagoshima Women's College, 1904 Uchi, Hayato-cho, Aira-gun, Kagoshima 899-5194 Japan

(4) a. Aristotle announced that the earth was/is a globe.

(Jacobs 1995)

b. Aristotle thought that the earth was/*is a globe.

The explanation only by pragmatics seems too wild since it cannot explain why the present tense is sometimes untenable with some reporting verbs in any possible context.

The discussion above proves that a single set of principles is not enough to explain the phenomenon. In order to overcome the inadequacies, Declerck and Tanaka (1996) specify in great detail the factors which prevent the present tense, which signifies a domain-shifting to the present sector in their theory,¹ from appearing in the reported clause. They compile abundant factors into these five categories: "semantic, pragmatic, syntactic, the communication structure, and contextual (1986: 299)." We must admit that they cover almost all factors which could be closely connected to the phenomenon. However, we will miss the point if we stick too much to factors themselves. First, those factors are too diverse: it is far from reasonable to suppose that the speaker takes so many factors into consideration at a time. Second, there is no hierarchy assumed among the factors. Third, their account obscures the fact that there are significant differences in judgment according to each speaker as we have seen in (3). A theory of tense choice should be able to explain these problems as well as the others I mentioned earlier.

2. THE SPEAKER AND THE REPORTING

The solution to the problems in the last section would be rather difficult to find. It seems right for us to start at a working hypothesis which could handle the whole phenomenon.

Working Hypothesis 1: The speaker is the authority to choose tense.

The speaker is the person who uses the language and therefore produces the whole sentence. He or she is qualified to select any situation which can be accessible to him or her and put it into linguistic form. It is quite reasonable to say that what determines the linguistic form is the speaker's attitude to the situation or proposition. He or she employs a past tense if he or she considers the situation as belonging to the past and no longer true at the speech time; on the other hand, when he or she wants to insist that it is valid now, a present tense befits the situation, although the reporting verb has the past tense. This working hypothesis will immediately solve the third problem of Declerck & Tanaka (1996), that is to say, there are significant differences in judgment from speaker to speaker.

A careful look at data, however, will show that the hypothesis above is too strong. It wrongly predicts that the speaker has the authority to choose any tense he or she likes, whatever the situation is. We must admit that there is certainly some tendency for either past or present tense in a certain situation. What could this mean? We need to put some kind of restriction on the hypothesis in order to conform our analysis better to the facts.

Working Hypothesis 2: The speaker is the authority to choose tense: he or she does so utilizing certain factors.

We will propose in the following sections that the speaker takes an active part in tense choice, using three factors: two fundamental, sentence level factors, that is, semantic and syntactic factors, and one pragmatic, extra-sentence level factor. This elaboration of Working Hypothesis 2 will enable us to solve the inadequacies in the previous studies I pointed out in the last section.

Having given the speaker a great deal of attention, our next step is to examine in what way his or her attitude is reflected in the report. Recall that our analysis deals with any type of reporting, not solely reported speech but also reported thought and perception. It is now helpful for us to clarify reporting before moving on to the main task.

Consider the following²:

(5) (I say to you) John told Mary (that) Bill loved Sue.

Assuming that every utterance presupposes a speaker and a hearer, we put a clause [I say to you] in front of the sentence. First of all, the vital participant is the reporting speaker "I," which premise we emphasize from time to time in this paper. "You" is the hearer of the reporting. The reported speaker is *John*, as we have already assumed. There may also be a hearer of the language event *told*, which can also be referred to as a reporting verb; in this case the hearer is *Mary*. The other two are the subject and the object of the message respectively, *Bill* and *Sue*, the latter being much less important. We should not overlook that all the participants could be the same person, or some of them could happen to be the same.

The key to solving questions concerning tense choice in the complement clause in reporting is the extent to which the reporting speaker is responsible for the message reported, where the reported speaker's responsibility prevails. In the following sections, let us observe in what way the reporting speaker utilizes the factors.

3. SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC FACTORS

3.0. Introduction

Having described the necessary tools for analysis, it is time for us to have a close look at the phenomenon by sorting out the factors which are relevant to tense choice and accessible to the reporting speaker. In this section we will analyze the two most fundamental factors in great detail.

We have revised our working hypothesis to reflect both strong and weak tendencies for the speaker to choose

¹ See Declerck (1991) for a detailed discussion.

²The explanation owes much to Janssen and Wurff (1996), who provide a typical example of reporting.

each tense. Still, the reporting speaker is the authority: he or she has the right to choose tense under some influence of those factors. Then, what sorts of factors does he or she utilize to choose tense, and with what attitude?

3.1. Semantic Relation between the Reporting Verb and the Message

The first and most powerful factor is the semantic relation between the reporting verb and the message in the complement clause. As we have seen in section 1, Costa (1972) and others along the same line have classified past reporting verbs into two categories: A-verbs, which allow both tenses, and B-verbs, which make the Sequence of Tenses obligatory. Here we will incorporate her idea into our theory.

Consider the following:

- (6) He argued that the responsibility of the United States is[was] “to do, confidently and firmly, not what is popular, but what is right.” (Brown Corpus)

The reporting speaker chooses present tense because he or she considers the reported message as still valid at the speech time, even though the time or arguing made by the reported speaker is the past. Past tense is also possible if the reporting speaker does not want to emphasize the validity at the present. In both cases, the reporting speaker is active and is responsible for the tense choice. Look at the example below, however:

- (7) In the pre-Civil War years, the South argued that the slave was[*is] not less humanely treated than the factory worker of the North. (ibid.)

The reporting speaker regards the situation as valid only in the past time, which is also obvious from the preposed adverbial phrase; that is why only the past tense is possible, though the same reporting verb is employed as in (6). Our first rule concerning semantics therefore goes:

Semantic Sub-rule 1: When the reporting speaker reports an established fact, he or she has a responsibility for the truth value of the message and therefore has the right to choose either a past or present tense. If the fact holds only in the past, he or she has to employ a past tense.

By “established fact” we mean that the reporting speaker considers that the truth value of the message is obvious to the hearer or the people who are assumed to hear the report, or that it holds without any doubt. G. Thompson (1994) points out that the situations such as the one we have observed cannot be denied by phrases such as *but he is wrong*:

- (8) Olson demonstrated that, if children are given a problem to solve, their hypotheses become more specific and precise with age (*but he is wrong). (G. Thompson 1994)

This reinforces our analysis that the reporting speaker admits that the truthfulness of the message is clear.

There are cases, on the other hand, where only past tense is approved:

- (9) He imagined they were[*are] the kind whose tax returns were never examined. (Brown Corpus)

This example suggests that the reporting speaker cannot experience the reported speaker’s thought or perception. It exists only in the reported speaker’s world, and he or she only is responsible for the truth value of the message. The second sub-rule can be stated as follows:

Semantic Sub-rule 2: When the reporting speaker reports a thought, perception, etc. which exists only in the reported speaker’s world, he or she has no responsibility for the truth value of the message and therefore has to employ a past tense.

This can also be supplemented by the representation of fact in the following:

- (10) My students thought Oxford was/*is in London (but they were wrong).

The idea of Oxford being in London is wrong checked against our real world and exists only in the reported speakers’ world. In such a case, therefore, the report can be negated by phrases such as *but they were wrong*.

Now let us combine the two semantic sub-rules into a more schematic one:

Semantic Rule: The reporting speaker chooses either tense by judging to what extent he or she can be responsible for the truth value of the message.

This rule will have a great effect on tense choice later in our discussion.

We are not classifying verbs in the same way as Costa (1972) does. Our rule is much more flexible, allowing the difference in judgment among speakers and even the change of tense preference under a different context or a situation.

3.2. Syntactic Relation between the Reporting Clause and the Reported Clause

Our second factor is Syntax. One of the reasons why the rule of Sequence of Tenses was assumed in the literature was that the complement clause is governed by and under the strong influence of the matrix clause. Please look at the sentence below:

- (11) California is too far, he thought. (Brown Corpus)

The reporting speaker deliberately postpones the reporting clause *he thought*. This way of reporting has often been referred to as “free indirect speech.” The reported message is separated by a comma and the present tense is employed although verbs such as *thought* seldom take it. Here the present tense is acting as if it signifies that the message is an established fact. In (12a) and (12b) below, both tenses are possible if we put the reporting clause somewhere else—in the middle of the sentence or at the end of the sentence. However, in (12c), the present tense sounds unacceptable if we put the message under the reporting clause:

- (12) a. California was/is too far, he thought.
b. California, he thought, was/is too far.
c. He thought California was/*is too far.

We can reduce this phenomenon to the syntactic relation between the reporting clause and the reported clause. In (12a) and (12b) the reporting speaker raises the complement clause to the status of an independent clause. It is demonstrated by the fact that (11) cannot be accompanied by *that*, which is a complement clause marker:

(13) *That California is too far, he thought.

The less syntactic dependence the clause has, the more possibility of present tense it possesses. Our syntactic rule therefore reflects this point:

Syntactic Rule: When the reporting speaker makes the reported clause independent of the reporting clause, he or she has the authority to employ a present tense in spite of the normal semantic relation between the reporting verb and the reported message.

The rule above describes the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the marked choice. To put it another way, the Sequence of Tenses is caused by the environment where the message is under a strong influence of the reporting verb; once it gets out of the command of the verb, either tense may be used freely. In this sense, this factor is crucially fundamental to the theory of tense.

4. PRAGMATIC FACTOR

4.0. Introduction

Having described the two fundamental factors, we can now go on to the discussion of the third one. We will show that this is closely connected to the role of the reporting speaker, who is a vital participant in the report.

Observe this set of data, which provides a starting-point for us:

- (14) a. California was/(?)is too far, I thought.
b. California was/(?)is too far, you thought.

The sentences above are the same as the ones we discussed in the last section except that they have "I" or "you." The former is the same person as the reporting speaker, the latter being the reported speaker him-/herself; each of them participates in the report as a reported speaker. For some speakers of English they sound odd, which offers us a promising clue to our analysis. Recall that in (3), the fact that the reported speaker is no longer alive makes the present tense sound unacceptable. These observations demonstrate that the phenomenon cannot be explained without taking pragmatic, extra-sentential factors into consideration. Here we will analyze the phenomenon by considering some of the pragmatic facts.

4.1. Participants in the Report

We have already discussed the reporting in section 2. Let us see how those settings work in our analysis. In the following examples, no hearer of the language event is assumed and both tenses are acceptable:

- (15) a. John said Mary was/is a liar.
b. John said I was/am a liar.

Let us add the hearer to (15) and examine several combinations:

- (16) a. John told me Mary was/is a liar.
b. John told me I was/(*)am a liar.
c. John told Mary she was/(*)is a liar.
d. John told Mary I was/am a liar.

Some English speakers react negatively to the present tense in (16b) and (16c). What they have in common is the fact that the hearer of the language event and the subject of the reported message are the same person. The time when the hearer received the message is the past. It is therefore natural to regard the message as belonging to the past time. This implies that by making the hearer the subject of the message and making the message contemporary with the past reporting verb, the reporting speaker attempts to push the transmission of the message back into the past, which makes him or her less responsible for it. Our first sub-rule concerning participants is therefore:

Pragmatic Sub-rule 1-1: When the hearer of the language event and the subject of the message are the same, the reporting speaker can employ a past tense in order to make the message contemporary with the reporting verb.

We should not overlook the fact that for some other speakers the present tense in the sentences above sounds all right: they do not have our Sub-rule 1-1. Here again, our analysis proves that the reporting speaker is the authority to choose tense.

4.2. Participants and Deictic Expressions

Allen (1966) points out that some deictic expressions are related to tense choice in some way. Let us examine the relation between participants and proximal expressions such as "here" and "come."

- (17) a. Did you know I was/*am here?
b. Did you know Tom was/is here?
c. Did you know I was/am in Singapore?
d. Did you know Tom was/is in Singapore?

In (17a) and (17c), both the reporting speaker "I" and the hearer "you" appear as participants. The present tense sounds awkward in (17a), where a proximal deictic expression is utilized. In (17c), on the other hand, *in Singapore* is neutral and the present tense sounds OK even if "I" is in Singapore.

We can define our second sub-rule from these data:

Pragmatic Sub-rule 1-2: When both the reporting speaker "I" and the hearer of the report "you" attend the report and some proximal deictic expression (such as *here*) exists in the report, the reporting speaker employs a past tense in order to make the message contemporary with the reporting verb.

The reporting speaker wants to avoid the contradiction of the present and the past senses. That is to say, the presence of "I" and "you" implies the center of deixis, i.e. "I-here-now," which is reinforced by the proximal

expression. However, the reporting verb is in the past. He or she therefore has no choice but make the message hold only in the past. The sentences in (17c) and (17d) have no expression relevant to deixis and both tenses are acceptable.

4.3. Participants and Current Involvement

As is noted by Riddle (1978), the participants should have some current involvement to make the present tense possible. Consider the following (the example in (3) is repeated for the sake of convenience):

- (18) a. Galileo believed the earth moved/(*)moves.
b. I believed the earth moved/(?)moves.
c. John believed the earth moved/(?)moves.

The knowledge that Galileo is already dead makes the message valid only in the past, although the fact that the earth moves is valid at the present moment as well. We can therefore set the third sub-rule as follows:

Pragmatic Sub-rule 1-3: When the reported speaker (or other participants) cannot be contemporary with the time of reporting, the reporting speaker employs a past tense in order to make the message contemporary with the reporting verb.

Here again, some speakers do not mind the fact that Galileo is dead; they would choose present tense if they would like to emphasize that the message is true now.

4.4. Participants and Speech Acts

Here is an intriguing set of data:

- (19) a. They told me you were/*are here.
b. They told me Tom was/is here.
c. They told me you were/(*)are in Singapore.
d. They told me Tom was/is in Singapore.

Recall that in 4.2. we discussed the relation between tense choice and deictic expressions in sentences with *Did you know* -?. The examples above are of the same type, except that they start with *They told me* - , which is affirmative. Our sub-rule 1-2 is able to explain why in (19a) the present tense is unacceptable, since it has "I (me)" and "you," and a deictic expression *here*. The point we should note is found in (19c): why does the present tense sound strange for some speakers in this affirmative sentence?

To find a solution to this, let us make a comparison between interrogative and affirmative sentences whose complement clauses are neutral i.e. have no deictic expressions.

- (20) a. Did you know I was/am allergic to alcohol?
b. I knew you were/(??)are allergic to alcohol.

In (20) above the same message is conveyed; however, whereas both tenses are all right in the interrogative sentence in (20a), the past tense sounds better in the affirmative sentence in (20b). The reason why is probably this: the reporting speaker of (20a) admits that the message is an established fact and his or her attention is now on drawing out the information from the hearer, concerning if the hearer knew it or not. In (20b), on the other hand, there is no such implication. He or she is asserting that "I" knew it at some time in the past. It is therefore more natural to employ a past tense to show that the message belongs to the past. Note, by the way, that Costa (1972) classifies *knew* as a B-verb, which does not approve present tense: her theory cannot explain the phenomenon dealt with in this subsection.

The negative element is known to have some influence on pragmatic sense. Compare the following negative forms with (20):

- (21) a. Didn't you know I was/(?)am allergic to alcohol?
b. I didn't know you were/(??)are allergic to alcohol.

The past tense is preferred in (21b) as well as (20b), the reason being the same. The interesting point to consider is that the present tense in (21a) sounds strange to some speakers. It may be because for them the negative element is the object of attention and his or her attention is no longer on the information expected from the hearer, which makes the past tense more acceptable. In such a case some other shade of meaning such as surprise is added to the sentence. Even more interestingly, if we change the subject of the message to the third person, the past tense is preferred:

- (22) Didn't you know he was/(??)is allergic to alcohol?

The use of the negative element and the third person will make the situation sound more like the past.

Observe our fourth sub-rule below:

Pragmatic Sub-rule 1-4: When the attention of the reporting speaker is more on getting information from the hearer than on conveying information, he or she can employ a present tense.

Now that we have offered several sub-rules concerning pragmatics, it is an appropriate place to compile them into a simpler one:

Pragmatic Rule 1: The more pragmatic resources which indicate that the reporting situation is in the past, the greater the possibility of the reporting speaker employing a past tense in order to make the message contemporary with the reporting verb: he or she has less responsibility for the truth value of the message.

4.5. Exceptional (?) Present Tense and the Speaker's Attitude

In this subsection we will look at uses of the present tense which our rules so far have not been able to explain.

- (23) I thought the saloon area works well, providing a comfortable place to enjoy a meal or just simply relax.

(COBUILD)

In this example, the present tense is employed although *thought* seldom takes it in the reported clause. Costa

(1972) would argue that the present tense is unacceptable in such contexts. Here the reporting speaker dares to employ it probably because he or she wishes to state that it is a firmly established fact in that context and emphasize it is valid at the speech time.

The following example proves that given a proper context, the present tense will sound better:

(24) a. Anne whispered that she loved/*loves him. (Declerck & Tanaka 1996)

b. I know Mary told everyone that Anne hated/hates Norman, but Anne whispered to me that she loves him. (Salkie & Reed 1997)

More interestingly, E. Thompson (personal communication) points out that the phrase *to me* rather than the context makes the present tense possible in (24b). This observation will support our theory, which esteems the reporting speaker's role. Our final rule emphasizing on the significance of the speaker's attitude is:

Pragmatic Rule 2: When the reporting speaker reports a fact which is firmly established or a fact which is strongly needed in the context, and he or she wishes to emphasize its present validity, he or she has the authority to employ a present tense in spite of the normal relation between the reporting verb and the reported message.

It must be noted again that we are not defining the reporting speaker as an omnipotent pragmatic source. If we did, we could not explain why in (24a) the present tense sounds awkward. It is true that he or she is the authority; however, in order to choose tense properly, he or she has to consider the factors we have already examined.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have observed how the reporting speaker is involved in tense choice in the reported clause. Though he or she is the authority and his or her attitude to the message is crucial, he or she has to resort to the three major factors: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. We have seen the dynamic interaction among these factors, and they can be unified into one all-embracing principle:

Principle of Tense Choice in the Reported Clause: The reporting speaker ultimately chooses the tense by judging how much responsibility he or she has for the truth value of the message.

The problems with the previous studies have been removed. We showed that a combination of factors is the best way among them to solve the questions. The recent major work in this field is Declerck & Tanaka (1996), whose problems have been solved by postulating the reporting speaker as crucial and reducing their numerous factors into much simpler ones.

In conclusion, I should emphasize again the reporting speaker's role in tense choice, which affords a new perspective on the study of tense.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Shingo Tokimoto for his constant support and Ellen Thompson, Carl Mantzel, and anonymous reviewers of PACLIC 12 for their valuable comments.

REFERENCES

1. Allen, Robert L. (1966) *The Verb System of Present-day American English*, The Hague: Mouton.
2. Comrie, Bernard (1986) "Tense in Indirect Speech," *Folia Linguistica* 20.
3. Costa, Rachel (1972) "Sequence of Tenses in That-Clauses," *Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting*, Chicago Linguistic Society.
4. Declerck, Renaat (1991) *Tense in English: Its Structure and Use in Discourse*, London: Routledge.
5. Declerck, Renaat; and Tanaka, Kazuhiko (1996) "Constraints on Tense Choice in Reported Speech," *Studia Linguistica* 50-3.
6. Jacobs, Roderick. (1995) *English Syntax: A Grammar for English Language Professionals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. Janssen, Theo A. J. M.; and Wurff, Wim van der (1996) *Reported Speech: Forms and Functions of the Verb*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
8. Kiparsky, Paul; and Kiparsky, Carol (1970) "Fact," in Bierwisch and Heidolph (1970), *Progress in Linguistics: A Collection of Papers*, The Hague: Mouton.
9. Riddle, Elizabeth M. (1978) *Sequence of Tenses in English*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
10. Salkie, Raphael; and Reed, Susan (1997) "Time Reference in Reported Speech," *English Language and Linguistics* 1-2.
11. Thompson, Geoff (1994) *Collins COBUILD English Guides 5: Reporting*, London: HarperCollins.

LANGUAGE CORPORA

1. Brown Corpus (1991) *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora*, Bergen: Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities.
2. COBUILD (1995) *COBUILD on CD-ROM*, London: HarperCollins.