

NARRATIVE TENSES AND BACKSHIFTING¹

TEMPOS NARRATIVOS E RETROCESSO TEMPORAL

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the observation that the Simple Past in languages such as French or Italian does not allow backshifting, a property that also generally characterizes the Historical Present, we provide a semantic analysis that accounts both for the similarities between those Simple Pasts and the Historical Present, and for the differences between the Simple Pasts of the French type and those of the English type. The analysis is bicontextual and follows the approach developed by Anand and Toosarvandani for the Historical Present. We further suggest that there is a correlation between Simple Pasts not permitting backshifting and the existence of aoristic Present Perfects.

KEYWORDS: Historical Present. Bicontextualism. Simple Past. Aoristic drift.

RESUMO

Partindo da observação de que o Pretérito Simples em línguas como o francês ou o italiano não permite o retrocesso temporal, uma propriedade que também caracteriza geralmente o Presente Histórico, fornecemos uma análise semântica que dá conta tanto das semelhanças entre esses Pretéritos Simples e o Presente Histórico como das diferenças entre os Pretéritos Simples do tipo francês e os do tipo inglês. A análise é bicontextual e segue a abordagem desenvolvida por Anand e Toosarvandani para o Presente Histórico. Sugerimos ainda que existe uma correlação entre Pretéritos Simples que não permitem retrocesso e a existência de Pretéritos Compostos aorísticos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Presente Histórico. Bicontextualismo. Pretérito Simples. Deriva aorística.

1. Introduction

The narrative mode of discourse, as described for instance in Smith (2003), exhibits a characteristic pattern of tense interpretation: the events and states introduced in the narrative are temporally ordered with regard to previously mentioned events and times, while the relation of tenses to Utterance Time (UttT) is a global one. Narratives overwhelmingly relate facts that precede UttT, although narrative sequences of future events are also possible. The dominant principle for tense

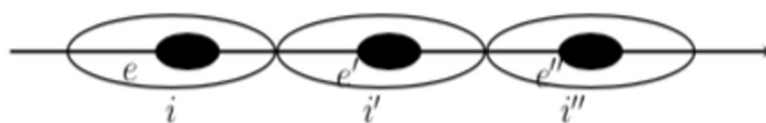
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interpretation in narratives is continuity (also known as narrative progression, or the principle of advancement of Reference Time), which may be glossed with the *and-then* relation: each successively mentioned event, provided that it is bounded,³ is understood as following the previously introduced event. Thus, a typical narrative sequence such as (1) is interpreted as in figure 1, where *e*, *e'* and *e''* stand for the events and *i*, *i'* and *i''* stand for Reference Time:

- (1) The truck began to move. The journey seemed to go on forever. Then we stopped. I was led off the truck (*Return*, p. 53)

Figure 1: Advancement of Reference Time



Source: Condoravdi; Deo (2015)

But – as is well known (Kamp; Reyle, 1993; Asher; Lascarides, 2003) – continuity is only the default principle of interpretation for a sequence of bounded past tenses in a narrative passage. Inferential processes based on world knowledge may dictate a temporal ordering of two events which inverts the order in which they are introduced in the text, as in (2a-b):

- (2) a. Max fell. John pushed him.
b. Miriam was late for work. She missed her train.

Since pushing events normally precede falling events, and missing a train is a common cause for being late, the most natural interpretation for these examples is one that involves temporal inversion, a kind of *backshifting* in which the event introduced in the second sentence actually precedes the one in the first sentence. However, not all past tenses equally permit backshifting. The Simple Past in French, for instance, a tense nowadays only used in literary fiction, excludes it (De Saussure, 1997).⁴ Thus, the French “literal” translations of (2) only allow for an interpretation in which the second mentioned event follows (or at most overlaps with) the first one, with Max being pushed when

³ “Bounded event” is used here as a cover term for any situation in a perfective tense, such as the Simple Past in the Romance languages, and for perfectly interpreted situations, such as all non-stative situations in any simple tense in English.

⁴ A reviewer raises the objection that it is not methodologically sound to compare a tense that is only used in literary fiction with “normal past tenses”. The answer to this objection is twofold. First, “normal past tenses” are also used in literary fiction, but with a different distribution and interpretation, as discussed in §2.2. Second, those French speakers who happen to write and/or read literary fiction have the Simple Past in their (passive or active) linguistic repertoire, and they have very sharp and consistent intuitions as to its distribution and interpretation.

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already on the ground, or, respectively, Miriam's missing the train occurring after her arrival at the workplace (3a-b):

- (3) a. Max tomba. Jean le poussa.
b. Miriam arriva en retard au bureau. Elle rata son train.

In order to obtain backshifting, the examples in (2) must be translated by the Present Perfect⁵, the general expression for anteriority to UttT in contemporary French:

- (4) a. Max est tombé. Jean l'a poussé.
b. Miriam est arrivée en retard au bureau. Elle a raté son train.

Now, backshifting in narratives is not only excluded for sequences of French Simple Pasts. Narratives relating facts that precede UttT are not necessarily told in past tenses: the HISTORICAL PRESENT is a narrative device, found both in literary fiction and in oral narratives, in which events described in the present tense precede the «real» UttT and – when bounded – are normally sequenced according to the principle of continuity. In fact, the narrative sequence in (1) could have also been told in the present tense with the same temporal interpretation schematized in figure 1:

- (5) The truck begins to move. The journey seems to go on forever. Then we stop. I am led off the truck.

Recently, Anand and Toosarvandani (2017) have made the important observation that the HISTORICAL PRESENT no more allows backshifting than the French Simple Past does. Thus, (6a-b) have the same temporal interpretation we attributed to (3a-b):

- (6) a. [At that moment] John falls. Max pushes him.
b. [On that morning] Miriam is late for work. She misses her train.

In this article, tenses that do not allow backshifting, that is to say, Simple Pasts of the French type and the HISTORICAL PRESENT, will be referred to as *narrative tenses*. Following the lines suggested by Anand and Toosarvandani (2016, 2017, 2023), we will propose a semantic-pragmatic account for the impossibility of backshifting that relies on a generalization of the bicontextual approach to tense semantics originally proposed for narrative devices such as Free Indirect Style by Doron (1991)

⁵ It is important to bear in mind that we are adopting the following convention: the label Simple Past is used for a morphologically simple form with past reference, and the label Present Perfect for a morphologically compound form whose auxiliary is in the Present Tense, with no implications as to their semantics. Labels in small capitals, such as PAST, refer to semantic tenses. The importance of consistently distinguishing between forms and meanings will become clear in the rest of the paper, particularly in section 4.

and Schlenker (2004). Simple Pasts of the French type exist in several languages, such as Italian, German, or Dutch, which also share the property of having so-called aoristic Present Perfects (cf. Dickey, 2001).⁶ We will refer to them as *NARRATION PASTS*⁷, and we will argue that their semantics is more similar to that of the *HISTORICAL PRESENT* than to that of the English (or Spanish or Portuguese) Simple Past, which we will refer to as *PAST*.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces further empirical evidence that confirms the unavailability of backshifting for narrative tenses. Section 3.1 provides a bicontextual semantics for narrative tenses that straightforwardly rules out backshifting in embedded contexts. Section 3.2 discusses a pragmatic constraint which, together with the proposed semantics, rules out backshifting between two successive independent sentences. Section 4 explores the correlation between the existence of *NARRATION PASTS* and that of aoristic Present Perfects. Section 5 concludes.

2. No backshifting for narrative tenses

The unavailability of backshifting for narrative tenses is confirmed by two further observations, the first one involving their distribution and interpretation in embedded, Sequence of Tense contexts, and the second one involving the expression of anteriority in passages in the Historical Present mode of discourse. In both cases, *NARRATION PASTS* align with the behavior of the *HISTORICAL PRESENT* and contrast with the behavior of *PASTS*.

2.1. Embedded contexts

In Sequence of Tense contexts, an embedded *PAST* may express anteriority with regard to the time of the matrix. If the time of the matrix is before *UttT*, as in (7a), this gives rise to a past-in-the-past reading, akin to a Past Perfect. If the time of the matrix is after *UttT*, as in (7b), the reading is a past-in-the-future one, akin to a Future Perfect:

- (7) a. He learned then that the count died in the war.
b. She will tell you that she wired the money the day before.

NARRATION PASTS, in contrast, are excluded from such contexts; they lack past-in-the-past or future-in-the-past readings, as shown in the French examples (8a-b), which translate (7a-b):

⁶ It should be noted, however, that French and Italian Simple Pasts are aspectually marked as perfective (the time of the event is included in Reference Time), whereas German or Dutch Simple Pasts are not. This aspectual contrast produces differences in distribution and interpretation that are orthogonal to the issues discussed in this paper.

⁷ The original label proposed by Anand and Toosarvandani (2023) is *REMOTE PAST*, which neatly fits the traditional Italian label *passato remoto*. A reviewer has pointed out that this term is potentially confusing, because it is used in the typological literature for tenses indicating temporal distance. *NARRATIVE PAST* would be equally confusing, hence the choice of the term *NARRATION PAST*.

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- (8) a. Il apprit alors que le comte *mourut/était mort en guerre.
 b. Elle te dira qu'elle *passa/a passé le virement la veille.

In this respect, NARRATION PASTS behave like the HISTORICAL PRESENT: an embedded present tense can never express anteriority to a matrix present tense, and this holds also in the Historical Present mode of discourse. In (9), if at all interpretable, the dying event in the complement clause cannot precede the time of the learning event in the matrix clause:

- (9) [On that day] he learns that the count #dies in the war.

In the Sequence of Tense contexts illustrated in (7)-(9), the embedded tense appears in the complement clause of an attitude predicate. Research on Sequence of Tense has established that tenses in the complement clause of attitude predicates are not primarily interpreted with regard to UtT. Their mandatory Evaluation Time (EvalT) is the *now* of the attitude holder, which corresponds to the time of the matrix attitude, a past time in (8a) and (9) and a future time in (8b). The facts in (8) and (9) suggest that narrative tenses are unable to convey anteriority to this EvalT.

2.2. Expressing anteriority in the Historical Present mode of discourse

Passages in the Historical Present mode of discourse rarely consist of pure narrative sequences as that illustrated in (5). Normally, other events and states are introduced that precede or follow those in the narrative sequence, and these are expressed in tenses other than the present tense. In fact, the Historical Present mode of discourse affects the interpretation of *all* tenses, which are likewise not anchored to the “real” UtT. In the following passage, events preceding those in the narrative sequence are expressed in the Present Perfect, and those following them in the Future Tense:

- (10) Juste **hangs up** the phone, **picks** it up again and **calls** his immediate superior [...] Quintana Lacaci. By then Quintana Lacaci **has spoken** fleetingly with the King; like all the Captains General, Quintana Lacaci **is** an unwavering Francoist, but, unlike what almost all the other Captains General **will do** over the hours that follow, he **has put** himself unwaveringly under the orders of the King (*Anatomy*)

Examination of a small parallel corpus of translations confirms an observation originally formulated for Italian by Zucchi (2005): whereas PASTS may be used – along with Present or Past Perfects– for expressing anteriority in passages in the Historical Present, NARRATION PASTS are no more available than the present tense itself for this function. Thus, Simple Pasts in a Spanish or English original are normally rendered by Present or Past Perfects in the French or Italian translations. The patterns exemplified in (11a-d) and (12a-c) are recurrent and systematic:

- (11) a. pero no duda de que hay que terminar como sea con el subalterno que cuatro años atrás [...] le **apartó** de su destino de presidente [Span. SP]
- b. but he does not doubt that they have to somehow get rid of the subordinate who four years earlier [...] **got** in the way of his prime ministerial destiny [Eng. SP]
- c. mais ce dont il ne doute pas, c'est qu'il faut à tout prix en finir avec ce subalterne qui, quatre ans plus tôt, [...] **l'avait écarté** de son destin de président [French Past Perfect]
- d. ma non ha dubbi sul fatto che occorra farla finita con il subalterno che quattro anni prima[...] gli **ha sottratto** il destino di presidente [Ital. Perfect] (*Anatomy*)
- (12) a. Nassun does not know that it **started** with the rock [Eng. SP]
- b. Nassun no sabe que la roca **fue** el detonante [Span. SP]
- c. Nassun ignore que c'est le caillou qui **a tout déclenché** [French Perfect] (*Obelisk*)

In sum, narrative tenses are not available for temporal inversion between successive independent sentences, they are not used for expressing the anteriority of the event in an embedded clause with regard to a propositional attitude in the matrix clause, and NARRATION PASTS are no more available for expressing anteriority to a HISTORICAL PRESENT than the HISTORICAL PRESENT itself. All this strongly suggests that **at some relevant level of analysis, narrative tenses do not convey anteriority**. The semantic analysis in the next section attempts to provide an explicit account for this property.

3. The semantics and pragmatics of narrative tenses

In this section, we provide first an explicit semantic analysis for narrative tenses building on the bicontextual approach to tense semantics developed by Anand & Toosarvandani (2016, 2017, 2023). This analysis straightforwardly accounts for the impossibility of backshifting in embedded contexts. Section 3.2. tackles the issue of backshifting for successive independent sentences by appealing to a pragmatic principle formulated by Anand & Toosarvandani (2017), the Constraint on Assessment Time Update.

3.1. A bicontextual analysis for narrative tenses

Although tenses are generally conceived of as indexical expressions, in the sense that they restrict the relation between a reference time (RT) and UtT, the behavior of embedded tenses shows that this restriction may be relative to a time other than UtT. Thus, in example (7b), repeated here for convenience, the Simple Past in the complement clause does not require anteriority to UtT, but to the time of the saying, which is after UtT:

- (13) She will tell you that she wired the money the day before

An adequate uniform account for the semantics of PAST should define it as restricting the possible values for RT to times preceding an evaluation time (EvalT). In independent sentences, EvalT is, by default, identical to UttT. But EvalT is effectively dissociated from UttT in propositional attitude contexts, and it may be dissociated from it in independent sentences.

Mismatches between temporal adverbials and tenses, such as those in (14a-c), and unexpected cases of narrative progression with Past Perfects, such as that in (15), have led some researchers to propose bicontextual analyses in which actually two different temporal contextual parameters are involved in the interpretation of a single clause:⁸

- (14) a. Tomorrow was Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week! (Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 185, London, Heinemann 1971; cited in Doron, 1991)
- b. Fifty-eight years ago to this day, on January 22, 1944, just as the Americans are about to invade Europe, the Germans attack Vercors. (Schlenker, 2004)
- c. Bill had come home at seven. Now he was writing a letter. (Kamp; Reyle, 1993, p. 596)
- (15) Fred arrived at 10. He had got up at 5; he had taken a long shower, had got dressed and had eaten a leisurely breakfast. He had left the house at 6:30. (Kamp; Reyle, 1993, p. 594)

(14a) is an instance of the fictional device known as Free Indirect Discourse, in which, characteristically, tenses are interpreted relatively to the *now* of the narrator, but indexical temporal adverbials are interpreted relative to the *now* of a protagonist. (14b) is an instance of the Historical Present, in which, inversely, tenses are interpreted relative to a time that precedes UttT, but indexical temporal adverbials are interpreted relative to UttT. (14c) illustrates a characteristic use of *now* not referring to UttT, but to a time following a previous change of state. Finally, (15) illustrates narrative progression in the Past Perfect within an extended flashback: whereas the first Past Perfect, as expected, is understood as preceding the previously mentioned event in the Simple Past, the successive events in the Past Perfect are ordered by the *and-then* relation.

Admittedly, these phenomena are disparate. They have been extensively treated in the formal semantics literature in different ways into which we cannot delve within the limits of this article.⁹ But their common denominator is that their analyses require at some point the introduction of a further contextual parameter next to UttT, and this in independent sentences. This second parameter goes

⁸ The restriction to a single clause is crucial in order to distinguish between bicontextualism and the phenomenon known as indexical shift, which obeys the *Shift-Together* constraint, effectively ensuring that a single temporal parameter per clause is active (Deal, 2020).

⁹ For Free Indirect Discourse, the reader may consult Doron (1991), Eckardt (2015), Schlenker (2004), Sharvit (2008), for non-indexical uses of *now*, Kamp and Reyle (1993, p. 595-597), Hunter (2012), Altshuler (2016, p. 16-60), for narrative progression with Past Perfects, Kamp and Reyle (1993, p. 593-594) and Bohnemeyer (2014).

under several different names, among them *time of evaluation*, *time of thought*, *perspective point*, *assessment time*. In order to capture the parallel distinctive behavior of narrative tenses in embedded and root contexts described in section 2 (that is to say, their unavailability for backshifting), and to remain non-committal as to the possible link of this second parameter to a perspectival center or to a “judge” different from the speaker/narrator, we will refer to it as EvalT, the standard term for the anchor of embedded tenses in the Sequence of Tense literature.¹⁰

Bicontextualism involves systematically distinguishing between two active contextual parameters, UttT and EvalT, which may but need not coincide. Building on work by Anand and Toosarvandani (2016, 2017, 2023), we propose the following definitions for the CANONICAL PRESENT, for the HISTORICAL PRESENT, for PAST and for NARRATION PAST:

- (16) a. CANONICAL PRESENT
 $\text{PRESENT}_i^{g,t^\circ,w^\circ,u} = g(i)$ defined iff $g(i) \subseteq t^\circ$ [$t^\circ = \text{Utt-T}$]
- b. HISTORICAL PRESENT
 $\text{PRESENT}_i^{g,t^\circ,w^\circ,u} = g(i)$ defined iff $g(i) \subseteq t^\circ$ [$t^\circ < \text{Utt-T}$]
- c. PAST $_i^{g,t^\circ,w^\circ,u} = g(i)$ defined iff $g(i) < t^\circ$
- d. NARRATION PAST $_i^{g,t^\circ,w^\circ,u} = g(i)$ defined iff $g(i) \subseteq t^\circ$ & $t^\circ < \text{Utt-T}$

These definitions adopt the tenses-as-pronouns-approach (Kratzer, 1998), in which tenses contribute a temporal variable (represented as their subindex i) together with a presupposition restricting the possible values for the assignment function that fixes the value of this variable, $g(i)$. $g(i)$ corresponds to RT, the time of which a temporal property is predicated. The presupposition uniformly targets the location of the temporal variable with regard to EvalT, represented as t° .

Both the CANONICAL and the HISTORICAL PRESENT have the same semantic definition. They only differ pragmatically, in so far as EvalT is canonically set to UttT, whereas it precedes UttT in the HISTORICAL PRESENT. PAST restricts the admissible candidates for RT to times preceding EvalT, but says nothing as to the relation between EvalT and UttT. Finally, NARRATION PAST requires both for RT to be included in the EvalT and for the latter to precede UttT. The relation between RT and EvalT is the same for NARRATION PAST as in both uses of the PRESENT (inclusion of RT in EvalT), but the condition that EvalT must precede UttT is hardwired into the semantics of NARRATION PAST as a presupposition, whereas in the case of the HISTORICAL PRESENT, it is the result of a pragmatic convention.

¹⁰ There is, however, an important *caveat* to our assimilation of EvalT as the time of the matrix in Sequence-of-Tense contexts with EvalT in narratives. EvalT *qua* time of the matrix event seems to correspond to a point in time (a singleton interval), just as UttT is conceived of as a point in time, giving rise to the Present Perfective/Bounded Event Constraint (a bounded event description cannot be included in a singleton interval). But the EvalT that, as discussed in section 3.2, expands to the right in narratives, can be an interval of any duration. In fact, Anand and Toosarvandani (2023, p. 198) suggest that this interval (that they label Assessment Time) “can be set wide enough to accommodate the entire story”.

The semantic definitions in (16) are bicontextual: tense denotations are relativized to two active contextual parameters (t° and u as superscripts). The proposed analysis provides a uniform semantic definition for PRESENT, with the difference between the CANONICAL and the HISTORICAL PRESENT being accounted for by the use of a different pragmatic convention regarding the setting of EvalT. The analysis also provides different semantic definitions for PAST and for NARRATION PAST, thus accounting for the different behavior of the English/Spanish Simple Past and the French/Italian Simple Past. More importantly, it provides an analogous semantics for the HISTORICAL PRESENT and for NARRATION PAST, the denotation of the narrative tenses that, as shown in section 2, resist backshifting. In both cases, the relationship between RT and EvalT is not one of anteriority, but of inclusion. If we take semantic tenses to constrain the relation between RT and EvalT, the HISTORICAL PRESENT is not a semantic “past” tense (no anteriority of RT with regard to EvalT), **but neither is the NARRATION PAST** (for the very same reason). The first statement will probably meet with general approbation (a non-ambiguous solution for the present, whether canonical or historical, is desirable), whereas the second one is certain to raise eyebrows on account of its paradoxical nature. How is it possible for the French Simple Past, “the mother of all pasts”, to not be a “past” tense? The answer to this is that, as proposed in definition (16d), it is a tense denoting a time included in an EvalT which is disjoint from UttT and necessarily precedes UttT. One is tempted to say that it is “past” in a stronger sense than the “normal” PAST in definition (16c): it is “past” because its temporal perspective, in the sense of Kamp and Reyle (1993), is necessarily past.¹¹

Before trying to show how the proposed analysis accounts for the impossibility of backshifting with narrative tenses, and in order to prevent possible misunderstandings, let us briefly dwell on what this analysis does not purport to say.¹²

First of all, the analysis doesn’t say anything – at least not directly – regarding the distinction between absolute and relative tenses (cf. Comrie, 1985). In a nutshell, absolute tenses are necessarily anchored to UttT, whereas relative tenses are not necessarily anchored to UttT. The problem is that the very notion of “anchoring to UttT”, which is intuitively clear when there is only one contextual parameter for interpretation, and this parameter may or may not coincide with UttT, becomes problematic in a bicontextual framework. Note that in a bicontextual framework, UttT always figures (as u) in the definitions as a parameter of interpretation, together with the second parameter, EvalT (t°). But this does not mean that all tenses are to be regarded as “absolute” in this framework. If we want to transpose the absolute/relative distinction into a bicontextual framework, the most adequate

¹¹ Kamp and Reyle’s (1993, §5.4) were, to my knowledge, the first to propose a system for tense interpretation in the spirit of bicontextualism. In their two-dimensional theory of tenses, they systematically distinguish *Perspective Time* (our EvalT or t°) from UttT. For them, tense interpretation requires temporal features (PAST/PRESENT) at **two** levels: the level of *TENSE*, a relation between Reference Time and Perspective Time, and the level of *Temporal Perspective*, a relation between Perspective Time and UttT. This amounts to semantic bicontextualism, that is to say, generalizing to the worst case, where Perspective Time \neq Utt-T.

¹² I’m deeply indebted to one of the reviewers and to Pier-Marco Bertinetto (p.c.) for insisting on the necessity of clarifying these issues.

solution is probably to characterize absolute tenses as those in which EvalT and UttT coincide. In this sense, the CANONICAL PRESENT as defined in (16a) is absolute, but the NARRATION PAST as defined in (16d) is not, because it contains the condition that EvalT precedes UttT. As for the “normal” PAST in (16c), it would come out as absolute in the overwhelming majority of cases (EvalT= UttT), but it may be relative in the cases of both embedded and intersentential backshifting discussed above, as well as in the cases of past-in-the-future readings.

A similar reasoning applies to the question as to the deictic or non-deictic nature of tenses in a bicontextual framework. Since UttT always figures as a parameter of interpretation, this distinction can only be meaningfully applied in a bicontextual framework if we characterize deictic tenses as those in which EvalT and UttT coincide. In this sense, the NARRATION PAST is not only non-deictic, but it is anti-deictic, by virtue of the semantic condition that its EvalT must precede UttT. This might be a welcome property of the proposed analysis – over and above its accounting for the impossibility of backshifting –, since the incompatibility of the French Simple Past with deictic temporal adverbials, such as *hier* ‘yesterday’, *il y a deux mois* ‘two months ago’, is frequently mentioned in the literature (see for instance Abeillé; Godard, (eds.) 2021, §2.3.2).

Having – hopefully – clarified these issues, we can now turn to the way in which the analysis summarized in definitions (16a-d) accounts for the facts discussed in section 2. The gist of the explanation is that backshifting is only possible if the semantic tense in question presupposes that RT precedes EvalT, a condition that is only met by the “normal” PAST in (16c). In the case of embedded contexts, this analysis provides a straightforward explanation for the fact that neither the HISTORICAL PRESENT nor the Simple Past in French or Italian are available for expressing anteriority to the time of the matrix: since they convey the presupposition that RT is included in EvalT, and it is the time of the matrix that acts as EvalT, backshifting is excluded in examples like (8) and (9), repeated here for convenience:

- (17) a. [On that day] he learns that the count #dies in the war.
 b. Il apprit alors que le comte *mourut en guerre. [French]
 Intended reading: ‘He learned then that the count died in the war’
 c. Elle te dira qu’elle *passa le virement la veille. [French]
 Intended reading: ‘She will tell you that she wired the money the day before’

By contrast, the English or Spanish Simple Past, whose denotation is PAST, conveys the presupposition that RT precedes EvalT, which is set in this case to the time of the matrix. This accounts for the possibility of backshifting in the parallel examples (18a-b):

- (18) a. He learned then that the count died in the war.
 b. She will tell you that she wired the money the day before.

The question that arises at this point is how the definitions proposed in (16) may account for the possibility or impossibility of temporal inversion among successive independent sentences in a narrative. How is temporal inversion prevented in the case of narrative tenses, and what licenses it in the case of Simple Pasts with the denotation of PAST? The question goes hand in hand with the question as to the setting of EvalT when it is neither identified with UttT nor with the time of the matrix. If the setting of EvalT were totally unconstrained in such cases, nothing would prevent choosing an EvalT before that of the last sentence and thus getting backshifting also for narrative tenses, which presuppose that RT is included in EvalT. But a totally free-floating EvalT is highly implausible.

3.2. Constraining the setting of Eval-T

In order to capture the impossibility of backshifting for the HISTORICAL PRESENT –that is to say, the fact that two successively mentioned events in the HISTORICAL PRESENT may be ordered by the relation *and-then* or may overlap, but cannot be temporally inverted –, Anand and Toosarvandani (2017) formulate a constraint that ensures that EvalT in narratives, when it is unmoored from UttT, is constructed along with the narrative and may only expand to the right. This is the Constraint on Assessment Time Update (CATU), Assessment Time being the term they use for the contextual parameter we are referring to, more neutrally, as EvalT.¹³ CATU specifies, for independent sentences, that if their EvalT is not set to UttT, it must left-align with the time of the most recently mentioned eventuality in the discourse. For tenses with the presupposition $g(i) \subseteq t^\circ$, such as the HISTORICAL PRESENT and NARRATION PAST in (16), this constraint automatically excludes backshifting, while allowing for narrative progression (*and-then*) and overlap.

Figure 2 shows schematically how this constraint produces the desired effect for examples (3a) and (6a), repeated here for convenience:

- (19) a. [At that moment] John falls. Max pushes him.
 b. Jean tomba. Max le poussa. [French]
 ‘Jean fell. [And then] Max pushed him’.

Figure 2: Ruling out backshifting by CATU

t°	t° updated
$g(1)$	$g(2)$
τ (FALL)	τ (PUSH)

Source: Elaborated by the author

¹³ The term *assessment* is inspired by MacFarlane’s (2014) theory of truth in bicontexts, which involves a contextually supplied judge or assessor and their respective parameters for sentence evaluation. In this paper, we try to remain agnostic as to this specific issue.

In figure 2, the lines stand for the relevant time intervals, from bottom to top: the temporal trace of the event described in each sentence, $\tau(e)$, $g(1)$ (=RT) and t° (=EvalT). In the interpretation of the first sentence in our examples, the temporal trace of the falling event is included in $g(1)$ – because the aspectual profile involved is perfective –, and $g(1)$ is included in t° by the definitions of PRESENT and NARRATION PAST in (16). As for the second sentence, CATU stipulates that the update of t° must left-align with the temporal trace of the previously mentioned falling event. Since, again, $g(2)$ is included in t° and the temporal trace of the pushing event is included in $g(2)$, the time of the pushing cannot precede the time of the falling. Thus, the semantic definitions proposed for narrative tenses – crucially, that they convey the presupposition $g(i) \subseteq t^\circ$ – together with the pragmatic constraint on the setting of a “free” EvalT provided by CATU, prevent temporal inversion between successive independent sentences.

The possible dissociation of EvalT from UttT, under the proviso that in such case CATU must be obeyed, is also exploited by Anand and Toosarvandani (2017) in order to account for the licensing of temporal inversion with PAST. As expressed in (16c), PAST conveys the presupposition that RT is before EvalT, but says nothing as to EvalT time itself: it may be identified with UttT or it may be dissociated from it, in which case – following CATU – it must left-align with the time of the most recently mentioned eventuality. Since PAST conveys an anteriority presupposition (namely, $g(i) < t^\circ$), unmooring EvalT from UttT automatically results in backshifting: in temporal inversion, the left boundary of EvalT is provided by the time of the most recently mentioned eventuality (by CATU) and RT must be before EvalT (because of the presupposition $g(i) < t^\circ$).

Thus, the ambiguity in the temporal interpretation of the two-sentence sequence (20) boils down to a double possibility for the setting of EvalT for the second sentence:

(20) (S1) Mary arrived late. (S2) She missed her train.

Mary’s late arrival may be the cause of her missing the train, in which case the event described in S1 precedes the one described in S2, or it may be the consequence of her missing the train, in which case the event described in S2 precedes the one described in S1. Recall that this latter, temporal inversion construal, is available for the Spanish or English Simple Past, but is not available for narrative tenses. The rhetorical relation of Narration or Consequence, with the ordering *event-in-S1* < *event-in-S2*, may be inferred when EvalT is set to UttT:

(20) a. Narration/Consequence
S1: $g(1) < t^\circ$. *S2*: $g(2) < t^\circ$ | $t^\circ = \text{UttT}$

In (20a), the RTs of each sentence, $g(1)$ and $g(2)$, are unordered with regard to each other, and they get sequentially ordered either by continuity/the principle of advancement of RT (see figure 1 in

section 1) or by the temporal import of the inferred rhetorical relation.¹⁴

However, the rhetorical relation of Explanation, with the ordering *event-in-S2* < *event-in-S1*, must rely on a different temporal interpretation. It cannot be simply a matter of general inference, because in this case it would also be available for narrative tenses, which it is clearly not. Anand and Toosarvandani (2017) propose that the temporal inversion required by Explanation arises when the EvalT for S2 is dissociated from UttT:

- (20) b. Explanation
 $S1: g(1) < t^{\circ} \mid t^{\circ} = \text{UttT}$. $S2: g(2) < t^{\circ} \mid t^{\circ} \neq \text{UttT}$

As a consequence of CATU, the EvalT for S2 left-aligns with the time of the event described in S1, so that $g(2)$, which precedes EvalT (by the definition of PAST), must precede the event described in S1, and so must the time of the event included (by perfectivity) in $g(2)$.

In this way, the combined effect of the definitions proposed in (16a-d) with the possibility of dissociating EvalT from UttT while restricting its location by CATU accounts for the fact that temporal inversion between successive independent sentences is not available for narrative tenses, but is available for PAST. It should be added that, in Anand and Toosarvandani's approach, temporal inversion relies on a complex and costly interpretation mechanism, that involves dissociating EvalT from UttT at a local point in discourse. This is actually a welcome feature of the analysis. As far as we can tell, naturally occurring cases of temporal inversion in lengthy narrative passages are difficult to attest.¹⁵

3.3. Taking stock

The analysis developed in this section, which relies heavily on the proposals made by Anand and Toosarvandani (2016, 2017, 2023), accounts for the unavailability of backshifting, both in embedded, Sequence of Tense contexts, and between successive independent sentences, that characterizes the HISTORICAL PRESENT and Simple Pasts of the French type. It also accounts for the availability of backshifting that characterizes Simple Pasts of the English type. It provides an analogous semantics for the HISTORICAL PRESENT and for Simple Pasts of the French type, which crucially share the presupposition that RT is included in EvalT, and, correspondingly, a different semantics for Simple Pasts of the French type (NARRATION PAST) and Simple Pasts of the English type (PAST), the latter

¹⁴ The interactions between temporal interpretation and rhetorical relations, as developed by Asher and Lascarides (2003), are complex. In the case at stake, we assume that a rhetorical relation may be inferred only if its temporal import does not contradict the semantic constraints imposed by the tenses involved.

¹⁵ In the setup developed in this section, the particular form of backshifting represented by temporal inversion between successive independent sentences is only possible for tenses expressing a PAST denotation. This holds for languages with a PAST/NON-PAST tense system. But this possibility should also be open for the NON-FUTURE in FUTURE/NON-FUTURE tense systems and for “tenseless” forms in languages that lack verbal forms specifying the relation between RT and EvalT. In fact, Toosarvandani (2020) documents temporal inversion in oral narratives in Zapotec, which is either a FUTURE/NON-FUTURE or a “tenseless” language.

conveying the presupposition that RT is before EvalT. This is achieved at the cost of adopting (i) a bicontextual semantics for temporal interpretation which makes it dependent not on one, but on two temporal parameters, and (b) a pragmatic constraint, CATU, that regulates the setting of EvalT when it is neither set to UttT nor to the time of the matrix in embedded contexts.

The denotations provided for PRESENT and PAST are the standard ones, and appear to be uncontroversial: they convey a presupposition constraining the relation between RT and EvalT, and they leave the setting of EvalT to be handled either by the semantics of the matrix context in embedded cases, or by pragmatics, with EvalT set to UttT as a default that may be overridden by a different pragmatic convention in a particular mode of discourse. However, the denotation provided for NARRATION PAST repeated here for convenience, is peculiar:

$$(21) \quad \text{NARRATION PAST}_{i}^{g,t^{\circ},w^{\circ},u} = g(i) \text{ defined iff } g(i) \subseteq t^{\circ} \ \& \ t^{\circ} < \text{Utt-T}$$

(21) crucially includes a presupposition constraining the relation between EvalT and UttT. It is the only denotation that is *semantically* bicontextual, in the sense that the relation between both temporal parameters, EvalT and UttT, is exploited in its definition.

It is important to recall at this point that the Simple Pasts analyzed here as NARRATION PASTS are forms that, for all practical purposes, are confined to the narrative mode of discourse and to the written language. The question that arises here is: why should languages such as French have a Simple Past with the semantics of NARRATION PAST? This question will be addressed in the next section.

4. NARRATION PAST and the aoristic drift of the Present Perfect

4.1. The aoristic drift of the Present Perfect

As far as we can tell from our small sample of languages, Simple Pasts whose behavior with regard to backshifting is captured by the denotation proposed for NARRATION PAST occur in languages whose Present Perfects¹⁶ have completed the aoristic drift. The aoristic drift is a diachronic process by which a form originally having the restricted distribution and interpretation characteristic of a PERFECT ends up having the distribution and interpretation of a PAST tense (Bybee; Dahl, 1989; Squartini; Bertinetto, 2000; Condoravdi; Deo, 2015, among many others). Present Perfects having completed the aoristic drift (i) may appear in narrative progression, (ii) may combine with definite temporal frame adverbials entirely disjoint from UttT, and (iii) are not constrained by any considerations of proximity or relevance to UttT. (22a-b) illustrates these properties for French, (22a) being an instance of narrative progression, and (22b) exemplifying the combination with definite past temporal adverbials and the apparent lack of any proximity or relevance constraint:

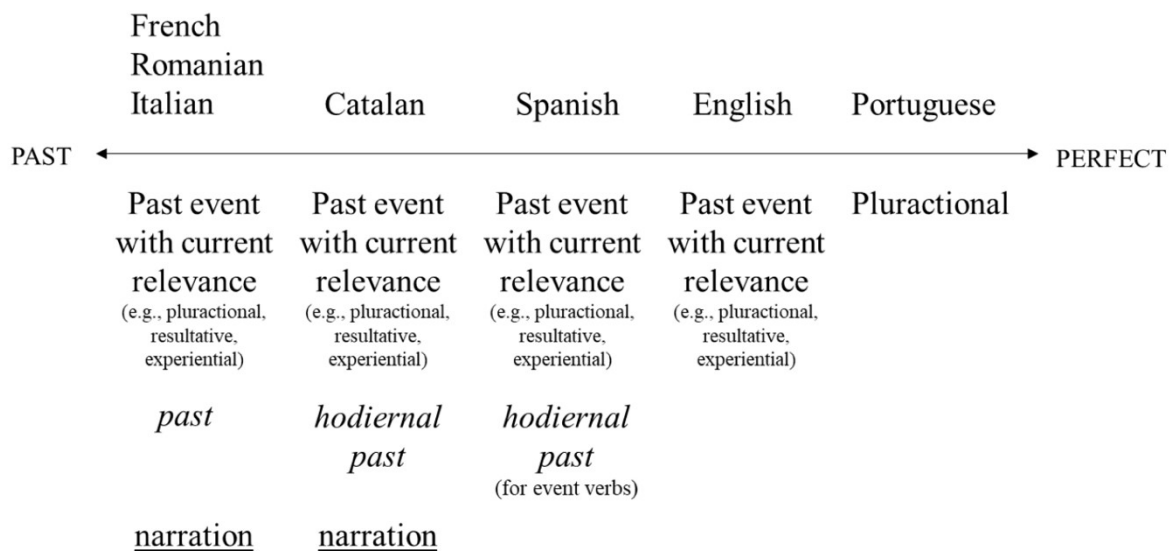
¹⁶ It should be recalled at this point that, according to the convention spelled out in footnote 2, the label Present Perfect refers to a form, with no implications as to its semantics.

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- (22) a. Elle s'est levée. J'ai aussitôt fait de même. Nous sommes sortis de la pièce principale, nous avons gagné un couloir et elle a ouvert une porte [...] La porte donnait sur un escalier, nous avons commencé à descendre les marches [*Feu*]
 'She stood up. I immediately did the same. We went out of the main room, we took a corridor and she opened a door [...] On the other side of the door there was a flight of stairs, we started to go down the steps'.
- b. Ce fut une répression de grandes dimensions. Il y a eu des actions de répression très féroces dans certaines villes de province, en novembre et décembre 1956, qui ont fait des centaines de morts. A Budapest, les combats ont fait environ 2000 morts. En Occident, à l'époque, on a donné des chiffres beaucoup plus importants.
 'Repression was massive. There were brutal repressive actions in certain provincial towns in November and December 1956, which left hundreds of people dead. In Budapest, fighting left around 2000 dead. In the West, at the time, much higher figures were given'.

Figure 3, taken from de Swart *et al.* (2022), illustrates the position allotted to the Present Perfects of different languages along the aoristic drift cline, that goes from the right (PERFECT) to the left (PAST). It is based on a thorough analysis of tense correspondences in a parallel corpus of translations, thus providing reliable empirical evidence that confirms and refines previous proposals.

Figure 3: Meaning ingredients underlying the PERFECT scale



Source: de Swart *et al.* (2022, p. 22)

For our purposes, it is important to notice that French and Italian, whose Simple Past we propose to analyze as NARRATION PASTS, have Present Perfects that have completed the aoristic drift and may be used as non restricted past tenses. By contrast, English and Spanish, whose Simple

Pasts allow backshifting and are analyzed as PASTS, have Present Perfects that cannot be used as non restricted past tenses.¹⁷

4.2. Aoristic Present Perfects and NARRATION PASTS: a markedness issue?

The availability or unavailability of backshifting is but one of several differences between the Simple Past of the languages that have not developed fully aoristic Present Perfects and the Simple Past of those that have. Schaden (2009) presents a full-fledged attempt to capture the differences both between the Present Perfects and between the Simple Pasts in languages that have or have not completed the aoristic drift. Schaden argues that Present Perfects and Simple Pasts compete for the expression of what he calls “one-step anteriority”, and this competition takes the form of a markedness contrast. In languages whose Present Perfects have not completed the aoristic drift, the Present Perfect is the marked form. In languages whose Present Perfects have completed the aoristic drift, it is the Simple Past that becomes the marked form. For him, as a matter of semantics, Present Perfects always introduce a perfect state, whereas Simple Pasts do not. But, by virtue of markedness, use of the marked form will trigger additional pragmatic inferences which are absent in the use the default form.

Thus, use of the Present Perfect where it is the marked form will focus on the existence of a perfect state, and it will therefore implicate current relevance of the reported past situation at UtT, while use of the default Simple Past will be entirely neutral as to current relevance. Conversely, use of the Simple Past where it is the marked form will focus on the lack of a perfect state and will therefore implicate lack of current relevance of the reported past situation; by contrast, use of the default Present Perfect will be neutral as to current relevance.

This approach presupposes a uniform crosslinguistic semantics for Present Perfects and Simple Pasts. It leaves the task of accounting for crosslinguistic differences in distribution and interpretation to a difference between a marked and a default form and to the pragmatic effects that ensue from markedness. A general problem with this approach is that semantic markedness contrasts are standardly conceived of as privative oppositions, in which the marked term in the opposition asymmetrically entails the unmarked term.¹⁸ But even leaving this problem aside, Schaden’s pragmatic explanation, based on the inferred lack of current relevance for marked Simple Pasts, is – as far as I can see – unable to account for the unavailability of backshifting that characterizes NARRATION PASTS.

¹⁷ A reviewer raises the issue of variation in the use of the Present Perfect in Spanish. I fully agree with their remarks, but to my knowledge, no Spanish variety has been described in which the Present Perfect has completed the aoristic drift in the sense defined above (§4.1). Even the most “advanced” varieties do not freely allow the Present Perfect in narrative progression, but are still constrained by considerations of temporal proximity or relevance to UtT. The contention in this paper is not that all varieties of Spanish have the same type of Present Perfect, but rather that none (or at least none of those described up to now) has completed the aoristic drift.

¹⁸ According to the definitions provided by Schaden (2009), and as he explicitly acknowledges, the denotation proposed for the Present Perfect asymmetrically entails that of the Simple Past, so that the Simple Past turns out be the *semantically* unmarked term.

This being said, the analysis developed in this paper shares a central feature with Schaden's proposal, namely that the Simple Past of languages whose Present Perfects have completed the aoristic drift is a marked form. But by contrast with Schaden's proposal, markedness is a feature of the denotation they have acquired, that of NARRATION PAST. As stated above, by contrast with other tenses, NARRATION PAST is the only one to carry a specific presupposition to the effect that EvalT must be disjoint from UttT and precede it. This rather obviously correlates with the fact that tenses with this semantics have become specialized for a particular mode of discourse, narration, and for a particular register, the written language.

It would be premature to suggest a hypothesis as to how this correlation might have played out diachronically. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the specific presupposition to the effect that EvalT is disjoint from UttT squares rather well with intuitions regarding especially the French Simple Past that have been expressed many times in the literature: that it is a tense dissociated from the context of utterance (Benveniste, 1966), or that it is a non-deictic tense, presenting series of situations as being detached from the time of utterance (Abeillé; Godard, (eds.) 2021, §2.3.2).

4.3. Semantic change: specialize or die out!

A crosslinguistically uniform semantics for the different Present Perfects of different languages does not seem to be a reasonable goal for any analysis. Present Perfects – in the way the term is used in this article – are forms, and form-meaning associations tend to change diachronically. A Present Perfect that has completed the aoristic drift, such as the French, Italian or Romanian Present Perfects in figure 3, does not have the same semantics as Present Perfects that have not completed it. For all practical purposes, it has acquired the meaning of a PERFECTIVE PAST.

An important question that arises in this context – and one that we will not attempt to answer – is whether it has acquired it *along* with its older PERFECT meaning, thus giving rise to an ambiguity (a form with two different denotations), or whether it has acquired a new underspecified meaning subsuming both. Condoravdi and Deo (2015), for instance, have shown that it is possible to set up denotations for PERFECT and for PERFECTIVE PAST that capture the intuition of a process of semantic generalization underlying the aoristic drift and in which PERFECTIVE PAST is asymmetrically entailed by PERFECT. Whichever the ultimate answer to this question might be, once this process is advanced enough, the new aoristic Present Perfects compete, in Schaden's (2009) apt formulation, with the older form for PERFECTIVE PAST. The final outcome of this competition is uncertain, because linguistic change, if at all deterministic, is determined by so many factors that it has at least the appearance of non-determinism.

But one thing seems certain: the Simple Pasts of languages whose Present Perfects have completed the aoristic drift have a different semantics, that of NARRATION PAST. That they have acquired such a special semantics should not come as a surprise: older forms that come under strong competition from newer forms having acquired the same denotation either specialize for a new meaning, or they disappear. The historical grammar of the Romance languages provides numerous instances of this

phenomenon. What remains to be reconstructed is how precisely this special semantics emerges. In fact, recent advances in formal approaches to grammaticalization have started to produce a precise picture of how semantic generalization proceeds (Condoravdi; Deo, 2015; Deo, 2014). But the concomitant processes of semantic specialization are for the most part still unexplored territory.

5. Concluding remarks

Starting from the observation that the Simple Past in languages such as French or Italian does not allow backshifting and is not used for the expression of anteriority in the Historical Present mode of discourse, we have proposed a semantic analysis for it as a NARRATION PAST, which does not presuppose anteriority of RT with regard to EvalT, but anteriority of EvalT with regard to UttT.

This analysis is bicontextual and follows the approach developed by Anand and Toosarvandani for the HISTORICAL PRESENT, a use of the Present that shares with this type of Simple Past the property of being confined to the narrative mode of discourse, as well as that of not allowing backshifting. The latter property is accounted for in our analysis by the assumption that these narrative tenses presuppose that RT is included in EvalT, not that it is anterior to it. At the same time, narrative tenses dissociate EvalT from UttT, setting it in the past of UttT – as a matter of pragmatic convention in the case of the HISTORICAL PRESENT, and as a matter of semantics in the case of NARRATION PAST. In the case of embedded, Sequence of Tense contexts, the impossibility of backshifting is derived straightforwardly from the presupposition that RT is included in EvalT. In the case of successive independent sentences, the impossibility of backshifting (temporal inversion) with narrative tenses is accounted for by the combined effect of the proposed semantics and a constraint regulating the setting of EvalT when it is dissociated from UttT, Anand and Toosarvandani's Constraint on Assessment Time Update. This constraint is also instrumental for capturing temporal inversion with Simple Pasts that denote PAST.

The denotation proposed for NARRATION PAST is peculiar, because it is *semantically* bicontextual, insofar as it has a presupposition involving the relation of the two contextual temporal parameters, EvalT and UttT. Building on the correlation between the existence of Simple Pasts with the semantics of NARRATION PAST and the existence of aoristic Present Perfects, we have suggested that NARRATION PAST is the semantic value of *marked* Simple Pasts, which have undergone semantic specialization as a consequence of the strong competition from aoristic Present Perfects. We would like to point out that this suggestion makes at least one prediction that is in principle empirically testable on diachronic corpora: backshifting – particularly in embedded contexts – should be available for a Simple Past at least until the moment in which the corresponding Present Perfect becomes freely available for narration and is able to combine with definite past temporal adverbials.¹⁹

A number of important conceptual issues have been sidestepped in this paper and require further theoretical elaboration. One of them is the question whether it is indeed legitimate to assimilate under

¹⁹ According to Pier-Marco Bertinetto (p.c.), this prediction seems to hold – to an extent to be yet determined – for Italian. Backshifting was possible for the *passato remoto* in Old Italian, at a time when the aoristic drift of the Present Perfect was certainly not completed.

the cover term EvalT both the *now* of the attitude holder in attitudinal Sequence of Tense contexts and the interval that is created along with a narrative. A second one concerns the need for better motivating the Constraint on Assessment Time Update. As it stands, it permits to derive the facts of temporal interpretation, but we agree with Toosarvandani (2020) that, ideally, it should have its source in some deeper principle. And finally, the question whether it is ambiguity or underspecification that better accounts for the semantics of aoristic Present Perfects, which was only cursorily mentioned, deserves much more attention.

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