

## THE SEMANTICS OF TENSE MORPHEMES IN AN ENGLISH NARRATIVE<sup>1</sup>

*Dora Kós Dienes*

### 1. Introduction

An a preliminary question. we might ask whether the title above is meaningful or not, i.e. has the genre of the examined corpus anything to do with the semantics of verb tenses?

As a preliminary answer, I would say "Yes".

Meaning always depends to some extent both on the communicative situation and on the context. I use the term "situation" to mean the physical-psychological circumstances during the communicative act, whereas "context" refers to the verbal surroundings of a segment in a text (when written) or in a discourse (when spoken).

The genre, in our case a short story, defines at least some basic features of the communicative act. In the sending situation, the author writes the text with the purpose of publishing it; in the receiving situation (in most of the cases) someone is engaged in reading printed material, knowing that it is a piece of fiction.

As for the context, the genre does not usually reveal the exact topic of the work, but it defines the type of text to some extent. In our case the text is a narrative, which has some grammatical consequences, e.g. for tense choice. I am going to discuss these questions in 2.1. and 2.2.

#### 1.1. The Aim of the Study

The first major aspect of the analysis is how and by what means the gap between sending time and receiving time is grammatically reconciled. The most expedient means for this reconciliation are the choice of tenses, the use of time adverbials ('yesterday', 'afterwards'), or some sort of direct information to the reader in form of more elaborately formulated reference to time ('two years before the French revolution').

Another aspect, closely connected with the first one, is the semantic value of tense forms in a narrative text. I am going to discuss the question of the temporal axis in narratives in general.

The final part is a case study, where I analyze verbal tenses in a corpus from a semantic point of view.

Two different discourse types, and therefore, two rather different applications of tenses are represented in the text.

##### *1.1.1. Direct Quotations*

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Jens Allwood for having read and criticised my manuscript, and Sally Boyd for proof-reading the text

One type is the use of direct quotation of the words of the characters. Here the tense choice is in many ways similar to, perhaps even identical with that of real conversations. This is only natural, as these sentences are supposed to be recordings of actual utterances. This is also true of the thoughts of the characters. I do not intend to give any definite statements about this similarity, as little is known about the tense choice of spoken language. Intuitively, however, I see a rather obvious parallel between the tenses in the dialogues of the corpus and tenses in everyday conversation.

Tense in direct quotations are not sensitive to the communicative situation, to the time relations or the tense forma of the context. Consider the present and future forms in the (222:1), an utterance six months previous to the time of quoting it:

"Oh, there is one, of course, but you'll never know it." (222:1)

(The numbers in brackets after the sentences quoted in the paper refer to the page number and the line number within the corpus, cf Appendix 1. E.9. (222:16) means page 222, line 16.)

Not only dialogues, but even directly quoted monologues and inner monologues are insensitive to the tense of the matrix verb:

"Can it be the house! she mused. (226:1)

### *1.1.2. The Narrative Parts*

Much more versatile are the possibilities of tense choice in the rest of the text. In what follows, I am going to focus on the narrative parts of the corpus, neglecting tense choice in the instances mentioned in 1.1.1.

## **1.2. The Method**

The paper is based on the analysis of the first chapter of a short story. First I shall give some general remarks on the characteristics of tense and time reference in the story as a whole, trying to grasp the basic motives of the writer's tense choice.

In the second part of the paper, the tense forma occurring in the corpus are considered, and their semantic value is established with the help of the context. This "semantic value is likely to be valid only within the examined corpus, i.e. within the "world of the story, of all possible worlds", and even there only in a Local context; but we may expect that some general rules of tense choice in narratives will come to light.

## **1.3. The Corpus**

The analyzed text is the first chapter of a short story: "Afterward" by Edith Wharton. In: *The Second Fontana Books of Great Ghost Stories*. Collected by R. Aickman. London pp 222-229. (See Appendix)

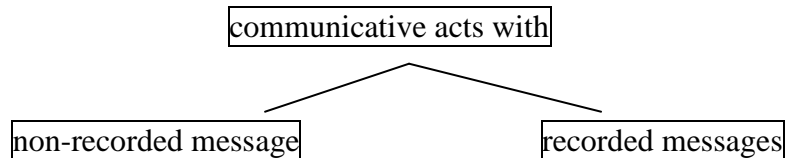
The plot: The Boynes have bought a house that is allegedly haunted. When her husband mysteriously disappears, Mrs. Boyne reconstructs the happenings o an afternoon some weeks before, when an unknown visitor came to the house. She realizes, that this "person" must have been a ghost, although she old 'not suspect anything at the time.

## 2. The Genre And The Tense Choice

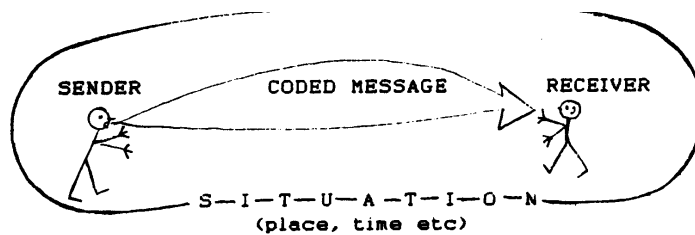
In this part of the study I am going to discuss some general points of the presumed connections between the genre of the text. end the choice of tenses.

### 2.1. The Communicative Situation

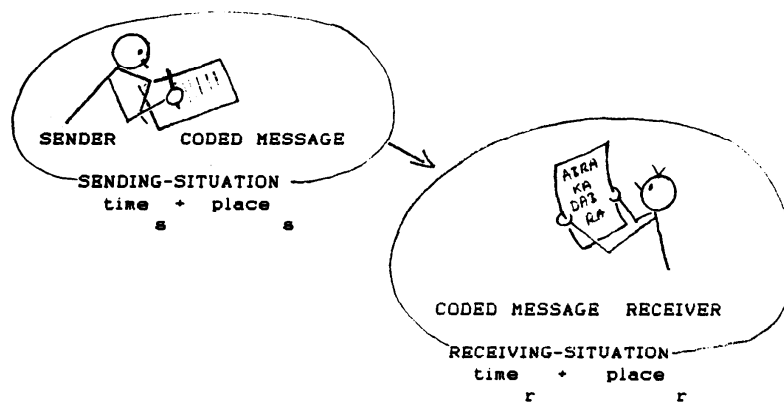
In our culture, the communicative situations, versatile as they are, can tentatively be divided into two great categories:



The main characteristic of communication with recorded messages is that the communicative act is split into two: namely to a sending and to a receiving process. In everyday communication with non-recorded messages, we normal have all the factors together:



If the message for some reason or another is somehow recorded, i.e., written, taped, filmed or video-taped, the communicative act is broken into two parts: on the one hand the act of sending and on the other hand the act (or several acts) of receiving. the receiving act can be repeated even with different receivers each time, but we can consider the sender the code and the message (at least the sender's intended message) as constant. the situation, however, is changed.



One might ask whether the message, more exactly the coded form of the message is somehow adapted to this split, situation? If yea, in what sense?

The maxims of what Grice calls the "cooperative principle" in our talk exchanges, i.e. that "they are characteristically, to some degree et least, cooperative efforts: and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set. of purposes" (1975:45), can certainly be applied to instances of written communication as well. The sender can - and should - formulate the message in a way that suits even the receiving situation, and likewise, the receiver's interpretation must take into account the sender's circumstances at sending time. Readers, just like listeners, make their interpretations in the belief that the writer has written things that are relevant and the sentences are unambiguous in their context. These principles certainly help to overcome the gap between the two halves of the communicative act. (See also Clark & Clark, 1977:73.)

Another question is: how much do the communicative partners know about each other's situation at the time of the sending and of the receiving respectively? Personal letters and literary works function rather differently from this point of view.

We know that deictic and indexical categories are especially situation-sensitive (see, among others, Allwood - Andersson 1976:105). In semantic studies, more often than not, the communicative situation is delineated as one undivided unit, whereas in a great number of cases communication takes place in two different situations, it happens in two phases, divided by time and often by place. It is to be expected that this shift is taken into consideration when the message is verbally composed. Obviously, the adaptation to this situation-shift concerns first of all the deictic categories such as pronouns, spatial and temporal expressions and verbal tenses.

How does this influence the choice of tenses in English fiction? In what way and to what extent should we apply our concepts about the past, present and future tense, traditionally defined on the base of observations on direct communication? How do Reichenbach's ideas on ST, ET and RT (speech time, event time and reference time) apply here? This is one of the main questions in this study.

## **2.2. The Narrative Context**

Narratives do not necessarily have a written form. The classical genres like myths, tales and heroic epic poems have a long oral tradition. The short story as a genre, however, was born in a written form and therefore displays the characteristics both of written and of narrative texts.

In a short story, the temporal axis is not attached either to the sending or to the receiving situation. It is rooted in the fictive world of the story, it is the temporal 0-point of the characters and of the events happening to them.

In some texts, the time of the events is explicitly given (e.g. "In the time of Queen Elisabeth". "In April, 1875"). Our corpus has no such references, but still, there are some hints that help to place the story temporally. We know that the plot starts in December. We also know that it takes place in modern times, the time of trains and electricity. But then we have to give up, there are no more clues. And we do not need them either, for the story is the same whether it takes place in the 20's or in the 80's of this century, or even in some indefinite future time.

Past tense for future time reference sounds rather unusual, but let's not forget that even sci-fi stories are as a rule written in the past tense, i.e.

grammatically they do not differ from e.g. historical novels. George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty- Four", published in 1949, uses the past tense too.

Although I have no statistics about the tense use of English fiction, my experience of many years rather extensive reading has convinced me that the grammatical tense used for referring to the fictive 0-point in English narratives is, as a rule, the simple past tense. One may easily control this intuitive statement by looking at some literary anthologies. Our corpus is but one example:

"The assertion...came back to Mary Bayne with a new perception of its  
significance as she stood in the December dusk " (222:3-4)

### 2.3. The Temporal 0-Point In Narratives

Moat, or perhaps all, discussions of time and tenses follow our intuition that a natural temporal 0-point for a speech act is the time of speaking. Some references are Lyons 1977 and Riddle 1978 for English; Collinder 1971 and Thorell 1973 for Swedish; Lotz 1962 for Hungarian.

This 0-point, also referred to as temporal axia (Huddleston, 1969) is a point of reference to which the described process is related by tenae. Tense, as Huddleston also points out, is not absolute, it shows that the process is previous to, simultaneous with, or takes place after a certain time point. This point of relation, the axis, is the speech time (ST). The time of the event (ET) is past if it precedes ST, ET is future if it follows ST. Present time is somewhat blurry, it ranges over a longer or a shorter period than ST actually is, but it must, by definition, overlap with ST.

Reference time CRT)is a time point to which the event is related temporally: When I entered the room (=RT) he had already gone (ET).

Let us consider the notion of ST. What, actually, corresponds with ST in the case of recorded messages? In a conversation, both the speaker and the listener move with a remarkable self-assurance on the imaginary time-line, they both know which event precedes or follows another one, even if the grammatical means of their language does not supply them with more than perhaps two or four verbal tenses. Besides the help of different time adverbials and similar amenities, they always have the axis of the ST as a fixed point to rely on, to relate all the other times to. Indeed, all the spatio-temporal circumstances of the speech act can be used, and, as a rule, are used in communication to reach a mutual understanding.

If the communicative situation is split and the time of the sending is not identical with the time of the receiving, we shall have to establish a new temporal axis as a constant and common reference point.

The reader, and, for that matter the writer, of a story have no natural common temporal 0-point. The time of writing (publishing?) a literary work may be considered as a sort of sending time, and thus has some resemblance to Reichenbach's ST. But ST, ca I understand it, is usually also considered to be listening time, and should rather be called "communication time" CT.

For the reader, CT might be the time of reading. But then again, the reader is well aware of the difference between reading e.g. the morning newspaper written some hours before, and reading a book written in a much more distant past. Depending on the genre, the writer, the topic and many other factors, the reader is

inclined to adapt his interpretation to the nature of the text, and even if he knows the more or less exact time of the sending. i.e. when the message was actually written, he accepts another 0-point as a basic temporal reference. To find this temporal axis, one has to disregard the communicative situation and turn to the text itself.

#### **2.4. The Semantic Value of the Past Tense in Narratives**

Semantically, instances of past. tense In narratives are not identical with the past tense in non-narrative verbal communication. The past tense in a non-narrative speech act refers to the time preceding ST. We have argued that in narratives, like e.g. fiction, there is no particular ST that could be used as a definite reference point. The past tense in fiction has a neutral temporal reference, or more exactly, it refers to a fictive temporal point, to a time which is "non- actual", "non-present". (I have to thank J. ALLWOOD for calling my attention to the possibility of this latter interpretation.) It refers to a time defined by the context (read: the verbally expressed context), no matter if ET is centuries before or after the time of writing or reading. The main point is that this time is non-actual; there is no correspondence between the actual communication time (i.e. the time of reading or writing) and the temporal reference of the text.

The narrative past tense, semantically, shows some remarkable resemblances to the present tense used in instances of direct verbal interactions. Notice that the temporal axis during a conversation is not associated with one single point of time but rather with a series of successive time points. The present tense related to ST moves along with the course of conversation.

Similarly, the temporal axis. grammatically referred to by the past tense, is related to a series of fictive time points. The proceeding along this fictive temporal path is associated with the order of events in the story. As a rule, each dynamic statement. (i.e. a predicative unit containing a dynamic verb) promotes the narrative in time. (See also Dahl 1977.)

The short story "Afterward" is rather special from this point of view, due to the dominance of static verbs and the prolific use of the past perfect tense.

The temporal reference of this narrative simple past tense is the narrated characters' actuality; it is related to the (usually fictive) events of the main line of the plot. What exactly this 'main line' means, is difficult to define in linguistic terms. One might claim that it is the concern of the theory of literature to define. Still, it is not impossible to grasp the notion by linguistic analysis: the grammatical means of text-coherence like pronominalization, cross-reference, ellipse, sequence of tenses etc. definitely guide the reader through the series of events. Even if the sequence of the fictive actions does not correspond with the order of relating them, the reader (in most cases) is well aware of where the plot starts, how it proceeds, when the story is interrupted by some flash-back. and when the main line is picked up again.

According to Levinson (1983) "Some languages also have morphemes that mark such clearly discourse notions as main story line. For example, in the Amerindian language Cuebo, the main protagonists and their actions in a story are tagged by a particle in such a systematic way that a concise and accurate precise is obtained if just those sentences containing the particle are extracted." Cp 88. see also Longacre. 1976.)

The past tense is maintained for relating a series of non- simultaneous events, events that precede and follow each other, events that are arranged in a sort of sequential temporal relationship. Still, the same tense is used for referring to the distinct time points of the different events. DAHL (1985) - in an other connection - suggests that the application of past tense forms in narratives can be interpreted as "due to the self- sufficiency of narrative contexts with regard to time reference: since time is (by definition) established by the immediately preceding linguistic context, the need for any external reference-point is nil." (p 138)

Because of the importance of the "immediately preceding linguistic context", the initial sentence of a narrative is a special case, inasmuch as it is not preceded by any other sentence that would provide the necessary temporal reference. According to DAHL, (1985) "a sentence occurs in a narrative context if the temporal point of reference (in Reichenbach's sense) is determined by the point in time at which the last event related in the preceding context took place... Basically, that means that in a pure narrative discourse, every sentence except the first one is in a narrative context." (p 113)

These statements are well supported by the fact that several languages (e.g. Basa, Bulu, Ganda, Swahili etc. from the Bantu group) have a special verbal tense form reserved for narrative discourses exclusively. The verb of the initial clause in a narrative, however, tends to have another tense form, which may be taken as an indication that the initial verb is not "entitled" to the narrative tense usage. It is not part of the narrative proper (Kopijevskaja, 1984).

These observations, however, do not necessarily hold in modern literary fiction. Even if the initial clause is not in a narrative context in the sense that it is not preceded by any other sentence. It certainly is in a narrative "situation", by which I mean that there are several factors that make up for the "lacking" preceding context.

First of all, the structure of the story does not necessarily follow the series of events in their temporal order: the author has the freedom to re-arrange the happenings according to his or her special aims. Our corpus is an example where the initial sentence is a fragment from a conversation that took place six months before the fictive ET (see 223:18). The next sentence already defines the temporal relationship between the first sentence and the main line of the story, so I would claim that the initial sentence gets "retroactively" embedded into a narrative context.

One might argue that even if the order of relating the events differs from the actual order of the events, there is a point where the actuality of the narrative begins, and this sentence would then be the "real initial" one where the temporal axis is established. In our corpus, this sentence is the second one:

"The assertion...came back to Mary Boyne.. as she stood in the December dusk..."  
(222:1-5)

Do we indeed have any reason to claim that this sentence is not in a narrative context? That there are special rules that apply for the semantic interpretation of the past tense of came and stood

True enough, the temporal reference of these verbs is not given by some preceding sentence. But the reader's approach and interpretation is perhaps not so

different from the way he or she approaches the next sentences of the text. That is, the modern reader's approach to a modern (usually written) text. But this is very probably the outcome of a long development both in text construction and in text interpretation.

The original classical (or primitive) European narrative genres like folk-tales and heroic epic poems, both of oral tradition, have some particular initial formulae. In epic, it is the invocation to God or to Muse, where the topic of the poem is also given:

"Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, hurried (or years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy."

Homer: *Odyssey*  
(Transl: R,Fitzgerald)

Folk-tales, in many cultures, start with more or less ritualized formulae: English Once upon a time... Swedish Det var en gång en.. 'there was once a...'; German Es war einmal ein.. 'there was once a...'; Hungarian Egyazer/hol volt hol nem volt volt egyszer egy.. 'once/sometime there was, sometime there was not, there once was a...'; Finnish Olipe kerran.. 'there was once...'; French Il y avait un fois.... 'there was once...'; Limouzi Un cop fach.. 'a strike/a time gone by...'; Russian Z'yl-byt.. 'there lived, there was'.

These almost obligatory initial phrases, rooted in the oral tradition, mark the beginning of a narrative for the Listeners. They also give some vague temporal orientation, often using an indefinite temporal adverb meaning 'once', 'at some indefinite (past?) time point'. Hungarian 'sometimes there was, sometimes there wasn't' can also be interpreted as a reference to the fictive nature of the story.

Similarly, in direct conversations we use some initial phrases to inform the listener that we are now going to relate a series of events, e.g. "Imagine, what happened to me yesterday". or "I've heard a good story" etc. By this the speaker creates a sort of narrative context.

In modern fiction no such means are necessary. The facts of the receiving situation (taking a book, knowing it is a narrative, and not let's say a book on ]ontague grammar or applied chemistry) leave no doubt about the nature of the message. This reliance upon the reader's expected cooperation is the result of a long development. Early European novelists not only, as a rule, began by placing the plot both temporally and geographically, but they also wrote a preface directly addressed to the reader, explaining the background and reasons for telling the story. Some examples are Thomas Nashe (1567-1601): "The Unfortunate Traveller Or The Life of Jack Wilton" (1594); William Congreve (1670-1729): "Incognita, Or Love and Duty Reconciled" (1692); Mme de Lafayette (1634-1692): "La Princesse de Cleves" (1678). Even the titles were more informative, cf. Defoe (?1660- 1731): "A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs Veal, the next day after her death, to one Mrs Bergrave at Canterbury, the 8th of September, 1705".

In modern fiction, little is left of these preliminary explanations, the reader is no longer prepared for the beginning of the narrative proper, i.e. the actual story. If the practice of leaving more to the receiver's active interpretation a general tendency that even prevails in other communicative situations is hard to say; a historical study of language games would perhaps provide some interesting



clues. But we might contemplate the possibility that there is a difference between the initial sentences of spoken and written narratives, which may result in the first sentence of (written) fiction not necessarily showing any peculiarities from the point of view of tense semantics. Instead, it has all the characteristics of other sentences in the narrative. The narrative context here has a "retroactive effect", enclosing the first sentence. Thus, there seems to be good reason to claim that the tense in the first sentence has the same semantic value as any other occurrences of the same tense form throughout the text.

### 2.5. Some Words On The Historical Present Tense

As the so-called historical present tense also occurs in narratives, and has a similar temporal reference as the narrative past tense, it might be appropriate to say some words about it here.

The historical present tense has a special stylistic value, "it conveys some particular vividness" (Levin 1969). According to Kiparsky (1968), "historical present is never sustained over long passages but normally alternates with preterite forms in rapid succession". (See also discussions by Levin 1969; McKay 1974.)

There are some literary examples though where the present tense is used as a narrative tense throughout the whole work. An example is "Isten ostora" (The Scourge of God) by J. Lengyel, in Hungarian; another is "Iuster Johnson" by J. Cary in English. In both cases, there are reasons for the unusual tense choice: Lengyel's book is a so-called film-novel, the literary version of a screen-play; Cary explains his tense choice as follows:

"As for the style of the book, critics complained of the present tense. And when I answered that it was chosen because Johnson lives in the present, from hour to hour, they found this reason superficial. It is true that any analogy between the style and the cast of a hero's mind appears false. Style, it is said, gives the atmosphere in which the hero acts...

But this, I think, is a view answering to a critical attitude which necessarily overlooks the actual situation of the reader. ... the reader's conscious self is at liberty to feel with the people of the book; he is at one with them. So if they are in the past tense he is in the past, he **tees** part in events that have happened, in history, over there. This is a true taking-part, whether the history is actual history or a novel.

But with a story in the present tense, when he too is in the present, he is carried unreflecting on the stream of events; his mood is not contemplative but agitated.

This makes the present tense unsuitable for large pictures 'over there'; It illuminates only a very narrow scene with a moving ray not much more comprehensive than a hand-torch. It can give the reader that sudden feeling of insecurity...

This restless movement irritates many readers with the same feeling, that events are rushing them along before they have time to examine them. But ... as Johnson swims gaily on the surface of life, so I wanted the reader to swim, as all of us swim, with more or less courage and skill, for our lives." (Preface, pp 9-11)

I have quoted Cary at length because I feel that his explanation, if not in strict linguistic terms, gives very deep insight into the author's consciousness of linguistic means when he creates a literary work, and explains a great deal of the semantic value of the narrative past vs. present tense. His reasoning convinces the reader that the present tense in narratives has a special stylistic value, and thus the Past Tense is the semantically more neutral, "unmarked" form, suited for referring to the non-actual, to processes happening "over there".

## 2.6. Summary

In part 2. I have drawn a general distinction between the tense usage of narrative discourses versus non-narrative verbal interactions.

Traditionally it is postulated that tenses express the temporal relation between ST and ET. In certain forms of communication via recorded messages, however, there is no equivalence of the ST of direct communication. The semantic value of tenses in these cases has to be defined by other conditions. The most plausible candidate for a temporal 5X15 in fiction equivalent to ST in direct communicative interaction is the ET of the main line of the story, i.e. the actuality of the characters.

One might ask why the notion of temporal axis is necessary in the first place. The answer is that a temporal axis is needed as a leading line to which different tenses and time references are related. The temporal references of a dialogue follow the course of the conversation on a continuous time line, i.e. the meaning of the verbal tenses is always related to the moment they are uttered. Similarly, we have to postulate a more or less continuous temporal axis, an imaginary course of time that gives a more or less firm background for the actual temporal reference of each verb. The same tense form at various parts of the story has different temporal references, which are following the main event line.

The most usual tense form in English narratives, referring to this axis, is the simple past tense. This is used as a general narrative tense and is not necessarily in any special temporal relation with either Sending Time (=time of writing the story) or Receiving Time (=time of reading). It marks primarily the nonactuality' of the events, both for the sender and for the receiver. This means that the semantic content of these past tense forms is not really temporal, but rather modal. Its most important function is not to inform the receiver about the temporal whereabouts of the events, but, rather about how these events are related to reality.

## 3. Semantic Analysis Of The Tenses Used In The Corpus

In this part of the paper I am going to survey the tense forms occurring in the text, and give an analysis of their temporal references. As I have already argued that the temporal 0-point of narratives is the *FET* ((Active event time) of the main plot, I am not going to relate the tenses to the world of the reader, i.e. to receiving time.

As I have already mentioned (1.1.2.). I do not intend to deal in detail with direct quotations; I restrict my analysis mainly to the narrative parts. However, there will be some remarks on the meaning of the present tense in the dialogues,, in order to provide a basis for comparing them to the occurrences of present tense in the narrative parts.

The tense forms analyzed are 1) present tense, 2) past tense. 3) past perfect tense. Present perfect and future tenses do not occur in the narrative part of the text. Different modal forms - though they certainly have temporal meaning - represent a different group with special problems which would go beyond the scope of this study. As a rule, I do not take up the modal meaning of tenses I discuss, but there are cases where the semantic analysis of these forms demands some remarks on modal as well as on temporal notions.

### 3.1. The Simple Present Tense

#### 3.1.1. *The Simple Present Tense In Dialogues*

This tense form occurs mainly in the dialogue recalled word-by-word by the heroine. As a rule, their temporal relevance is restricted to the limits of the FET, to the fictive world of the story. The context usually gives further information about the time reference of these utterances

"It belongs to Hugo's cousins, and you can get it for a song." (222:16-17)

The context makes clear that the conversation took place six months before the main plot starts (222:2), and that the house no longer belongs to Hugo's cousins at the time when Nary recollects the conversation. The present tense here refers to some state of affairs at a time previous to FET, and has no relevance to the time when the statement is recollected.

Other quoted utterances with verbs in the present tense retain their relevance throughout the story, i.e. even in the FET when they are quoted:

"Oh, Dorsetshire is full of ghosts...,fee  
(223:13)

These statements are more general, they might be considered as generic within the fictive world".

Somewhat more complicated is the temporal reference of the fictive utterance when its topic is more general and is not limited to the world of the fiction:

"But what in the world constitutes a ghost except the fact of its being known for one?"  
(223:20-22)

This statement (in interrogative form), raises a question about a concept. It has the same general temporal relevance for sending and receiving time as for FET. The present tense here has a proper generic temporal value. At the same time, it is also generic within the fictive world.

#### 3.1.2. *The Simple Present Tense In Comparisons*

Besides the reported statements, there is one instance of present tense usage that deserves some attention:

...e man ...who was sauntering down the lime-avenue to the court with the doubtful gait of a stranger who seeks his way." (228:4-7)

Here the temporal relevance of the verb reaches beyond the limits of FET; we are dealing with a general statement that relies on the reader's general knowledge of the world. It is in the nature of comparisons to illuminate something by referring to a similar phenomenon already known by the addressee. Here the writer appeals to the reader's general knowledge about the (usual) behaviour of people who seek their way. This comparison is not restricted to the universe of the story, that is, the action expressed by the clause is not a part of the plot. The subject who refers to any possible stranger in general, not to some particular figure. Accordingly, the whole action described by the predicate and its complement

seeks his way is not an action that happens in the story; it is only similar to it. In this sense we can say that with this clause the writer, for a short moment, leaves the course of the plot and presents, briefly, a typical situation. The "stranger who seeks his way" has no specific reference in the fictive world.

The grammatical means for this "reaching out" to the real world is the shift from the narrative past tense to the present tense, which here is used in a generic sense.

However, when the comparison refers to a particular object from the fictive world of the novel, the past tense is maintained:

"...it had fallen as noiselessly into the past as the quiet drizzle of autumn fell hour after hour, into the fish-pond between the yews;" (225:5-7)

This difference in the tense choice of comparisons, I think, supports the theory that the narrative past tense is not simply a means for temporal reference but rather the grammatical means for creating a fictive world, with its own, fictive spatial and temporal dimensions.

### **3.2. The Past Tense And The Past Perfect Tense**

I have already dwelled on the semantics of the narrative past tense long enough. I claimed that it refers to the temporal axis of the plot; that it is not necessarily in any particular relation to the sending and receiving time; and that its temporal reference is moving along with the narrative. This movement, however, is apparently restricted to dynamic verbs. Static verbs do not necessarily move the plot forward in time, and a series of static verbs often refer to simultaneous events:

"It was the house itself, of course, that possessed the ghost-seeing faculty, that. communed visually but secretly with its own past;" (226:31-33)

The temporal point (or span) of reference of was, possessed and communed are definitely overlapping each other.

Still, some occurrences of the Past Tense seem to be "out of alignment". To understand these we have to relate them to certain occurrences of the past perfect tense.

#### *3.2.1. The Reorientation or the Temporal Axis*

Whenever the author steers the thoughts of a character to a time previous to the main plot, the past perfect tense is used:

"The words had been spoken by their friend..."  
(222:6)

When the reader is already mentally established in this new temporal situation, that is, the temporal axis has been moved, the past tense is resumed:

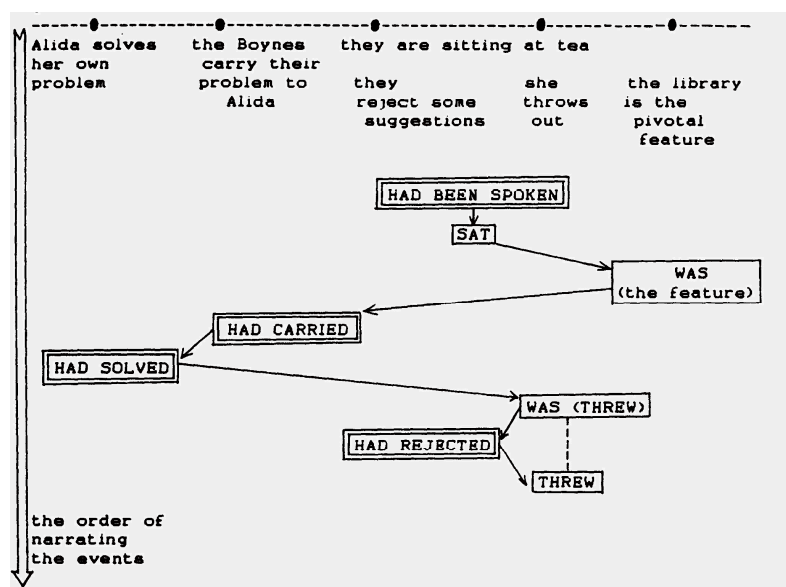
"The words had been spoken by their friend Alida Stair, as they sat at tea on her lawn at Pangbourne, in reference to the very house of which the library in question was the central, the pivotal feature." (222:6-9)

The past perfect tense is applied again whenever the character's recollection or the writer's explanation goes further back in time:

"Mary Boyne and her husband .... had, on their arrival to England, carried their problem straight to Alida Stair, who had successfully solved it in her own case: but it was not until they had rejected several practical and judicious suggestions that she threw out ..."  
 (222:9-15)

Let us compare the temporal relations of the events in this paragraph with the order of relating them, and see the grammatical means to link them together:

### Temporal Axis



In this paragraph we find that the past perfect tense is used to push the temporal reference backward, whereas the past tense applies when the temporal reference of the immediate context, 1.9. of the previous clause is maintained.

The past perfect tense in the first clause, had been spoken relates the event to a time point earlier than the main plot. (i.e. when Mary recollects the conversation). The recollection continues in the past tense, until two events, in a more distant past, are mentioned: had carried, had solved. Both events take us one more step backward in time. Then the recollection continues in the past tense in a cleft sentence: was..threw, but here again, we have to make one step backward in time, when the Boynes had rejected some suggestions, before Alida threw out a new one.

This analysis does not prove that the only use of the past perfect tense is to push the temporal axis backward. There are examples where the past perfect tense is maintained for a series of simultaneous actions, i.e. where the past perfect is used with a narrative-within-the-narrative value:

"...It was for the ultimate indulgence of such sensations that Mary Boyne ... had endured for nearly fourteen years the soul-deadening ugliness of a Middle Western town, and that Boyne had ground on doggedly at his engineering..."  
 (224:11-16)

In these cases, each unique event or process expressed by a verb in the past perfect tense, gets related to the temporal axis "in Its own right", i.e. one has to understand the time of each event by the way it is temporally related to the main plot.

### 3.2.2. *Tense Meaning and the Immediate Context*

I have already mentioned the theory that in narratives, the temporal point of reference is defined by the preceding context. Considering the alternating usage of the narrative past tense and the past perfect, I would rather suggest the following possibilities:

(i) successive past tense verbs refer to a series of simultaneous (if static) or successive (if dynamic) events: the temporal reference of each verb is determined by the previous verb, if no other explicit reference to time is given.

(ii) past tense followed by past perfect: In most cases the temporal reference of the past perfect is determined by the preceding past tense verb in the sense that the past perfect verb refers to an earlier action. This does not apply to cleft sentences, where the initial *it + to be* part tends to be in the past tense, even if the following verb is in the past perfect:

"...it was then that she had flung back tantalizingly:"

(223:17-18)

(iii) past tense following a past perfect either refers to the new, reorientated axis, where the Past Perfect verb serves as a temporally determining context:

"Mary had, indeed,... made the customary inquiries among her rural neighbours, but ... the villagers had nothing to impart."

(226:11-14)

The verbal phrase had made inquiries establishes a temporal reference for had nothing to impart

As a second possibility, a past tense verb following a past perfect one leaves the reorientated, secondary temporal reference area (established by the Past Perfect verb) and returns to the main PET, resuming the story where it has been interrupted for a flash-back:

"...supposing, Ned had seen one when they first came and had known only within the last week what had happened to him"? More and more under the spell of the hour, she threw back her thoughts to the..."

(227:10-13)

In these cases there is little reason for claiming that the temporal reference of the past tense verb threw back would be established by the previous past perfect verb, had happened i.e. by the immediately preceding context. It seems to be more plausible that in order to kind the temporal reference, we shall have to return to the main event time, to find an appropriate temporal continuity. The fragment.

starting with supposing relates Mary's speculations, her attempts to find an explanation to certain events. With the next sentence ( More end more etc...) the writer takes us back to the main event time, to the actuality of the characters. This re-connection to the main line of the story is also accentuated by the phrase under the spell of the hour , i.e. when Mary is in the library and contemplated the happenings of the last weeks. This is a rather radical step forward in time.

If we compare (226:11-14) and (227:10-13). we find that in the first case the temporal reference of the past tense verb is established by the previous past perfect ones: whereas in the latter the past tense form indicates a turn-back to the fictive event time (FET), and here the preceding past perfect tenses cannot have the same defining role.

In English, no verbal tense is reserved for this "lump forward" in time. The past tense is used both for referring to a time previous to the main ET (established by a past perfect verb), and for referring to the time of the main plot of the story. To decide which of the two possibilities one is dealing with, one has to turn to clues other than verbal tenses. The most obvious help is the semantic analysis of the temporally ambiguous clause. The reader will have to find its thematic antecedent somewhere in the previous context. In our case (227:10-13. threw back I would choose the following clause era a plausible antecedent:

"And thence she was thrown back once more on to the fundamental dilemma:" (227:4-6)

This sentence actually is a frame for Mary's speculations, and the same can be said about (227:10-13). According to my analysis, the past tense predicate threw back (227:12-13) picks up the main line of the story where it was abandoned for the sake of describing Mary's thoughts about some past events. Therefore, threw back is not within the temporal reference-area of the preceding past perfect verbs (had known had happened) it is instead referring to the same temporal continuum as the verb was thrown back (227:5).

(iv) successive past perfect tenses: Let us consider the cases where a verb in the past perfect tense (PP 1) is followed by another verb in the past perfect tense (PP2). In some examples PP2 refers to an action previous to PP1:

"Mary Boyne and her husband ... had, on their arrival to England, carried their problem straight to Alida Stair, who had successfully solved it. in her case:"  
(222:9-13)

The temporal reference of the second verb seems to be determined by the preceding verb. Since the past perfect expresses anteriority, this means that the time point of had solved is previous to the time point of had carried

In these cases the determining role of the immediate context shows a similar pattern to the sequential past tense occurrences, only the direction of the temporal shift is the opposite.

Instances of dynamic past tense verbs move the plot forward, whereas dynamic past perfect verbs move the plot - temporally backward. The preceding verb, in both cases, defines the point of temporal reference.

This analysis, attractive as it is, has its weak points. Namely, not all past perfect verbs refer to a time point previous to the preceding past perfect. Consider this fragment:

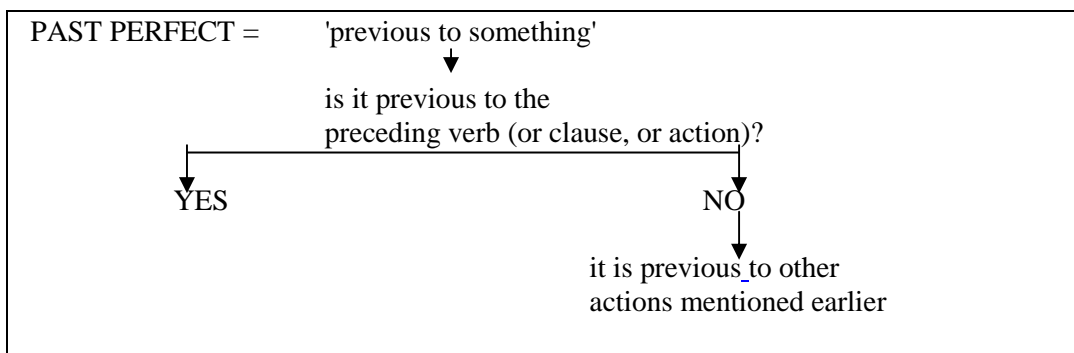
"And now *the other way*, ' he had said turning her about within his arm; end closely pressed to him, she had absorbed the picture of the gray-welled court...- (227:33-36)

The temporal order of the actions are undoubtedly had said - had absorbed

What, then, is had absorbed previous to? How do we explain the use of the past perfect that. means anteriority?

My answer is that this anteriority is related to the main temporal line of the story, i.e. this tense form does not get its semantic value from the temporal reference of the preceding verb. To make the right. interpretation, the reader has to think of the main plot.

What is the function of these past perfect occurrences? One explanation might be that they link the flesh-back episodes to the temporal axis. They help to maintain the coherence of the text by reminding the reader of the "primary fictive event time. The following interpretation-process can be postulated:



If we want to answer the question of what a past perfect verb is previous to, we have to consider partly the event expressed by the preceding verb, and partly the actuality of the characters, the actuality of the story. Thus, these past perfect instances make the Main plot lurk in the background even during a flash back episode. The past perfect tense establishes a connection between its own temporal reference point and the time of the main line of the story.

In these cases the temporal reference is not determined by the preceding verb but by a much more distant context. This far-reaching cohesive effect of the tense choice is an exciting phenomenon in texts that deserves much more attention than we usually devote to it..

### 3.3. Summary

In part 3. I attempted to give an analysis of the temporal meaning of the present, past and past perfect tenses occurring in the corpus. Roughly, the past tense is used for referring to the main ET, the past perfect expresses anteriority to this ET, whereas the present tense (not considering direct quotations) applies in some generic statements or when the writer leaves the course of the fictive events to appeal to the reader's background knowledge.

A more detailed approach shows the role of the immediate context in the proper interpretation of the occurring tenses. The temporal reference of a verb is often defined by that of the preceding verb. Sequential past tenses move the plot



one step forward, whereas past perfects move backward in time compared to the temporal reference of the preceding verb.

However, there are cases when the preceding context does not serve as a reference point for the interpretation of a verbal tense. In these cases one usually has to turn to the main line of the plot, i.e. to FET, to find the actual semantic value of that particular tense occurrence. The tense of the verb interacts with the actuality of the main plot, it expresses sequentiality or anteriority to its happenings.

In instances where temporal references connect distant parts of the corpus, where tenses function as a kind of cross-reference throughout the text, tense choice can be considered as a means of establishing and maintaining text-coherence.

These conclusions are based on the evidence of one rather short, written narrative corpus, and their validity is very probably restricted to this genre. Further studies should be done on spoken narratives and on corpuses of other genres, such as scientific prose and informative texts.

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