

# Time and Tense in English and Swedish Social Interaction

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## 1. Introduction

Time may be conceptualised in a number of different ways. In Swedish and English, and many other languages, it is, for instance, conceptualised as a commodity which we can borrow, buy (*we're living on borrowed time, köpa tid*), consume (*tidskrävande, time consuming*), or squander (*Slösa inte tid! Don't waste my time*). Time is also conceptualised as a space (Evans 2003). Either time itself moves through space (*Tiden går fort! Time flies!*) or time is a space through which we ourselves move (*Vi går mot battré tider. We are running out of time*). This time-space extends from somewhere in the past, to somewhere in the future. It can be long or short and have a beginning and an end, and we, ourselves, are in the centre of the time-space, in the present, looking back to the past and forward to the future.

This conceptualization of time as a space is signaled in language by the grammatical category of tense. Situations and events at the same time as, or which overlap with, the time of speaking are perceived as close to the speaker at the centre of the time-space, and are therefore normally in the present tense. Situations and events which took place in the past, before the time of speaking, are perceived as remote from the speaker and are therefore normally in the past tense. Situations and events which are ahead in time are also remote from the speaker. No one can ever be absolutely certain about what will happen in the future. The future is always coloured by how we foresee it. Future time in Swedish and English is therefore usually expressed by modal auxiliary verbs, such as *ska/shall, komma att / be going to*, etc., which express our anticipation of how events will happen in the future. In example (1), for instance, which is taken from a translation of Astrid Lindgren's *Ronja Rövardotter*, there is a strong sense of intention that the action will take place, and this is expressed by the modal verbs *ska* and *will* in Swedish and English, respectively.

- (1) “Ja”, sa Lovis, “det stämmer på lite av varje. Därför är det säkrast att inte vara rädd i Mattisskogen.” “Det *ska* jag komma ihåg”, sa Ronja.      “Yes,” said Lovis, “that's true of all sorts of things. So the safest thing is not to be frightened in Matt's Forest.” “*I'll* remember that,” Ronia said.

Tense, then, is one of the linguistic means which shows how situations and events in the world around the speaker relate to the speaker's 'now' at the centre of the time-space. However, although tenses relate events to the speaker at the time of speaking, there is not always a direct correspondence between the actual time of the event and the tense which is used. This is illustrated by example (2), where the past tense is used by the speaker to talk about an event that will take place after the time of speaking, and by example (3) where the present tense is used for events that took place earlier.

(2) *Did* you want to speak to me now?                      *Ville* du tala med mig nu?

(3) And before we could do anything, in *comes* Peter and *punches* Simon on the nose.                      Och innan vi kunde göra något, in *kommer* Peter och *slår* Simon på käften.

The reason for this lack of correspondence between tense and time is that language is not only used to represent our experience of events in the world around us, it is also used as an instrument of social interaction between human beings. This is generally referred to as the interpersonal function of language (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen 2004:29). In examples (2) and (3) above, the past and the present tenses have been used to carry out an interpersonal function. In example (2), it is to express the speaker's role relationship with the addressee and in example (3), it is to express the speaker's attitude towards the subject matter. This has been done by transferring the spatial conceptualization of time to the relationship between the speaker and others in their social interaction.

In a very basic sense, then, the interpersonal function of language is the exchange of information or goods and services (cf. Eggins 1994:146–197), and in this exchange the speaker takes on the speech roles of either giving or demanding. When information is being exchanged, the speaker may express varying degrees of commitment to the validity of what they are saying, e.g. *This might/must be the last one. Detta kan/måste vara den sista*, and this may be expressed with subjective involvement, e.g. *I doubt / am sure this is the last one. Jag tvivlar/är säker på att detta är den sista*. Universal to the exchange of both information and goods and services is the notion of politeness. This is the speaker's concern for the 'face' needs of others', i.e. their positive face, which is the need to be liked and admired, and their negative 'face', which is the need not to be imposed upon (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987:13, Scollon & Scollon 1995:33–499). The former involves projecting oneself as close to the addressee.

This may be done in many ways, for instance, by using direct speech acts, such as imperatives for commands, e.g. *Sit down!* (*Sätt dig!*), or by using the subject *we* to include the addressee and create a feeling of shared activity, e.g. (nurse to patient) *How are we feeling today?* (*Hur mår vi idag?*) Concern for the addressee's negative face, on the other hand, involves projecting oneself as humbly distant. This may be done, for instance, by using indirect speech acts, such as interrogative clauses for commands, e.g. *Would you sit down, please?* (*Vill du vara snäll och sätta dig?*), or by hedging one's statements with probabilities e.g. *It's likely to happen.* (*Det kan hända*). In social interaction, there is thus an interpersonal space surrounding the speaker, his or her territory, so to speak, and speakers position themselves within this space as close or distant to others. This distance depends on their social relationship, i.e. the degree of power between them, which may range from equal to unequal (e.g. close friends vs. employer and employee), the degree of contact, which may range from frequent to occasional (e.g. spouses vs. acquaintances) and the degree of affective involvement, which may range from high to low (e.g. lovers vs. business associates), (cf. Eggins 1994:64).

The interpersonal function of tense is, thus, to signal the distance between the speaker and others in their social interaction. I will now explore this usage of tense in English and Swedish. Both languages have only two morphological categories of tense, the present and the past. I will look at each of these tenses in turn and examine how they are used for interpersonal functions in the exchange of information and goods or services. The examples are taken from translations in the English-Swedish Parallel Corpus (cf. Aijmer *et al* 1996), from English and Swedish grammar books (cf. Downing & Locke 2006, Teleman *et al* 1999, Holmes & Hinchcliffe 2003) and native speaker informants.

## 2. Present tense

The present tense locates “a situation holding at the present moment” (cf. Downing & Locke 2006:352) and therefore signals proximity to the speaker in the temporal space. In the exchange of information, the present tense may be transferred to the interpersonal space, to signal the speaker's involvement in the subject matter of what he or she is saying. The present tense is, therefore, often used by speakers when they are telling stories about events which took place in the past. It brings events closer to the speaker and the addressee, making them appear more real, as if they were happening before their eyes, and it increases the dramatic effect of the story. The examples (4) and (5) are passages from the Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman's autobiography, *Laterna Magica*,

where he describes incidents he remembers from his childhood. In example (4), Bergman uses the present tense, signaling a high degree of personal involvement. This has, however, been changed into the past tense by the English translator. Strangely enough, the reverse has occurred in example (5). Bergman describes the incident in the past tense but this has been changed into the present tense by the Swedish translator, who by doing this has, intentionally or not, enhanced the dramatic feeling of the passage.

(4) Vad som sedan hände minns jag otydligt. Mor satt på soffan i sitt rum och blödde näsblod. Hon försökte lugna min syster. Jag *står* i barnkammaren och betraktar min kinematograf, *faller* patetiskt på knä och *lovar* gud både film och apparat om mor och far *blir* vänner.

I can't remember clearly what happened next. Mother was sitting on the sofa in her room, her nose bleeding. She was trying to calm my sister. I *was* in the nursery looking at my cinematograph. I *fell* pathetically to my knees and *promised* God he could have my films and all my apparatus as long as Mother and Father *became* friends again.

(5) Jag *satt* i någons knä och blev matad med välling. Tallriken *stod* på en grå vaxduk med röd bård. Emaljen var vit med blå blommor, den speglade det sparsamma ljuset från fönstren. Genom att böja mig åt sidorna och framåt, *prövade* jag olika blickpunkter. Allteftersom jag *rörde* huvudet *förändrades* reflexerna i vällingtallriken och *formade* nya mönster. Plötsligt *kräktes* jag över alltsammans.

I *am* sitting on someone's knee being fed with gruel. The plate *is* on grey oilcloth with a red border, the enamel white, with blue flowers on it, and reflecting the sparse light from the window. By bending my head sideways and forwards, I *try* out various viewpoints. As I *move* my head, the reflections in the gruel plate *change* and *form* new patterns. Suddenly I *vomit* over everything.

The present tense may also be used in the exchange of information about future time. This reduces the remoteness of future events, bringing them closer to the speaker and increases the speaker's commitment to their validity. This is the tense which is normally used, both in English and Swedish, when speakers believe that events are most certainly going to happen because they are planned on a timetable as in example (6).

(6) The train *leaves* at nine tonight.

Tåget *går* klockan nio ikväll.

The present tense is also used in Swedish for situations and events in future time when the speaker has a strong feeling of prediction that they will take place. English, on the other hand, tends to use the auxiliary modal verbs such as *shall*, *will*, or *going to*, etc., instead, as the following examples from the translation of Astrid Lindgren's *Ronja Rövardotter* illustrate.

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| (7) “Jovars, det kommer att reta livet ur Borka. För nu <b>lever</b> Mattisätten vidare, men Borkaätten, den <b>går</b> det rakt åt pipsvängen med. | “Sure enough, it will plague the life out of Borka. Now Matt's line <b>will</b> live on, but Borka's line <b>will</b> be finished and done for.” |
| (8) “Du, rövardotter, vi <b>ses</b> väl nån gång!”  | “Hey, robber's daughter, <b>I'll</b> be seeing you!”   |
| (9) Snart <b>är</b> jag hemma, tänkte hon för att trösta sej, snart <b>ligger</b> jag i min bädd och hör Lovis sjunga Vargsången.                   | <b>I'll</b> be home soon, she thought to console herself. Soon <b>I'll</b> be lying in my bed, listening to Lovis singing the Wolf Song.         |

So far, the examples of the interpersonal usage of the present tense have concerned the exchange of information, where it signals involvement in the information being exchanged or commitment to its validity. The present tense is also used for an interpersonal function in the exchange of goods and services. Offers such as (10) and (11) promise a future action which is beneficial to the addressee.

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|---|---------------------------------|
| (10) Jag <b>följer</b> dig hem.           | <b>I'll walk</b> you home.      |
| (11) Oroa dig inte! Jag <b>fixar</b> det! | Don't worry! <b>I'll</b> fix it |

Although these actions will take place in future time, the present tense is used in Swedish. English, on the other hand, uses the modal auxiliary verbs *shall* or *will*. This usage of the present tense in Swedish is a positive politeness strategy. It reduces the interpersonal space between the speaker and the addressee, and signals concern for the addressee's positive 'face'.

### 3. Past tense

The past tense locates a situation at a distance from the moment of speaking within the temporal space (cf. Downing & Locke 2006:358). In the exchange of information, the past tense may be transferred from the temporal space to the in-

terpersonal space where it signals the speaker's lack of commitment to the validity of what is being said. In examples (12)–(16) the past tense indicates that the situations or events have not yet occurred but are perceived by the speaker as potential and hypothetical.

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| (12) He talks as if he <i>owned</i> the place.                             | Han pratar som om han <i>ägde</i> stället.      |
| (13) If only we <i>had</i> more time.                                      | Bara vi <i>hade</i> mera tid på oss!            |
| (14) I often wish I <i>were</i> somewhere else. (Downing & Locke 2006:353) | Jag önskar att jag <i>var</i> någon annanstans. |
| (15) I thought you <i>were</i> on the beach (Downing & Locke 2006:353)     | Jag trodde du <i>var</i> på stranden.           |
| (16) If he <i>was</i> here, I would ask him.                               | Om han <i>var</i> här, skulle jag fråga honom.  |

In Swedish, the past tense is also used in the exchange of evaluative information. This occurs in exclamations when speakers express their first impression of a situation or event taking place in the present at the time of speaking, as in examples (17)–(20). English, on the other hand, has the present tense.

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| (17) Det <i>var</i> varmt, det här!   | This <i>is</i> hot!   |
| (18) Det <i>var</i> länge sedan vi träffades sist.                            | It <i>is</i> a long time since we last met.                                     |
| (19) Det <i>var</i> snällt av dig att komma!                                  | It <i>is</i> very nice of you to come.<br>(Holmes & Hinchcliffe 2003:278)       |
| (20) Det <i>var</i> bra, Mattis, att du kom så övermåttan hastigt", sa Borka. | "It's a good thing you came so uncommonly fast," said Borka.<br>(Lindgren 1981) |

These evaluations are typically clauses with the verb *vara* (to be) and attributive adjectives, as in examples (17)–(20), but they may also be expressed by other verbs, as example (21) illustrates.

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| (21) Den spiken <i>satt</i> väldigt hårt,<br>kom och hjälp mig dra!<br>(SAG:227) | This nail <i>is</i> really stuck. Come and<br>help me pull it out! |
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Comments expressing opinions and emotions, such as examples (17)–(21), may be perceived as threatening to the addressee’s ‘face’ (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987:65–68). By using the past tense rather than the present, speakers distance themselves from what they are saying and show concern for the addressee’s negative face. This usage of the past tense as a negative politeness strategy is not normally found in English evaluative comments.

The past tense is also used for future time in the exchange of goods and services. In requests and commands, the speaker wants the addressee to perform an action in the future that is beneficial to the speaker. Both in English and Swedish, speakers may make their imposition on the addressee less direct by prefacing it with a framing clause where they refer to their intentions in the first person and use the past tense of the verb, as in example (22).

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| (22) I <i>was</i> wondering if you would<br>water the flowers. | Jag <i>tänkte</i> be dig vattna blom-<br>morna. |
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This usage of the past tense as a negative politeness strategy appears, however, to be more widespread in Swedish than in English. In Swedish it may also be used in prerequisites, where speakers refer to their intentions in the third person, such as (23), which is from the translation of Stig Claesson’s *Vem älskar Yngve Frej*. Here, the English translation has the present tense.

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| (23) Förlåt att jag stör men det <i>gällde</i><br>ett fornminne som ska finnas<br>här. | I’m sorry to disturb you, but it’s<br>about an ancient monument there’s<br>supposed to be somewhere here. |
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In Swedish the past tense is also often used in interrogative and declarative clauses which function as indirect requests and commands,<sup>1</sup> such as (24)–(27), where English uses the present tense.

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|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (24) <i>Fanns</i> det växel?  | <i>Do</i> you have any change? |
| (25) Så <i>var</i> vi framme! | Here we <i>are</i> !           |

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<sup>1</sup> The declaratives in (25)–(27) infer that some kind of action is required of the addressee, for instance, to disembark from a vehicle in (25), to ‘come to the dinner table’ in (26) and to finish what they were doing in (27).

(26) Då *var* det dags för middag!                      It's dinner time!

(27) Nu *var* det slut!    Time's up!

This usage of the past tense in indirect requests and commands has become a conventionalized politeness strategy in Swedish. It is, for instance, the tense normally used in formal settings by officials when they ask strangers for their names, as in (28).

(28) Hur *var* namnet?    What *is* your name?

In casual settings, in contrast, the present tense is normally used, as in *Vad heter du?* "What call you?".

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Tense signals when situations and events in the world are experienced from the speaker's point of view, at the centre of the time-space. When this spatial conceptualisation of time is transferred to the interpersonal space, tenses signal the distance between the participants in English and Swedish social interaction. The present tense denotes closeness to the speaker, and is therefore used to signal involvement and commitment in what is being said and positive politeness towards the addressee. Conversely, the past tense denotes remoteness, and it is therefore used to signal lack of involvement and commitment and negative politeness towards the addressee. Although the principles for this interpersonal usage of tense are similar both in English and Swedish, Swedish sometimes uses these tenses as a politeness strategy where English has an auxiliary verb (e.g. offers and requests/commands) or the normal temporal usage of tense (evaluative comments). It appears, then, that both the present and past tense are used as a politeness strategy more often in Swedish than English.

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