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Grammaticality, time and tense

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Processing an utterance involves identifying the time – past, present or future – at which the event described in that utterance is meant to be located. This identification exploits the interaction of the tense system of the language with other syntactic, semantic and pragmatic variables. It is claimed that the basic ‘default’ meaning of the tense markers of English can be overruled by purely linguistic means, by contextual means, or by a combination of the two. These possibilities are illustrated by making crucial use of the notion of *relevance* developed recently by Sperber & Wilson. In addition to examples of the many–many relations of times and tenses, there are tentative analyses for conditionals and the perfect. Finally the implications of these analyses for the traditional Chomskyan notions of grammaticality and acceptability are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

One part of processing an utterance involves identifying the time – past, present or future – at which the event or state described is intended by the speaker to be located. The most obvious bearer of this information is the set of forms generally referred to as the tense system of the language concerned. It is well known, however, that the relation of time to tense is far from being one–one, and the localization of time is not even an exclusively linguistic matter. I shall consider a number of simple examples in English to see how time is determined and the extent to which it is a matter of syntax, semantics or pragmatics. I shall suggest that some of the apparent complexities of the English tense system diminish if an adequate distinction is made between linguistic and non-linguistic parameters; if we take to heart the Chomskyan distinctions between competence and performance and grammaticality and acceptability; and if we exploit the definition of *relevance* recently provided by Sperber & Wilson.

To be specific, I wish to claim that each morpho-syntactic tense form has a ‘default’ meaning that specifies *time* rather than modality or remoteness, but that this default meaning can in every case be overruled by either co-text or context: by linguistic or pragmatic factors. Given this maximally flexible system, one of three situations may arise: (a) the intended time of the event is signalled unambiguously by other linguistic means; for instance, by deictic adverbials, and cannot be overruled by contextual factors; (b) the temporal interpretation of the utterance is linguistically vague and can be determined exclusively by contextual factors; for instance, the possibility of giving an iterative or a unique interpretation to an utterance in the absence of adverbial modifiers, or of disambiguating a conditional sentence; (c) the determination of the time intended is a joint function of semantic and pragmatic factors; for instance, the temporal interpretation imposed by the use of the perfect as opposed to the simple past.

After illustrating these various possibilities, I look briefly at the notion of grammaticality more generally.

[39]

TIME AND TENSE

In the simplest case there is a straightforward relation between time and tense such that the past, present and future tense forms, as in (1), refer to past, present and future time respectively.

- (1*a*) The chairman *resigned*
- (1*b*) The secretary *is* happy
- (1*c*) The share-holders *will* celebrate

That is, associated with the morphological forms in italics, there is a simple default meaning that holds unless it is explicitly overruled by co-occurring features of the co-text or context. Thus although not accurately pinpointed, the time of the chairman's resignation in (1*a*) is unambiguously past, i.e. before speech time, and the sentence is semantically complete, even though further temporal specification could obviously be given. The absence of such further specification does not render the sentence 'semantically incomplete' (Smith 1978) any more than the failure to specify the agent in 'John was murdered' renders that sentence incomplete. It should also be noted that the philosophical status of the proposition expressed by the sentence has no bearing on the ability of that sentence to be couched unambiguously in the past. Hence mathematical truths or generic sentences may all be put into any tense, as can be seen in the examples in (2).

- (2*a*) The dodo *ate* figs
- (2*b*) The cow *is* herbivorous

The default meaning exemplified in (1) and (2) is overruled in (3) where, although the verb is identical in all three examples – i.e. it is still morphologically past – the sentences have the same respective temporal interpretations as those in (1).

- (3*a*) Mary *came* at three o'clock
- (3*b*) If Mary *came* now we could elope
- (3*c*) According to our original plans Mary *came* next week

In isolation, 'Mary came' would refer necessarily to the past. As used here, however, Mary's coming may be located at any time. It is clear that in (3*c*) the assumed time of Mary's coming is due entirely to the deictic adverbial *next week*. Hence if we replace this phrase by the non-deictic *the next week* the time indicated is linguistically indeterminate and depends for its identification on non-linguistic information. Similarly the sentences in (4) with a present tense verb are naturally construed as putting the hostages' arrival in the future.

- (4*a*) The hostages *arrive* tomorrow
- (4*b*) The hostages *arrive* on Tuesday

However, with (4*a*) this is a necessary interpretation because *tomorrow* is deictic, while with (4*b*) it is an optional interpretation as *on Tuesday* is not deictic but 'unanchored'.

The class of V(P) that can occur with such future adverbials is open, being a function of our conception of the potential variability, controllability and hence predictability of the event or state described. Thus (5*a*) and (5*b*) with a stative verb and generic subject respectively are well-formed linguistically even if somewhat odd as characterizations of the world we live in.

- (5a) Wilt *is tall* tomorrow
 (5b) Oil *floats* on water in future

If a sentence contains no adverbial, a future interpretation, as opposed to a habitual one, is dependent on contextual factors alone, as in (6).

- (6) Which exam *do* we have in here?

The same is true of the palmist's utterance of (7) to an adolescent.

- (7) Congratulations: you *marry* three times and *have* four children

Although the temporal reference of a sentence containing the present tense is in general determined either contextually or by the presence of adverbials, it is clear as numerous scholars (Kenny, Vendler, Lyons, Dowty) have pointed out that the present has different preferred interpretations in construction with different semantic classes of verb: most specifically, active verbs as in (8a) as opposed to stative verbs as in (8b).

- (8a) Fred smokes a pipe
 (8b) John admires Rembrandt

Sentence (8a) is typically habitual and (8b) is typically descriptive of a single state, but (8a) also has a possible stage-directional (i.e. non-habitual) interpretation dependent merely on the context of utterance, and (8b) also has a possible habitual interpretation normally dependent on the addition of some overt linguistic marker such as a frequentative adverbial. In this last case the sense is 'makes his admiration known' rather than simply 'admires'. Although less frequent, these interpretations are perfectly plausible and it is important to note, as Palmer (1965) has emphasized, that both habitual and non-habitual interpretations are compatible with *all* tense forms in English: i.e. there is no grammaticalization of habituality as there is in many languages, and the possibility or necessity of a habitual interpretation is dependent on the presence of frequentative adverbials and the context of utterance as well as the stativity of the verb. For instance, a habitual or iterative interpretation is necessary only in the presence of adverbs such as *frequently*, or if the sentence containing the present tense is embedded under the predicate 'it is time that...', as in (9).

- (9) It is time that John *goes* to bed (whenever I arrive there)

In all other cases a habitual interpretation is an optional alternative. Thus although (10a) is likely to be interpreted as a commentary or stage direction and (10b) as habitual, either can have either meaning:

- (10a) Antigonus leaves pursued by a bear
 (10b) John bullies his little sister

A number of other linguistic variables favour an interpretation of the present tense as referring to future time without this being forced: for instance, embedding under verbs such as *hope* as opposed to *hear* as in (11); occurrence in adverbial clauses introduced by *after*, *before*, *when*, etc., as in (12a), and in conditionals such as (12b).

- (11a) I hope she *sings*
 (11b) I hear she *sings*

(12a) John inherits £10000 when he *marries*

(12b) If John *visits* the zoo we are doomed

It is not necessary that the time of the event be future in any of these examples, but it is permitted to be so construed when no other marker is present. In (11a), for example, the speaker is postulating an alternative possible world where the embedded proposition expresses the desired state for the real world to be in: a state that either may not now exist but may be brought about in the future, or may already exist unbeknown to the speaker.

A future interpretation is necessary in examples such as (13).

(13) John will collapse after he *eats* the apple

This is parallel to (12a) except that the main clause itself is overtly marked for future. With stative verbs, the meaning in such contexts is the futurity of the state's inception, as in (14).

(14) John will collapse before he *knows* what has hit him

With conditionals, it is often the case that only a future interpretation is plausible, as in (15).

(15) If John *commits* suicide we are doomed

However, this is merely a product of our knowledge about the usually irreversible nature of death, and a habitual (or iterative) reading is feasible in the appropriate context.

Just as a present tense may be construed as referring to the future, so also may it refer to the past. It has been claimed (Braroe 1974) that linguistic aspects of the context are favoured over non-linguistic ones, and that a present tense must be modified by an overt past adverb to yield a past time interpretation. This seems to be wrong: a clear example to the contrary is provided by a number of verbs used to introduce a report: *tell*, *report*, *inform*, *imply*, *hear*, and so on, as in (16).

(16) Jane *tells* me you are having an affair with my wife

It is of course possible that (16) be interpreted as habitual, but the most usual reading is one where there has been a single instance of telling and that quite unequivocally in the past. A past time construal of a present tense is also characteristic of the so-called 'historic present' as in (17).

(17) The next day they both *wander* about still more absent-minded...

(Joyce Cary: *Mr Johnson*, p. 105)

Sentences like (17) are timeless in the sense that the event described may be located at any time provided that its relevance is evaluated with respect to the present. Only if the present tense is associated with a past deictic adverb, as in (18), is a past interpretation forced.

(18) He also says he doesn't know what I *am* doin' around Joe Madrigaul's place last night but that...

(Peter Cheyney: *Poison ivy*, p. 45; quoted in Fries (1970), p. 327)

Examples such as (17) and (18) are acceptable in a narrative setting where the author or speaker is attempting to render immediate the event of the past by using the non-past. The effect of this usage is to force an interpretation against a context containing other present tense

propositions. That is, given that *context* is defined (following Sperber & Wilson 1981) as a set of propositions, and utterances are construed so as to maximize their relevance *vis-à-vis* some context, then the use of the historic present ensures that the interpretation exploit other present tense propositions: i.e. it narrows down the set of propositions constituting the relevant background against which the novel utterance is evaluated.

The freedom of interpretation manifest by the present tense is shared by the past, as was illustrated in (3) above, and – to the extent that it exists as a grammatical category – by the future. That is, sentences containing *will* may also be taken to place the situation they describe at any time, past, present or future, as in (19).

- (19a) Mary *will* be there by now
- (19b) That *will* be Fred at the door
- (19c) Bill *will* leave tomorrow

The default meaning of *will* is to suggest the relevance of future experience in establishing the validity of a temporally unspecified event. Such an event is defined as necessarily future only by the simultaneous presence of a (deictic) averbial as in (19c).

CONDITIONALS

The most striking cases of morphological forms having non-default interpretations occur in conditionals. In simple (real) conditionals with *if* in the protasis (S_1) and an optional *then* in the apodosis (S_2) there are no constraints on the occurrence of tense, aspectual, modal or other categories distinct from those in non-conditional sentences. However, explicit futurity can be marked in S_1 only by adverbials and not by the modal *will*, which expresses only volition or disposition. Examples of the sort in (20)

- (20) Either it will rain tomorrow or it won't. If it *will* we should mend the roof today

are unacceptable except perhaps as examples of semi-quotation. The correct antithesis to the semantically distinct 'If it does...' is 'If it is going to...' and not 'If it will...'. Where *will* is in a syntactic position that allows contraction to 'll its presence in a conditional is much less unacceptable: cf. the gradation in (21).

- (21a) ??If it *will* rain tomorrow we might as well . . .
- (21b) ?If it'll rain tomorrow we might as well . . .
- (21c) If it's going to rain tomorrow we might as well . . .

(Sentence (21b) is cited as acceptable in Palmer (1974).) Even here the modal is not fully acceptable, and since the other modals similarly fail to have an epistemic reading in the *if* clause, the constraint seems to be epiphenomenal as regards tense. With this exception the interpretation of temporal adverbs is entirely parallel to that in non-conditional sentences.

If the tense of S_1 is present or present perfect and that of S_2 is past, then the whole conditional has only one semantic interpretation instead of the two that are usual in conditionals. Thus a sentence such as (22)

- (22) If John *speaks* he *has lost*

could be used to inform one's interlocutor indirectly of either of two distinct rules of a game, either (23),

(23) If one speaks during a game one is disqualified

hence, if John speaks, he will be disqualified and lose; or (24),

(24) The loser of a game is the one who has to announce the result of that game

hence, if John speaks, he must have lost.

These two interpretations are relevant in different contexts. For instance, assuming in either case that it is known that John is about to speak, (23) is relevant in the context (25) and (24) is relevant in the context (26).

(25) The game is in progress

(26) The game is over

Thus, depending on which is the correct context for the listener concerned, (22) will be interpreted in a radically different way: i.e. the time of John's possible losing is taken to be future under the first interpretation and past under the second. That is, we have two incompatible semantic representations that are selected differentially according to the propositional content of the context. In other words we have a purely contextual disambiguation. In contrast, in a sentence such as (27),

(27) If John *speaks* he *lost*

with present tense in S_1 and past in S_2 , only the latter interpretation (24) is possible. The possibility of finding alternative interpretations of conditional sentences comparable to those for (22) is always open (even with counterfactuals) except in the case where the tense of S_2 is anterior to that of S_1 , when only the temporally earlier event or state may be construed as cause. A comparable example is provided in (28).

(28a) If John *comes* tomorrow he's a malingerer

(28b) If John *comes* tomorrow he *was* a malingerer

The range of possible interpretations for counterfactual conditionals is much more restricted. I suggest that counterfactuals are marked [+subjunctive] and that there are just two possible syntactic variants (rather than the half dozen or so given under *if* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). First, S_1 may be semantically present, in which case the verb is realized morphologically by a form identical to the past indicative (e.g. *came*). (In the case of *be* there is a contrast between indicative and subjunctive marked by the distinction between *was* and *were*, as well as the form *be* itself). Secondly, S_1 may be semantically past, in which case it is realized by *had* and the past participle of the relevant verb. In both cases S_2 must contain a past modal, e.g. *would*, *might*, *could*. With the former case the interpretation is unreal in that the time of the putative event is future, but potentially of the real world, e.g. (29).

(29) If John *came* tomorrow we could have a party

With the latter case the interpretation is unreal in that the time of the putative event is either past and hence, necessarily, true only in some other world, e.g. (30)

(30) If John *had come* yesterday we could have had a party

or, if future, is asserted to be false of the real world as it is expected to turn out, e.g. (31).

- (31) If John *had come* tomorrow we could have had a party (but the plans have been changed)

Analysing *came*, etc., as ‘present’ and *had come* as ‘past’ may seem counterintuitive, but it accounts for the parallelism in the interpretation of temporal adverbials in these counterfactual conditionals. That is, just as the simple past or, more often, the past progressive may be used with a future adverbial to indicate that a plan has been fixed (cf. (3c) above), so may the past counterfactual conditional as in (31). Examples such as (32)

- (32) If John *came* yesterday I (must have) met him

are simple, not counterfactual, conditionals with *came* functioning as a past indicative; and those like (33)

- (33) If John *came* tomorrow...

in fact allow two interpretations, one parallel to that in (29) and one where the natural continuation is as in (34).

- (34) If John *came* tomorrow according to your original plan but...

Examples like (35)

- (35) ?If John *were* here yesterday...

are unacceptable, as is the straightforwardly ungrammatical (36),

- (36) *John *were* here

because the past indicative interpretation given to examples like (32) is excluded as *were* is necessarily subjunctive in this case. Even a historic present interpretation is excluded here, as the use of the historic present does not extend to conditionals, and even examples containing verbs of report (cf. (16)) in such environments are possible only as semi-quotation. Thus (37)

- (37) If Jane *tells* you I’m having an affair with your wife she’s wrong

must refer either to non-past time or be an example of mention not use.

THE PERFECT

Orthogonal to the contrast between past, present and future, English has a set of aspectual contrasts, most notably the progressive and the perfect. I shall look next at the perfect as exemplified in (38),

- (38) John *has scored* a goal

which is problematic because of the status of its contrast with the simple past. Despite claims to the contrary (see, for example, Tichý 1980), there is no good evidence that the past and the perfect are ever truth-conditionally distinct. Thus although (38) and (39)

- (39) John *scored* a goal

can occur with different adverbials (cf. (40)) and have different conditions of appropriateness, they can never be consistently asserted and denied at the same time.

- (40*a*) ?John *scored* a goal already
 (40*b*) John *has scored* a goal already
 (40*c*) John *scored* a goal yesterday
 (40*d*) ?John *has scored* a goal yesterday

The implication of this truth-conditional equivalence is that the contrast between (38) and (39) is at least in part pragmatic. It seems clear, however, that the difference between (38) and (39) is not on a par with, say, the alternative interpretations most likely to be given to the sentences in (10). That is, each of the sentences in (10) has two interpretations that are differentially selected by non-linguistic parameters, whereas (38) and (39) impose different constraints on the content of the context in which they are to be interpreted. While both (38) and (39) refer to past time, (38) with the perfect has the conventional implicature (Grice 1975) or non-logical implication (Wilson 1975) that the propositions relevant to the interpretation of the sentence include some present tense ones: i.e. *has* contains a subjective element incorporating the event described into the time of speech. As a second example, consider the contrast between the sentences in (41).

- (41*a*) John *has broken* his leg
 (41*b*) John *broke* his leg

It is not necessarily the case that (41*a*) implies that the leg is still broken but (41*b*) does not, even though this is one natural construal of the inclusion in the present time-span of the leg-breaking. Rather, (41*a*) corresponds to the two possible questions in (42),

- (42*a*) Has John broken his leg?
 (42*b*) Has John ever broken his leg?

and may itself be interpreted as extending the relevant context from the period including the time of speech indefinitely far back into the past. The use of (41*a*) without some adverbial such as *once* in a situation where the extent of the time-span intended was not contextually obvious would be conversationally misleading but in no way grammatically incorrect. The assumption that *has* embodies a semantic feature that limits the possible context of interpretation (cf. Brockway 1981) allows for an explicit account of the well known notion of 'current relevance'. I shall give one further example from Sperber & Wilson's (1981) paradigm example of a contextual implication: that is, an implication derivable from an utterance in conjunction with a specified set of background contextual propositions. They set up a context consisting of the two propositions (43) – their (4).

- (43*a*) If the chairman resigns, Jackson will take over his duties
 (43*b*) If Jackson takes over the chairman's duties, the company will go bankrupt

They then add the utterance (44) – their (5) –

- (44) The chairman *has resigned*

allowing the conclusions (45) and (46) – their (6) and (7).

- (45) Jackson will take over the chairman's duties
 (46) The company will go bankrupt

It is clear that if (44) were replaced by (47),

(47) The chairman *resigned*

there would be no such contextual implications. Although truth-conditionally equivalent to (44), the utterance of (47) in the simple past does not license the appropriate interaction with (43*a*) whose protasis is *present* and is therefore irrelevant in this context. Given that the difference between the simple past and the perfect is that the latter places constraints on the context of interpretation, we also have an explanation for the finding of Clark & Stafford (1969) that this difference is regularly forgotten in psycholinguistic experimentation. It has been suggested (Miller & Johnson Laird 1976) that a semantic explanation for this phenomenon is required, but if the contrast between past and perfect is context dependent in the sense just given, then such forgetting is precisely what one would expect to find in an experimental, i.e. decontextualized, situation.

Perfect *have* is tied to speech time and is accordingly inappropriate if it occurs with elements that designate any period necessarily exclusive of the present, e.g. temporal adverbials such as *yesterday*, phrases containing *ago*, *last*, etc. Accordingly, if *have* occurs with adverbials of this sort the utterance will if possible be reinterpreted as a habitual encompassing the present. Thus (48)

(48) ?John *has gone* to Morocco on the 1st of June

is acceptable only if the sentence is amplified with an overt frequentative, as in (49)

(49) John *has gone* to Morocco on the 1st of June every year since 1931

or if the context makes a frequentative reading self-evident, as in this recent example from the *Times* (Woodcock 1981) in (50).

(50) He *has played* for Western Province in the early 1970s and for Zimbabwe last year

Even examples like (51)

(51) ?John *has gone* to Morocco on the 1st of June 1945

are judged unacceptable only for reasons having to do with our knowledge of the calendar. The imposition of cyclic time-keeping and imputed longevity (or variable reference) to the subject can render even this acceptable, as witness (52).

(52) The emperor *has gone* to Morocco on the 1st of June 1945 every time that day in the calendar has fallen on a Tuesday

Whereas (51) can be rendered acceptable in this way, such rescue is impossible with a deictic such as *last week* in place of 1945,

(53) ?John *has gone* to Morocco last week every time I see him

since *last week* specifies a unique time by reference to the present.

Turning from past to future time, Palmer (1965) has suggested that 'The perfect forms are never used to refer to the future', but it would be more accurate to say that sentences containing

the perfect *have* may refer to future time only when embedded in subordinate clauses introduced by a temporal adverbial, *if*, or some other conditional adverbials, as in (54).

(54) You can leave *when/provided that/on condition that/if it has stopped* raining

Indeed, with *when* the interpretation of the time of the rain's stopping must be future (with the other items it may be future or past) and a past tense instead of the perfect is anomalous.

(55) ?You can leave when it *stopped* raining

GRAMMATICALITY

In the discussion of the examples above, I have followed the traditional distinction between grammaticality and acceptability, a dichotomy that follows inevitably from the Chomskyan distinction between competence and performance. In the last section of this paper I shall look again at the relation between grammaticality and acceptability in the light of the foregoing discussion. That grammatical sentences should correspond to acceptable utterances and ungrammatical sentences to unacceptable utterances is straightforward and expected. In addition, there are a number of examples above of unacceptable sentences that are none the less grammatical (e.g. 40*a*, 40*d*, 51) and many others could be supplied. There are two factors usually involved in the unacceptability of such strings: first, the sentence may be hard to process for reasons of self-embedding or similar complexity as in (56) – or (57) if (56) is not complex enough.

(56) John *wanted to come* yesterday yesterday

(57) John *expected to want to come* yesterday yesterday yesterday

That these are grammatical is evidenced by the full acceptability of a sentence parallel to (57) but with the adverbs distinct and non-adjacent.

(58) John *expected* yesterday to *want* today to *come* tomorrow

Secondly, the sentence may give rise to conflicting implications of the sort illustrated in (48) or in the following examples from Smith (1978),

(59*a*) Mary has left at noon

(59*b*) Jane has arrived tomorrow

which are claimed to be ungrammatical because they are deemed unacceptable as 'independent' sentences. This judgement seems unfortunate on two counts: first, it makes it harder to adhere to compositionality, given the acceptability (and presumably grammaticality) of (49) and (60);

(60*a*) Mary *has left* at noon whenever I have been with her

(60*b*) Assuming Jane *has arrived* tomorrow we can leave

secondly, it fails to account for the fact that independent examples do occur, as in the case of (50) above or of (61), where in each case the required interpretation of iterativity is obvious from the context.

(61) A: No one ever leaves as late as 11!

B: Mary *has left* at noon (before now)

If examples such as (59) are grammatical despite one's immediate reaction that they are unacceptable, it may be that a comparable analysis is motivated for sentences that seem irremediable but that translate word for word acceptably into other languages, for instance, (62).

(62a) ?I'm here since yesterday

(62b) Je suis ici depuis hier

Sentence (62) is unacceptable because normally only the perfect is compatible with the combination of a past time *yesterday* and the implication of its contextual relevance to the present provided by *since*. If it is none the less grammatical, it should be possible to find examples in which the anomaly of (62a) is mitigated. A possible candidate is provided by the following, from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

(63) Since 1960, in recognition of the benevolent motivation of the Waitangi treaty, February 6 is celebrated by New Zealanders as Waitangi Day

The reason for the use of *is* rather than *has been* is probably multiple. Given the parenthetical phrase, it may simply be an oversight (although people that I have asked have accepted it happily enough), but it is also probably due to the desire to emphasize the present rather than the past aspect of the celebration: i.e. *has been* might suggest 'and no longer is'.

The obvious alternative to analysing (63) as grammatical and dubiously acceptable, as I have suggested, is to claim that it is ungrammatical but can be rendered acceptable by non-linguistic factors. It is clear that a category of ungrammatical yet acceptable utterances is both predicted by any theory that distinguishes grammaticality from acceptability, and is necessary for the analysis of utterances whose deviance one simply fails to notice in the flow of conversation. It is, however, less desirable as a characterization of utterances that remain acceptable even on reflection; first, because this device can be used – as it has been in the literature – simply as a means of preventing disconfirmation of the theory; secondly, because it is unclear what evidence could lead the child to draw the conclusion that an acceptable sentence was *not* grammatical. There are two kinds of relevant example: the first is of language mixture as in (64).

(64) Tous les hommes de génie sont des drunkards et des gamblers qui boivent like fish
(Dostoevski: *The Devils*)

While language mixture is acceptable and, in some cultures such as pre-Revolutionary Russia and present-day India, normal, examples such as (64) could only be made grammatical at the cost of allowing grammars to generate sentences of more than one language simultaneously. However, to the extent that bilingual speakers have intuitions of well-formedness that cross their languages (cf. Sridhar & Sridhar 1980; Annamalai 1971) in the sense that the possibility of incorporating a constituent of a certain type from language A into a sentence of language B depends on grammatical properties of both languages, this will presumably be necessary in the long term if we are accurately to replicate the speaker's linguistic knowledge.

A second class of examples is illustrated in (65) and (66),

(65a) John is easy to please

(65b) Who did you see a picture of? (From Koster 1978)

(66) A not unhappy man entered the room (Langendoen & Bever 1973)

where the judgement of 'acceptable' seems unimpeachable but where it has nevertheless been claimed that the sentences are ungrammatical on the grounds that a maximally simple grammar will fail to generate them. Thus Koster (1978) suggests that sentences that are not generated by core grammar are by definition 'marked' and while acceptable are ungrammatical with respect to the core. The examples in (65) are then ungrammatical though obviously acceptable. This treatment exploits the mismatch between grammaticality and acceptability at the cost of having two distinct notions of grammaticality. If one has clear criteria for the demarcation of core and peripheral phenomena, this is defensible, but it leaves untouched the present problem in that we still need a distinction between those ungrammatical sentences that can be rendered acceptable by peripheral rules and those that are irredeemably bad. The obvious conclusion is that such an analysis should be disallowed. Comparable remarks apply to (66), which Langendoen & Bever claim to be rescued by pragmatic principles rather than by peripheral rules. Pragmatic principles may select a particular reading of an unambiguous sentence, or allow the appropriate construal of vague sentences, but it seems unnecessary to force them to operate on something that is not even generated by the grammar.

If these examples are typical of the (mis)use to which the category of ungrammatical acceptable sentence has been put, then the implication is that the category should be restricted to those cases where there is an unreflecting failure to censure the mistakes of the speaker as a result of temporary inadvertence, and not extended to sentences that remain acceptable on close introspection.

To summarize, I wish to defend the view that each tense form of English has a default interpretation that identifies the time – past, present or future – of the event described in the utterance. This default interpretation can be overruled by linguistic factors, by the context (which, following Sperber & Wilson, I take to be a set of propositions against which the utterance is processed), or by a combination of linguistic and contextual factors. The clearest example of this last category is provided by the perfect *have*, which imposes a semantic constraint on relevance in the sense of Brockway (1981). The use of pragmatic as well as syntactic and semantic principles suggested a rescrutiny of the relation between grammaticality and acceptability, with the conclusion that some constructions previously deemed ungrammatical were in fact grammatical even though frequently unacceptable, and that other constructions previously deemed ungrammatical even though acceptable should be reanalysed as grammatical.

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