

# Tense in English

Its structure and use in discourse

Renaat Declerck

London and New York

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# Preface

I have been interested in the English tense system for quite a long time. However, it was not until I read Comrie's (1985) book on tense that I decided to investigate that system in detail myself. The reason was that, although I found the book excellent in many respects, I could not agree with some of Comrie's basic claims. I therefore put pen to paper and wrote an article (Declerck 1986a) in which I refuted the claims in question and suggested an alternative theory. However, it soon became clear to me that my article had been a bit premature. I found that the theory I had suggested was not quite satisfactory. I also found that there were other interesting problems in connection with tense which were worth considering besides the ones I had treated. And last but not least I found that the linguistic literature contained a lot of work on tense which I had not read while writing my article. So I decided to do the job over again, and to do it differently this time. The present book is the result.

One of the things that struck me while reading the (innumerable) books and articles on tense that have been written over the last few decades is the proliferation of theoretical claims that have been made in connection with tense. As is well known to anybody familiar with the field, these claims are divergent and often conflicting, although the data from which they are derived are relatively uncontroversial. The problem, apparently, is that there has been no coherent theoretical framework within which to interpret the data. I realized this was a gap which had to be filled before any progress could be made, and I decided to undertake the task of doing so. Offering a coherent theoretical framework is therefore one of the major purposes of the present book.

This being said, I hasten to add that this is the only respect in which the work is theoretical. It is not theoretical in the sense that it is written within the framework of one of the current linguistic theories (transformational grammar, Montague grammar, functional grammar, etc.), nor is it meant to adduce evidence either for or against any of these theories. As noted by Comrie (1985:viii), none of the current linguistic theories

seems to have much to say about tense. I have therefore preferred to build a theory of tense in isolation rather than squeeze it into the bodice of some linguistic theory that is not particularly well suited to deal with tense.

Another feature of the book which some linguists may find surprising is that it is written without any formalism. Though I agree that formalization may sometimes be useful when a very precise semantic description is called for, I personally prefer to avoid formalism unless it is really necessary. For one thing, formalizing is just a way of describing meaning (i.e. it is a descriptive tool; it does not explain anything). For another, not everybody finds the formalized version of a statement more illuminating and readable than its nonformalized counterpart. In my opinion, the theory of tense I have developed can be presented without any formalism whatever. I have therefore abstained from using any.

Finally, I am very grateful to Bernard Comrie for the numerous comments he made on an earlier version of this book, and to Shigeki Seki for the assistance he gave me in proofreading the manuscript.

R.D.

*Catholic University of Leuven*  
14 March 1990

## Abbreviations

FPS	Future Perspective System
MidS	middle of the situation
NP	noun phrase
PPS	Present Perspective System
RST	Represented Speech and Thought
SoT	Sequence of Tenses
SS	situation span
TE	established time
$t_0$	temporal zero-point
TO	time of orientation
TOE	time which is both TE and TO
TO <sub>sit</sub>	situation-TO
TS	time of the situation
TU	time of utterance
VP	verb phrase

# Tense in English

Tense has always been one of the central issues of linguistics. In recent years the attention it has received has led to a proliferation of widely divergent theoretical approaches and analyses. Yet until now no coherent framework has emerged to help the linguist interpret the data correctly. The major part of this book is a 'descriptive' theory of tense, which together with the discussion of the temporal schemata underlying various tenses makes this the most comprehensive account of tense available.

The first part of the book develops a full 'descriptive theory' of tense. This is constructed to function at an intermediate level between the concrete data and the abstract treatment found in theoretical frameworks. The result is relatively simple and has a strong empirical basis. It offers a coherent set of generalizations which function as ordering principles and render it possible to classify, and hence interpret, observational data correctly. The inherent possibilities of the theory are extensively discussed and the restrictions to which they are subject are considered. Tense uses in indirect speech and in conditional clauses provide the major test cases for the proposed theory.

In the second part of *Tense in English*, Renaat Declerck proposes a reconstruction of the temporal schemata realized by the various English tenses. The merits and flaws of influential analyses such as those of Hans Reichenbach and, more recently, Bernard Comrie, are considered before he elaborates his own schemata. This takes into account not only the time reference effected by tense but also that effected by the use of time adverbials. The theory is applied to each of the eight traditional tenses of English.

The book is primarily of a theoretical nature, but the descriptive theory it offers and the discussion of the various tenses make it valuable to those concerned with teaching English. Theoretical and applied linguists will find this important contribution to the debate on tense an essential starting point for any future work in the area. Students of English and anyone concerned with the subject of tense in any language will find this a readable and reliable guide to the area.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1 AIM AND SCOPE OF THE WORK

The number of books and articles that have been written on the subject of tense in recent years is quite impressive.<sup>1</sup> This shows both that the interest in the phenomenon of tense is great and that the problems in connection with it are numerous. It is also striking how many different 'theories' of tense have been proposed. Clearly, tense is a subject on which the last word has not yet been said.

Of course, this is not in itself a justification for writing yet another book on tense. The reason why I have deemed it necessary to write this book is that the vast literature on tense still shows a couple of conspicuous gaps – gaps which need to be filled if the theory is to make any progress whatsoever.

The first gap is the absence of what could be called a 'descriptive theory' of tense. What I mean by this is a theory which functions as an intermediate level between the concrete data and the abstract, hypothetical treatments of tense in theoretical frameworks. It is my conviction that the reason why there has been a proliferation of widely divergent and often conflicting theoretical approaches to tense is the lack of such a descriptive theory. As I see it, a descriptive theory is a coherent set of generalizations, which function as ordering principles and render it possible to classify the observational data and hence to interpret them correctly. At present there is apparently no complete descriptive theory of this kind (though there are bits and pieces scattered around), and this is the reason why the data are so often interpreted differently. The recent literature shows too many examples of intricate theoretical constructs that are inadequate because they are based on faulty interpretations of otherwise sound observations.

To illustrate the need for a descriptive theory, I will review a couple of sets of data, which have given rise to a variety of claims. Since the claims

1. Schulze (1985) offers a bibliography which is twenty-five pages long in spite of the fact that it covers only a period of (roughly) ten years and does not aim at being complete.

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are usually contradictory, a large part of them must of necessity be mistaken. Yet all of them are familiar in the linguistic literature,<sup>2</sup> and all of them are claimed to be supported by the data.

1.1 As is well known, English has various means of referring to the future. The following examples illustrate some possibilities:

- (1) (a) I *will do* it tomorrow.
- (b) I *am leaving* tomorrow.
- (c) I *am going to leave* tomorrow.
- (d) I will do it tomorrow if I *have* time. (\*will have)

Data like these have led linguists to formulate widely divergent claims. The fact that four different kinds of verb form are used to refer to the future is sometimes interpreted as meaning that English does not really have a future tense. Some linguists consider the form with *will* to represent the future tense in English and claim that there is 'will-deletion' in the *if*-clause of (1,d). Some treat the use of the present tense in (1,b) and that in the *if*-clause of (1,d) as instances of one and the same phenomenon. Some of those that hold this view claim that there is *will*-deletion in both cases. Others argue that (1,d) is different from (1,b) and that the use of the present tense in (1,d) is due to linguistic economy, because futurity is sufficiently expressed by the head clause. In contrast, some linguists claim that the present tense in (1,d) is due to the fact that the speaker treats the future fulfilment of the condition as a present fact. Others say that the present tense is used in the *if*-clause because the *if*-clause is temporally subordinated to the head clause. In sum, the few data available in (1,a-d) are interpreted as evidence for widely divergent claims. Each of these claims has some *prima facie* plausibility and would seem to be in accordance with the data of (1,a-d). It is my belief that in order to judge which of them is/are correct and which of them are not, we must stop considering (1,a-d) in isolation. What we must do is try and build a descriptive theory of tense which is consonant not only with (1,a-d) but also with the hundreds of other observations that can be made. If we succeed in doing this, we can judge the soundness of the theoretical claims simply by checking whether or not they are in keeping with the descriptive theory as a whole.

1.2 A second illustration concerns sentences like the following:

- (2) (a) I *am* hungry.
- (b) London *lies* on the Thames.

2. The fact that all of the claims that are presented below are widespread is one of the reasons that I will abstain from adding references to them. The other reason is that all these claims will be discussed at greater length at different places in the book and that all necessary references will be given there.

- (c) John's dog *chases* cars.
- (d) The exhibition *opens* next month.
- (e) I *hear* you have been promoted.
- (f) He just *walks* into the room and *sits* down in front of the fire without saying a word to anyone. (Palmer 1988:39)

In these six examples the present tense is used with reference to different times. In (2,a) the reference is to a relatively short interval which includes the moment of speaking. Example (2,b) refers to an interval which is indefinitely long and encompasses not only the present but also the past and the future. Example (2,c) refers to a habitual activity consisting of a repeated number of occurrences; the habit includes the moment of speech and extends into the past and possibly also into the future; it is not necessary that any of the occurrences should coincide with the moment of speech itself. In (2,d) the reference is to a future event. In (2,e) *hear* refers to an event that took place in the past and is still relevant at the present moment; it is thus roughly equivalent to *have heard*. In (2,f), finally, we have the so-called historical present, which refers to events that took place in the past.

Again, these data have given rise to various interpretations. Some linguists claim that there is no reference to the present (the moment of speech) in generic or habitual sentences like (2,b) and (2,c). Others hold that both sentences refer to a state which is represented as holding at the moment of speech. The latter group usually claim that the basic meaning of the present tense is reference to present time and that the uses in (2,d-f) are special uses. Others conclude from (2,a-f) that there is no relation between the present tense and the expression of present time. In fact, they claim that the present tense does not refer to time at all, but simply functions as the unmarked tense in the English tense system, and is therefore compatible with any time reference.

1.3 Like the present tense, the past tense (preterit) can be used in different ways:

- (3) (a) Yesterday I *met* John in the street.
- (b) The two girls *were* usually known by their surnames, Banford and March.
- (c) I *wanted* to have a word with you.
- (d) I would appreciate if you *came* on time.

Sentence (3,a) might be part of any everyday conversation. Example (3,b) is the first sentence of a literary work (D.H. Lawrence's novella *The fox*). Examples (3,c) and (3,d) illustrate so-called 'modal' uses of the preterit: in (3,c) *wanted* is an 'attitudinal' preterit, which is used for tentativeness and has present time reference; in (3,d) *came* refers to an action which could take place in the future.

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Most linguists hold that the basic meaning of the preterit is reference to past time, and that the modal uses are special ones. Others, however, point out that what all the sentences in (3) have in common is the idea of 'remoteness' or 'distance': in (3,a) the preterit represents the event as temporally distant from the moment of speech; in (3,b) it represents the event as distant from present reality, i.e. as belonging to a fictional work; in (3,c) the preterit conveys the idea of psychological or social distance, i.e. modesty, tact; in (3,d) the preterit again expresses some distance from reality, since the future event is not represented as factual but as one whose actualization is only possible, and not even very likely. For linguists who set store by these considerations, the basic meaning of the preterit is not reference to past time but the expression of distance from present reality. If this interpretation is combined with the view that the present tense does not refer to present time (see above), it leads to the conclusion that there is no basic connection between tense and time. However, even this view can lead to quite different theories. Most people that believe that there is no fundamental relation between tense and time accept the view that the basic distinction between the past tense and the present tense is that between representing situations as non-actual (remote) and representing them as actual (see e.g. Janssen 1990). However, Weinrich (1964, 1970) holds that the essential difference is that the past tense is used in 'Erzählsituationen' (narrative contexts), whereas the present tense is used in 'Besprechungssituationen' (contexts of discussion). And there are still other (slightly different) views besides these.

1.4 When the contents of a sentence in the present tense are reported in the form of an indirect speech clause embedded under a verb in the past tense, the embedded clause usually makes use of the preterit:

- (4) (a) John said: 'I am hungry.'  
(b) John said that he *was* hungry. (\*is)

The observation that we use *was*, not *is*, in (4,b) has been interpreted in at least three different ways. A small group of linguists argue that the use of the preterit in the subclause of (4,b) is in no way different from its use in the head clause: in both cases the preterit is used because the event or state in question is to be located in the past (i.e. before the moment of speech). Others argue that *was* is not an 'absolute' tense form (like *said*) but a 'relative' one. That is, the preterit is used because the state referred to in the *that*-clause is represented as simultaneous with the action referred to in the head clause. According to these linguists, the past tense is the tense form to be used for the expression of simultaneity if the head clause is also in the past tense. A third group of linguists (probably the majority) believe that there is a 'sequence of tenses' rule which mechanically backshifts the present tense to the past tense in clauses that

are embedded under a head clause in the past tense. Some of these linguists still accept that this rule is semantically motivated, but others (e.g. Comrie 1986) claim that it has no semantic motivation whatever, i.e. that it is a purely formal rule.

1.5 The above four illustrations concern data which have given rise to a variety of different interpretations and explanations, even in theories of tense that have been developed independently of any particular theoretical framework (such as transformational grammar, Montague grammar, etc.). In treatments of tense that do make use of a theoretical framework the danger of deriving theoretical conclusions from faulty interpretations of data is even greater. One example may be sufficient here. Ladusaw (1977) observes that the sentence

(5) Mary saw the unicorn that walked.

may be true not only if the event of the unicorn walking was simultaneous with the event of Mary seeing the unicorn but also if the unicorn walked before or after Mary saw it. This observation is correct, and I will argue below that it can be explained from the fact that both clauses in (5) locate an event before the time of speech independently of each other. That is, each of the tense forms in (5) expresses no more than that the event referred to took place in the past; neither of them conveys any information as to the temporal order in which the events took place. Since the tense forms leave the temporal relation between the events unspecified (vague), and since there is no other (e.g. adverbial) indication of this relation, the sentence may be true irrespective of whether the seeing is prior to, simultaneous with, or posterior to the walking. However, Ladusaw interprets the data differently. He claims that (5) is three-ways ambiguous, and that this ambiguity is due to the fact that the sentence may be derived from three different sources: a higher past tense sentence lowered to complement position, a base past tense complement, and a base present tense complement to which the sequence of tenses rule has applied. In his opinion, these three sources correspond with the interpretations that the time of walking is before, after, or simultaneous with the time of seeing, respectively.

I think that the above illustrations are sufficient to substantiate the claim that there is not much point in developing 'higher order' theories of tense as long as there is no basic descriptive theory to help us to classify and interpret the data.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore one of the aims of the present book to

3. The numerous theories developed in tense logic are clear examples of theories that suffer from the defect of being based on scanty, and moreover often misinterpreted, data. It is therefore not surprising that these theories have little to offer that is useful for a linguistic theory of tense in English.

## 6 *Tense in English*

fill this gap and offer such a basic theory. This is done in the first half of the book. In chapter 2 I develop a full descriptive theory of tense, in which all the data (as far as I am aware of them) are given their proper places. This theory consists of a number of rules and principles which (in my opinion) provide for the different uses of the tenses in English and predict which tenses can be used in particular environments and contexts.<sup>4</sup> Since, obviously, not all principles are operative in all contexts, ample attention is devoted to the necessary restrictions and conditions. For some of the major principles this is not done in chapter 2, but in the next chapter, where the possibilities and restrictions can be explored at greater length. Chapter 4 then closes off the first part of the book with a scrutiny of two areas of English grammar which have proved to be particularly troublesome and have therefore frequently been discussed in recent times: the use of tenses in indirect speech, and the use of the present tense vs. *will* in conditional clauses referring to the future. These two subjects are seen as test cases for the descriptive theory developed in the previous chapters.

The second part of the book concerns matters of a different kind. It no longer deals with the use of the tenses in simple and complex sentences and in stretches of text and discourse, but rather with the internal structure of the tenses, i.e. with the temporal schemata which they realize. Here, I think, there is a second gap to be filled in the linguistic literature. This time it is not a gap in the sense that there is no theory – the theories abound – but in the sense that there is no *satisfactory* theory.

My quest for temporal schemata begins in chapter 5, where I discuss the theory that is by far the most influential in the recent literature, viz. the analysis proposed by Reichenbach (1947). After summing up the various objections that can be made to this theory I conclude by separating the elements that are useful from those that should be given up in favour of a better alternative. I then proceed to discuss the theory more recently advanced by Comrie (1985), which departs from Reichenbach (1947) in a number of ways. Here again I argue that the theory is valuable in some respects but needs revising on other points. The conclusion is that, if we want to build a theory which produces the correct temporal schemata for the different tenses, we must adopt the valuable elements from the theories of both Reichenbach and Comrie and remedy their defects.

In chapter 6 a theory is developed which I think comes up to these requirements. Here I single out the 'primitives' that are to be the corner-stones of the temporal schemata and examine the temporal relations that can hold between them. I also discuss the role of temporal

4. The rules in question concern the use of tenses not only in unembedded clauses but also in embedded clauses and in discourse.

adverbials and examine how the theory can account for generic and progressive sentences. Chapter 7, finally, applies the theory to each of the English tenses. That is, it examines what is the basic temporal structure that is realized by the present tense, the preterit, the present perfect, etc.

## 2 SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

There are a few theoretical and methodological questions that must be briefly gone into before I can conclude this introduction.

**2.1** I should like to make clear from the outset that I do not subscribe to such theories as claim that there is no connection between tense and time. I accept Lyons' (1977:68) definition of tense, which says that tense 'grammaticalizes the relationship which holds between the time of the situation that is being described and the temporal zero-point of the deictic context'.<sup>5</sup> As stressed by Lyons (1977:682), 'the crucial fact about tense, whether we are talking about sentences or propositions, is that it is a deictic category. A tensed proposition, therefore, will be, not merely time-bound, or even temporally restricted: it will contain a reference to some point or period of time which cannot be identified except in terms of the zero-point of utterance.' (see also Rescher and Urquhart 1971:27).

According to this definition, only finite verb forms can be said to express tense. Nonfinite verb forms (i.e. infinitives, gerunds and participles) express a single temporal relation, viz. they relate the situation to some other time, which may or may not be the temporal zero-point (the time of speaking).<sup>6</sup> (In fact, the reference time in question is usually the time of the head clause situation.) A tense, by contrast, expresses the various relations that hold between the situation and the zero-point. If the tense is an 'absolute tense' (such as the preterit), it relates the situation directly to the zero-point. If it is a 'relative tense' (like the past perfect), it relates the situation to a reference time which is itself related to the zero-point (either directly or via other reference times). In other words, tenses realize temporal schemata which necessarily involve the zero-point, whereas nonfinite verb forms do not. Nonfinite clauses will therefore be treated as tenseless (untensed). (This accords with the fact that nonfinite clauses are by definition dependent clauses: they cannot be

5. We find the same definition in other words in Fleischman (1982:10): 'tense will be defined as a deictic category of grammar, marked formally by an affix, particle, auxiliary, etc., whose primary function is to mark sequence of events in direct or indirect relation to a temporal zero-point, which is the moment of the speech event'.

6. For the time being I will disregard the exceptional possibility that the temporal zero-point is a time other than the coding time (time of speaking) (see chapter 2, section 2).

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used as statements and cannot, therefore, be assigned a truth value.)<sup>7</sup>

Clauses whose verb form is in the subjunctive mood are also untensed (see Heny 1982:112). Like nonfinite forms, subjunctive forms merely express a single temporal relation. Thus, the 'present subjunctive' just expresses simultaneity. For this reason it can be used after any tense (see Er-Rayyan 1986:72):

- (6) Bill suggests/suggested/will suggest/had suggested/would suggest that we leave.

It should be noted that the term 'tense' is not always defined so restrictively as is done in Lyons (1977) and here. For example, Comrie (1985) also treats tense as a deictic category (p. 14), but (in spite of the fact that he refers to Lyons' treatment of deixis in a footnote) he accepts a much broader definition of deixis: according to him, a verb form is deictic if it relates a situation to a reference point, even if this referent point is not the 'speech time'.<sup>8</sup> Comrie therefore uses the term 'relative tenses' to refer to nonfinite verb forms that have 'relative time reference, i.e. time reference relative to a deictic centre other than the present moment' (p. 16), as in *Those sitting on the benches were forced to move*. In this book the term 'relative tense' will be defined differently. As far as I can see, the issue is largely a terminological one. However, it is important to see the precise meaning that is going to be ascribed to the term 'tense'.

2.2 The linguistic literature reveals a total lack of consensus as to the question of how many tenses there are in English. A great many linguists hold that we can speak of different tenses only if we have to do with morphologically differentiated verb forms. This leads to the conclusion that there are only two tenses in English: the past tense and the present (or 'nonpast') tense.<sup>9</sup> In this theory, such verb forms involving different auxiliaries as *will do*, *has done*, *will have done* all belong to the same (in this case: present) tense. However, other linguists hold that tenses may be

7. It should be clear from these remarks that we cannot subscribe to McCawley's (1973) claim that *have* in English is always the realization of past tense. Our position is that *have* means no more than anteriority. (As noted by Lyons (1977:89), anteriority is not a deictic notion and should therefore be distinguished from 'past'.) In tenseless constructions (e.g. infinitives, gerunds, participles) *have* just expresses this temporal relation; when used as a finite form (i.e. in one of the perfect tenses) the anteriority relation in question is part of a temporal schema that ultimately relates the time of the situation to the coding time. For example, in the past perfect tense *had* expresses a relation of anteriority between the time of the situation and some other time, which is itself 'past' with respect to the coding time.

8. In his review article on Comrie (1985), Dahl (1987:491) also draws attention to this difference between Lyons' definition of deixis and Comrie's.

9. See e.g. Jespersen (1931:3), Trager and Smith (1951:77), Twaddell (1960), Ota (1963:2), Joes (1964:120), Chomsky (1965), Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968), Streng (1972), Enc (1987:634), etc.