

LIN241

Introduction to Semantics

Lecture 11

Tense and its relation to Grammatical Aspect

Tense and the Topic Time

- Sentences make comments about what goes on at a time.
- We call this time the Topic Time (TT).
- Tense is used to locate TT with respect to the Time of Utterance (TU).

Tense and the Topic Time

- Sentences make comments about what goes on at a time:

A: **What did you see when you entered the room?**

B: **There was a book on the table.**

- TT in B's answer is the time of entering the room
- TT is before TU
- TT is included in the time when the book is on the table

Tense and the Topic Time

- Sentences make comments about what goes on at a time:

This morning, Jess wrote an email his mother.

- TT is some interval during the morning
- TT is before TU
- TT includes the time of writing an email

Tense in English

- In English, there are three ways to relate TT to TU:
 - present: $TT = TU$
 - past: $TT < TU$
 - future: $TT > TU$

Tense in English

- These three different tenses are expressed by a combination of inflection and auxiliaries:
 - present: I believe in you.
 - past: I believed in you.
 - future: I will believe in you.
- They also combine with grammatical aspect.

Tense and Aspect combinations: Present

- Present progressive:
 - **Jess is smoking.**
 - $TT = TU \ \& \ TT \subseteq TSit$
- Present stative:
 - **Jess is happy.**
 - $TT = TU \ \& \ TT \subseteq TSit$

Tense and Aspect combinations: Past

- Past progressive:
 - **Jess was smoking.**
 - $TT < TU$ & $TT \subseteq TSit$

Tense and Aspect combinations: Past

- Past, unmarked aspect with stative predicate:
 - **Jess was happy.**
 - $TT < TU$ & $TT \subseteq TSit$
- Past, unmarked aspect with dynamic predicate:
 - **Jess smoked.**
 - $TT < TU$ & $TSit \subseteq TT$

Tense and Aspect combinations: Future

- Future progressive:
 - Jess will be smoking.
 - $TT > TU$ & $TT \subseteq TSit$

Tense and Aspect combinations: Future

- Future, unmarked aspect with stative predicate:
 - **Jess will be happy.**
 - $TT > TU \ \& \ TT \subseteq Tsit$
- Future, unmarked aspect with dynamic predicate:
 - **Jess will smoke.**
 - $TT > TU \ \& \ TSit \subseteq TT$

Sequence of Tense

Embedded tense in English

- Things become more fun when we embed an inflected verb under another one:
 - **Jess said that she will leave.**
- In this example:
 - **that she will leave** is embedded under **said**
 - the matrix verb **said** is past
 - the embedded verb **will leave** is future

Past-under-present in English

- Past tenses embedded under a present tense are not problematic:
 - **Jess believes that Alex left.**
- The embedded past locates TT before TU:
 - the time of leaving is included in the embedded TT
 - the embedded TT precedes TU

Past-under-future in English

- Past tenses embedded under a future tense are more interesting:
 - **Jess will say that Alex left.**
 - the time of leaving is included in the embedded TT
 - the embedded TT precedes the time of Jess's report
 - the embedded TT does not have to precede TU!

Past-under-future in English

- Past tenses embedded under a future tense are more interesting:
 - **Jess will say that Alex left.**
- The embedded past tense locates TT with respect to the matrix TSit, rather than with respect to TU.
- Embedding can change the temporal anchor of tense.

Past-under-past in English

- A past tense in the complement of a past tense verb cannot have a *forward-shifted* interpretation:
 - Jess said that Alex left.
 - Alex's leaving cannot be later than Jess's report
- The following sentence is ungrammatical:
 - *Last week, Jess said that Alex left yesterday.

Past-under-past in English

- A past tense in the complement of a past tense verb can have a *back-shifted* interpretation:
 - Yesterday, Jess told me that Alex left a week ago.
 - Alex's leaving precedes Jess's report
- This suggest that the embedded past tense is interpreted with respect to the matrix TSit

Past-under-past in English

- However, things get more complicated.
- Simultaneous interpretations are also possible:
 - Yesterday, Jess told me that she was sick.
 - Jess's being sick is simultaneous to her report
- This cannot be analyzed as past with respect to matrix TSit

Past-under-past in English

- Crucially, simultaneous interpretations of past-under-past do always locate the TT before TU:
 - John **decided** a week ago that in ten days at breakfast he **would** say to his mother that they **were** having their last meal together. (Abusch 1988)
- The last past tense denotes a future time!
- This time is simultaneous with the time of the saying event.

Past-under-past in English

- Crucially, simultaneous interpretations of past-under-past do not always locate the TT before TU:
 - John **decided** a week ago that in ten days at breakfast he **would** say to his mother that they **were** having their last meal together. (Abusch 1988)
- This simultaneous interpretation is licensed by embedding under another past tense.
- This is known as *sequence of tense*.

Tenseless languages

What is a tenseless language?

- Jo-Wang Lin (2012): a tensed language requires the presence of a morpheme that locates a situation in time whether or not similar temporal information is conveyed by other temporal expressions.

Mandarin Chinese as a tenseless language

- Mandarin Chinese verbs are not inflected for tense or aspect and need not co-occur with a temporal, aspectual or modal marker.

Present Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- For stative sentences, present time reference is expressed by an unmarked verb, adjective or nominal:

a. Wǒ xiànzài bú xìn shén

I now not believe god

“Now I don’t believe in God.”

b. Zhāngsān (jīntiān) hěn máng

Zhangsan today very busy

“Zhangsan is busy (today).”

c. Tā nánbù rén

he southern-part person

“He is from the south.”

Present Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- Unmarked dynamic verbs are compatible with a present habitual interpretation.

Wǒ (měi tiān/chángcháng) mànǎo

I every day/often jog

“I jog (every day/often).”

- Progressive interpretations are available with the marker *zài*.

Wǒ zài mànǎo

I Prog jog

“I am jogging.”

Present Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- *Zài* is compatible with past and future adverbs:

Wǒ zuótiān zhèi-ge shíhòu zài mànpǎo

I yesterday this-CL⁶ time Prog jog

“I was jogging at this time yesterday.”

Past Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- Unmarked dynamic predicates are compatible with a past interpretation:

Lǐsì dǎpò huāpíng

Lisi break vase

“Lisi broke a vase.”

Past Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- Perfective and experiential aspect marker may be added:

Lǐsì	dǎpò-le	huāpíng
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Lisi	break-ASP	vase
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“Lisi broke a vase.”

Lǐsì	dǎpò-guò	huāpíng
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Lisi	break-ASP	vase
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“Lisi broke a vase before.”

Past Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- Bare stative predicates are not compatible with a past tense interpretation:

Xiǎomíng hěnn cōngmíng

Xiaoming very smart

a. “Xiaoming is smart.”

b. *“Xiaoming was smart.”

c. *“Xiaoming will be smart.”

Future Tense in Mandarin Chinese

- Future Time reference is expressed with modal operators, except for predicates of scheduled or planned events:

Míngtiān *(huì) xià yǔ

Tomorrow will rain

“It will rain tomorrow.”

Huǒchē sān diǎn (*huì) kāi

train three o'clock will leave

“The train leaves at three o'clock.”

An aspect based system

- Atelic/imperfective/stative predicates have a present interpretation by default.
- Telic/perfective predicates have a past interpretation by default.

Correlates of tenselessness

- Existence of Bare Nominal Predicates

Tā dà bízi

he big nose

“He has a big nose.”

Correlates of tenselessness

- Lack of expletive subjects:

Yǒu	yì-zhī	cāngyíng	zài	nǐ	de	tāng	lǐ
have	one-CL	fly	in	you	Poss	soup	inside

“There is a fly in your soup.”

Xià	yǔ	le
fall	rain	Par

“It is raining now.”

Bù	kěnéng	Zhāngsān	yǐjīng	zǒu	le
not	possible	Zhangsan	already	leave	ASP

“It’s impossible that Zhangsan has left.”

Correlates of tenselessness

- Lack of Finite/Nonfinite Distinction

Tā líkāi xuéxiào sān tiān le

He leave school three day PAR

“It has been three days since he left school.”

Tā shèfǎ líkāi xuéxiào

He try leave school

“He tried to leave school.”