

English Relative Past Tense: Simultaneous or Anterior?\*

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1. Introduction

Declerck (1991, to appear) claims that English has relative past tense as well as absolute past tense.<sup>1</sup> They are defined as follows: absolute past tense represents anteriority relative to the temporal zero-point or  $t_0$  (usually the speech time), whereas relative past tense represents simultaneity relative to a time point (or span) established in the context, the so-called reference point.

The distinction between absolute and relative past tense is not new. What is new in Declerck (1991, to appear) is that he divides finite past tense into two types: finite absolute past tense and finite relative past tense. Traditionally, it has been considered that absolute past tense is connected to finite past tense form (or preterite) and relative past tense to participle or nonfinite verbal form. Consider (1):

- (1) a. The girl playing tennis was pretty.
- b. She seemed to have been sad.

Sentence (1a) encodes two situations, the situation of a girl's playing tennis and that of her being pretty.<sup>2</sup> The latter situation has absolute past tense which is associated with the finite preterite *was*, while the former has relative past tense which is associated with the present participle *playing*. The preterite *was* indicates that the situation of a girl's being pretty is prior to the speech time. On the other hand, the participle *playing* does not come with an obligatory past time interpretation. Its 'pastness' is dependent on some other specified time or a reference point (in this case the time

referred to by *was*).

In (1b), the pastness denoted by the finite verbal form *seemed*, which represents absolute tense, is measured from the point of view of the speech time, while the pastness denoted by the nonfinite verbal form *have been*, which represents relative tense, is measured from the point of view of the relevant reference point, the time indicated by that finite verb.

However, in fact, finite past tense can be used to represent its situation as prior to a reference point. Observe:

- (2) a. In 2010, Ebenezer will say that he got tenure in 2000.  
 b. Tomorrow, Frances will say that she was absent today. (Declerck (1991: 161))

In (2a) the situation of Ebenezer's getting tenure is anterior to the situation of his utterance in the future (functioning as a reference point), not to the speech time. The same observation applies to (2b). Thus, finite past tense can be divided into two types: finite absolute past tense and finite relative (non-absolute) past tense. In what follows, I will be concerned only with finite past tense (henceforth I call it simply past tense).

This paper claims that, as Declerck points out, English has (finite) relative past tense. However, I do not subscribe to Declerck's view that English has relative past tense representing simultaneity vis-à-vis a reference point (i.e. some other time established in the context): within Declerck's system, *was feeling* in *John said that he was feeling happy* expresses relative past tense which represents its situation as simultaneous with the matrix-clause time (i.e. the time of John's utterance); and the preterites in (2) are not regarded as expressing (pure) relative tense. Instead, I argue that both absolute and relative past tenses represent the anteriority relation and the only difference is their 'anchoring point': the former tense expresses

anteriority in relation to the speech time, whereas the latter expresses anteriority in relation to a reference point. Thus, on our approach, the preterite *was feeling* in *John said that he was feeling happy* as well as the preterites in (2) expresses its situation as anterior to the time of John's utterance: the reason why such a sentence can receive a simultaneity reading is due to the nature of unbounded situations, not to the semantic structure (or semantics) of relative past tense.

This paper consists of five sections. Section 2 outlines some preliminaries within Declerck's temporal system. Section 3 argues that English relative past tense represents anteriority with regard to a reference point, comparing Declerck's view on relative past tense with ours. Section 4 examines some arguments that Declerck claims support his view, showing that the notion of relative past tense expressing simultaneity relative to a reference point is not needed. Section 5 makes concluding remarks.

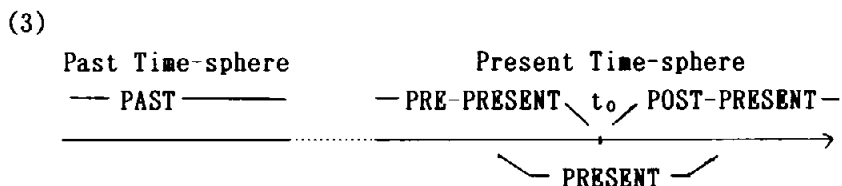
## 2. Absolute Sector, Temporal Domain and Shift of Temporal Perspective

In this section, we are concerned with some preliminaries which Declerck assumes and are thus necessary for the discussion to follow.

We begin with the conceptualization of time. Declerck primarily divides time into two parts, the past time-sphere and the non-past (or present) time-sphere. Declerck (1991: 16) notes that the past time-sphere is a time-span of indefinite length which lies completely before the temporal zero-point (or  $t_0$ ); the present time-sphere is a time-span of indefinite length which includes  $t_0$  and divided by  $t_0$  into three sub-portions: the pre-present sector (i.e. the portion that precedes  $t_0$ ), the present sector (i.e. the portion that is centered on  $t_0$ ), and the post-present sector (i.e. the portion that follows  $t_0$ ). The past time-sphere is associated with the past tense, the pre-present

sector with the present perfect, the present sector with the present tense and the post-present sector with the future tense.

Within Declerck's system, the conceptualization of time in terms of time-spheres and sectors is represented as follows:



Time flow goes from left to right. The dotted line means that there is a 'subjective break' between the two time-spheres. Here, the term subjective is used in the sense that the borderline between the two time-spheres is determined based on our subjective judgment. Declerck calls the four capitalized portions in (3) *absolute sectors* because they are defined in direct relation to  $t_0$ .

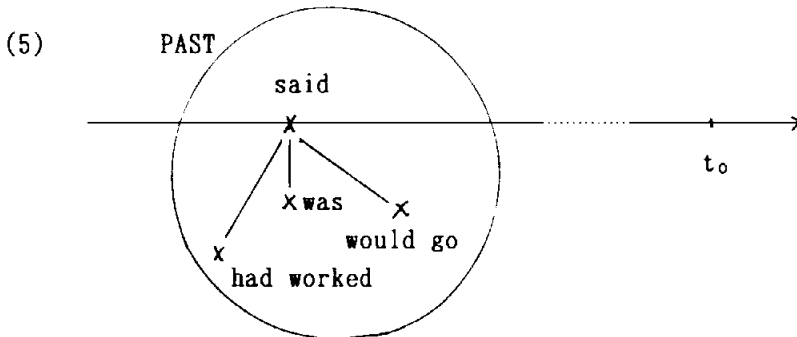
Let us turn to the notion of *temporal domain*. Declerck defines it as the time interval comprising the times of several situations which are related to each other. (A temporal domain can consist of the time of a single situation.) Observe the following:

- (4) John said he was tired because he had worked hard and that he would go to sleep early. (Declerck (1991: 20))

In (4) a temporal domain in the past time-sphere (henceforth a past domain) consists of the four times of situations, i.e. the time of John's utterance (represented by *said*), the time of John's being tired (represented by *was*), the time of John's working hard (represented by *had worked*), and the time of John's going to sleep (represented by *would go*). Among these four verb forms (i.e. *said*, *was*, *had worked* and *would go*), only the first one is regarded as an absolute (past) tense form in that the time

represented by it is directly related to the temporal zero-point (i.e. the speech time) and establishes a past domain; whereas the other three are regarded as relative tense forms in that the times represented by them are related to the relevant reference point, the time represented by the absolute tense form (i.e. *said*) and express relations in that past domain: the pluperfect (i.e. *had worked*) represents anteriority, the preterite (i.e. *was*) simultaneity, and the conditional tense (i.e. *would go*) posteriority, relative to the matrix-clause time associated with the absolute past tense form (i.e. *said*).

To capture this clearly, their temporal relations are diagrammed as in:



A circle denotes a temporal domain. A vertical line represents simultaneity, whereas a slanting line represents either anteriority or posteriority. What is to be kept in mind is that within Declerck's system relative past tense represents the simultaneity relation in a past domain.

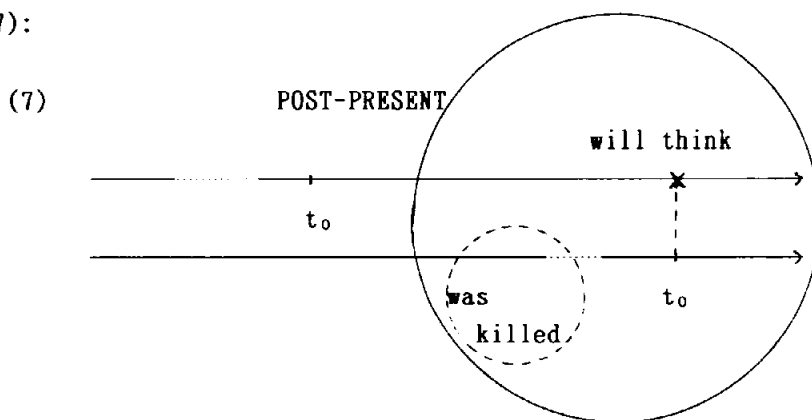
Finally, let us take a look at the notion of *shift of temporal perspective*. Declerck (to appear) defines it as "the phenomenon that a situation which is interpreted as lying in a particular sector is sometimes treated as if it belonged to another absolute sector" (p. 11). (See also Declerck (1991: 66-76).) For example, a situation described by a preterite in a temporal domain in the post-present sector (henceforth a post-present domain), which is an absolute sector, is treated as if it belonged to the past time-sphere, i.e. another absolute

sector:

- (6) [If we dump his body in Soho after we have killed him]  
 the police will think that he *was killed* there.  
 (Declerck (to appear: 11))

In (6) the preterite *was killed* in the main clause refers to a situation anterior to a time in a post-present domain (i.e. the future time), viz. the time of the police's thinking.

The temporal relations of the main clause is represented as in (7):



In (7) the temporal zero-point ( $t_0$ ) is shifted from the speech time to a reference point in a post-present domain (i.e. the time of the police's thinking). A dotted circle symbolizes a temporal (sub-)domain. As is clear from (7), the preterite *was killed* has both a characteristic of absolute tense and one of relative tense: it establishes a temporal domain, on the one hand, and it is not directly related to the speech time, on the other. Declerck calls this type of past tense *pseudo-absolute past tense*. Thus, the preterites in (2) (i.e. *got tenure* and *was absent*) are both pseudo-absolute past tenses within Declerck's system.

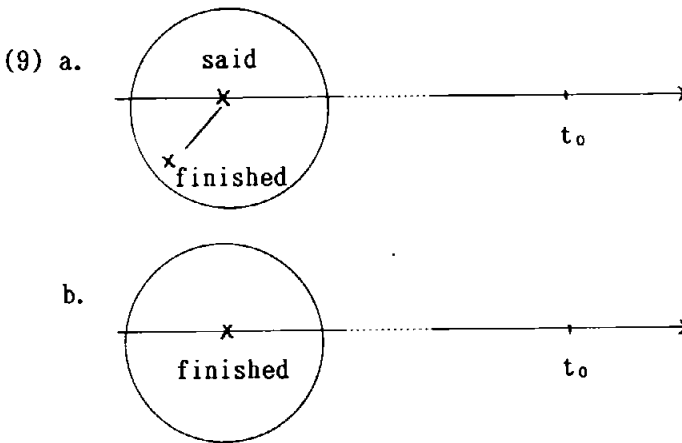
### 3. Relative Past Tense Represents Anteriority in Temporal Domain

As we have seen in the previous section, Declerck claims that English relative past tense represents simultaneity in a past domain (see (5)). Contra Declerck, however, I argue that in English relative past tense as well as absolute past tense expresses anteriority: the only difference between them is that the former expresses anteriority in a temporal domain, namely, anteriority relative to a reference point (i.e. a time established in the context), whereas the latter expresses anteriority relative to the speech time. They are exemplified in (8):

- (8) a. Mary said that she finished her homework.  
 b. Mary finished her homework.

In (8a) the time of Mary's finishing homework is interpreted as anterior to the time of Mary's utterance, which is, in turn, prior to the speech time. In (8b), by contrast, the pastness of that situation is measured directly from the speech time.

Their temporal relations are schematized in (9a) and (9b):



What is to be noted here is that, as is self-evident from (9a), relative past tense represents the anteriority relation in a temporal domain (in this case, in the past domain established by *said*). Our position differs from Declerck's in this regard.

With this in mind, let us compare our view on relative past tense with Declerck's. I claim that our view has an advantage over Declerck's for the following two reasons. First, Declerck's view needs two kinds of relative past tense, viz. relative past tense and pseudo-absolute past tense. As Declerck himself admits, pseudo-absolute past tense is a kind of relative past tense in that it refers to the time of the situation prior to a reference point, i.e. a time established in the context (see (2) and (6)). On the other hand, our view needs only one relative past tense, which represents anteriority vis-à-vis a reference point. Thus, in our view, the preterites in (2) and (6) are thought of as representing (pure) relative past tense, not pseudo-absolute past tense. Our claim is preferable to Declerck's in that our approach can subsume both absolute and relative past tenses into the notion of anteriority, which is reflected in the past tense morpheme *-ed*.

Secondly, Declerck's view on relative past tense requires at least two different kinds of factors, i.e. the semantics of past tense and some pragmatic constraint, while ours requires only one factor, i.e. the semantics of past tense, in order to account for some phenomena concerning past tense in indirect speech/thought. For example, let us consider (10):

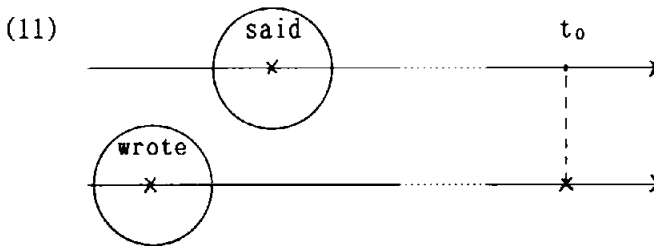
(10) John said that he wrote a book.

(Declerck (to appear: 29))

The only interpretation of (10) is that the complement-clause time (i.e. the time referred to by *wrote*) precedes the matrix-clause time (i.e. the time referred to by *said*). To explain this, Declerck considers the preterite in the complement clause to be an absolute tense form, which establishes a past domain of its own, and states that the complement-clause time happens before the matrix-clause time for some pragmatic reason(s).

The temporal relation in (10) is represented as in:





The time of situation (or the event time) associated with absolute tense, by definition, is directly related to the speech time, so both the times referred to by *said* and *wrote* in (10) are directly related to the speech time, as shown in (11). The reason why the time of John's writing a book precedes the time of John's utterance is due to some pragmatic constraint. That is to say, within Declerck's system, the semantics of absolute tense represents its situation as anterior to the speech time, on the one hand, and some pragmatic constraint enables the complement-clause time to precede the matrix-clause time.

Our approach, by contrast, needs only the semantics of relative past tense so as to explain why sentence (10) receives only such a reading. Since the semantics of relative past tense expresses anteriority in a temporal domain, the preterite *wrote* represents the anteriority relation in the past domain established by *said*.

Our claim is supported by the following quotation from Hornstein (1990): "When a finite sentence is embedded as a propositional argument under a finite verb, the temporal interpretation of the embedded clause is dependent on that of the embedding clause" (p. 120). In this view, it is appropriately accounted for in terms of the semantics of relative past tense why in a case like (10) the complement-clause time is always anterior to the matrix-clause time. The semantic structure of relative past tense (in this case expressing anteriority with relation to the matrix-clause time) makes the complement-clause time precede the matrix-clause time.

In this section, I have claimed that English relative past tense represents the anteriority relation in a temporal domain;

and I have shown that our view on relative past tense is preferable to Declerck's for the above two reasons. In the next section, I will observe four major arguments that Declerck offers in order to justify his claim that relative past tense represents simultaneity in a past domain, and demonstrate that they do not necessarily support his claim and they can be explained by our approach.

#### 4. Is Relative Past Tense Representing Simultaneity in Past Domain Necessary?

##### 4.1. *When*-clauses

Declerck presents the following as an argument for his claim that English has relative past tense which expresses simultaneity:

- (12) [He told us about what he planned to do.] When he was sixty, he would have his autobiography written by a journalist. But he would have the world believe that he had written it himself when he was in hospital.

(Declerck (to appear: 16))

The event time (E) of the verb *was* in the second *when*-clause coincides with the E of the verb *had written*, which is, in turn, anterior to a reference point in the past time-sphere (i.e. the time of a man's deceiving the world).

The point here is that Declerck ascribes the simultaneity relation between the E of *was* and the E of *had written* to the semantics of relative past tense, not to the lexical property (or the discourse function) of *when*. He notes that the reason is that the temporal connective *when* is compatible with tense forms representing anteriority (e.g. the pluperfect) or posteriority (e.g. *be going to*):

- (13) a. He was shot when he had opened the gates.

- b. He was shot when he was going to open the gates.  
(Declerck (to appear: 15, fn. 12))

In his view, *had opened* expresses anteriority with respect to the main-clause situation and *was going to open* posteriority with respect to the main-clause situation. What he is arguing is that if *when* represents the simultaneity relation between two situations, it can be compatible neither with the pluperfect nor with *be going to*.

However, such examples do not necessarily prove that *when* itself does not represent simultaneity between the main-clause and *when*-clause time. Under the assumption that both a sentence in the perfect and a sentence involving *be going to* have a dual structure, i.e. a structure which consists of two (sub-)situations, we can hold the general view that *when* represents a relation of simultaneity between the relevant two times.<sup>3</sup>

The explanation of (13) in terms of dual structure goes as follows. In (13a) there are two (sub-)situations in the *when*-clause: the situation of a man's opening the gates and the situation following that situation, i.e. its resultative state (the state of the gates' being open). The main-clause time (the time of a man's being shot) is interpreted as simultaneous with the time of the resultative state of the *when*-clause, not with the time of a man's opening the gates itself. The same is true of (13b). The main-clause time is construed as simultaneous with the time of a man's will to open the gates, not with the time of its actualization.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is possible (at least in this hypothesis) to say that *when* expresses the simultaneity relation between the relevant two times. So the sentences in (13) are not counterexamples to the general view on *when*.

Before jumping to a conclusion, however, we must recall that Declerck assumes that relative past tense expresses simultaneity in a past domain. This suggests that he assumes the identification of the *when*-clause time to be based on the

relevant main-clause time. The assumption seems to be grounded on the view that *when*-clauses are temporal clauses, and so they are, subordinated to, and dependent on, main clauses with respect to establishment of temporal location. Under this assumption, it is possible that relative past tense in a *when*-clause expresses a temporal relation (i.e. simultaneity) in a past domain which is established by an absolute tense form in a main clause. Observe:

- (14) I was still thirsty when it was five o'clock.  
(Declerck (to appear: 21))

Within Declerck's framework, the preterite *was* in the main clause establishes a past domain and the *when*-clause time is represented as simultaneous with the main-clause time by virtue of the semantics of relative past tense expressing simultaneity in a past domain.

However, Declerck's view on *when*-clauses is not convincing. It is a prevailing view that a *when*-clause modifies its corresponding main clause. That is, determining the position of a *when*-clause time does not presuppose determining the position of its corresponding main clause. This implies that the identification of the event time (E) of a *when*-clause is done independently of the identification of the E of its corresponding main clause. Given this, we can say that, although a *when*-clause is syntactically subordinated to its corresponding main clause, the former is semantically (or temporal-structurally) independent of the latter.

This is supported by Leech's (1987) observation on *after*-clauses, which are temporal clauses. Consider (15):

- (15) I ate my lunch after my wife came back from town.  
(Leech (1987: 48))

Leech (1987: 49) states that sentence (15) measures the 'beforeness' of the arrival directly from the speech time, not

from the main-clause time (i.e. the time of the speaker's eating lunch). This indicates that the preterite *came* in the *after*-clause represents absolute tense. We can infer, by analogy, that the same holds for preterites in *when*-clauses.

Our inference is justified by the fact that preterites in *when*-clauses can be specified by temporal adverbs, as shown in:

- (16) a. When I awoke one morning, I found the house in an uproar. (Quirk et al. (1985: 1079))  
 b. When I entered the room yesterday at ten o'clock, a man was lying on the floor. (Klein (1994: 163))

In these sentences the identification of the *when*-clause situation is done by a temporal adverb like *one morning* or *yesterday at ten o'clock*, not by the main-clause time. Thus, the preterites in the *when*-clauses (i.e. *awoke* and *entered*) establish their own temporal domain, representing anteriority in relation to the speech time.

Taking the above matters into consideration, we can say that both a preterite in a main clause and a preterite in a *when*-clause are absolute past tense forms. The simultaneity relation of the *when*-clause time to the main-clause time can be attributed to the lexical property (or discourse function) of *when*.<sup>5</sup> In conclusion, we can say that a preterite in a *when* clause in the past time-sphere is not a relative past tense form representing simultaneity in a past domain, but an absolute past tense form representing anteriority with respect to the speech time (e.g. *awoke* and *entered* in (16)).

#### 4.2. Indirect Speech

Declerck states that a second argument for the existence of relative past tense expressing simultaneity in a past domain is concerned with the fact that some past tense forms are not backshifted in indirect speech/thought:

- (17) a. John thought that I was abroad.  
 b. Betty hoped that John had thought that she was abroad.  
 c. Betty hoped that John had thought that she had been abroad. (Declerck (to appear: 18))

If (17a) is the direct speech/thought version of the proposition expressing Betty's hope, its adequate indirect speech/thought counterpart is (17b), not (17c). In (17b) the verb *thought* is turned into the pluperfect version, whereas the verb *was* remains the same. This phenomenon leads Declerck to claim that the former verb represents absolute past tense and the latter relative past tense. Declerck's reasoning goes as follows. The verb *had thought* in (17b) indicates a situation anterior to the situation of Betty's hoping, the time of which corresponds to the temporal zero-point ( $t_0$ ) in (17a). Hence the verb *thought* is an absolute tense form. On the other hand, the verb *was* in (17a) remains the same in (17b) because the temporal relation between the verb in question and its immediately higher verb does not change; in both cases the situation of Betty's being abroad coincides with that of John's thinking. Declerck attributes such simultaneity to the semantics of relative past tense. He claims that since it always expresses simultaneity in a past domain, relative past tense form does not change.

However, this line of reasoning is not convincing for two reasons.<sup>6</sup> First, the above observation may suggest the existence of two different kinds of past tense, but it does not necessarily show that English has relative past tense representing simultaneity in a past domain. Secondly, a past tense form is not always turned into the pluperfect version in indirect speech/thought. Consider the following pair:

- (18) a. John said, "Betty broke the window."  
 b. John said that Betty broke the window.

When sentence (18a) is converted into its indirect speech/thought counterpart, the preterite in the reported clause (i.e. *broke*) is not necessarily turned into the pluperfect version, but can remain the same, as in (18b). In this case *broke* is interpreted as referring to a time prior to the reference point established by *said*.

A question, then, arises as to whether or not a preterite like *broke* in (18b) is a relative past tense form. Declerck himself notices this point, claiming that such a preterite should be regarded as an absolute tense form because in such a case the complement-clause time is construed as connected directly to the speech time.

As has already been mentioned in section 3, however, the preterite at issue (e.g. *broke* in (18b)) can be regarded as representing relative past tense whose event time is primarily related to the relevant reference point (e.g. the time referred to by *said* in (18b)). Thus, both our approach and Declerck's one can account for the phenomenon at stake.

Recall here that our approach needs only the semantics of relative past tense, while Declerck's approach needs the semantics of absolute past tense and some pragmatic constraint, in order to explain why in (18b) the complement-clause time happens before the matrix-clause time. In this sense, our approach is preferable to Declerck's one.

#### 4.3. Ambiguity

Drawing on Lakoff's (1970) test for ambiguity, Declerck offers the ambiguity of sentence (19) as a third argument for the existence of relative past tense representing simultaneity:

(19) John said Mary was ill, and so did Bill.

(Declerck (to appear: 24))

In this sentence the second conjunct is semantically parallel to the clause *and Bill also said that Mary was ill*. According to Declerck, the point is that *was* in this paraphrase receives the same interpretation as *was* in the first conjunct in (19): if the former expresses simultaneity relative to the matrix-clause time, the latter does so; if the former expresses anteriority relative to the speech time (and refers to a past time anterior to the matrix-clause time for some pragmatic reasons), the latter does so. Declerck (to appear) states that "this is typical of readings resulting from semantic ambiguity" (p. 25), arguing that the existence of English relative past tense which expresses simultaneity is borne out by this test.

It is certain that Lakoff's ambiguity test applies to (19). However, it does not necessarily show that English has relative past tense representing simultaneity in a past domain.

Declerck claims that in the case of the simultaneity reading of (19) the preterite *was* is a relative tense form, while in the case of the anteriority reading of (19) the preterite *was* is an absolute tense form. However, the reverse combination is possible: the ambiguity test only suggests that there are two different kinds of past tense in English. We can thus say that in the case of the simultaneity reading the preterite in question represents absolute past tense, whereas in the case of the anteriority reading the preterite in question represents relative past tense.

To put it another way, we can say that when a preterite in the complement clause is an absolute tense form, it expresses anteriority with regard to the speech time and its event time is construed as simultaneous with the matrix-clause time by virtue of pragmatic factors; when a preterite in the complement clause is a relative past tense form, it expresses anteriority in relation to the matrix-clause time by virtue of the semantics of relative past tense. (Note here that I do not subscribe to this view, but argue that in both cases the preterite at issue represents relative past tense expressing anteriority relative to



the matrix-clause time. I will return to this matter in the next subsection.) The above observations show that Lakoff's ambiguity test does not necessarily support Declerck's view that relative past tense expresses simultaneity in a past domain.

#### 4.4. Boundedness/Unboundedness

Declerck regards the fact as a fourth argument that sentence (20b) cannot be interpreted as expressing the simultaneity relation in a past domain, whereas sentence (20a) can:

(20) a. John said that he was writing a book.

b. John said that he wrote a book.

(Declerck (to appear: 29))

In (20a) the time of John's writing a book obtains at the main-clause time. Within Declerck's system, the verb form *was writing* thus expresses simultaneity in a past domain established by the absolute past form *said*. In (20b), in contrast, the complement-clause time cannot be construed as simultaneous with the main-clause time. In this case Declerck regards both of the preterites (i.e. *said* and *wrote*) as absolute tense forms.

Declerck explains the difference in interpretation between (20a) and (20b) by having recourse to the notion of *boundedness/unboundedness*.<sup>7</sup> Note here that a bounded situation means a situation which actualizes its inherent end-point on the time line. A telic VP in the perfective (i.e. nonprogressive) form implies that the sentence associated with it (e.g. (20b)) represents the situation as bounded, whereas a telic VP in the progressive form implies that the sentence associated with it (e.g. (20a)) represents the situation as unbounded.

From this point of view, let us compare (20a) with (20b). In (20b) the time of John's utterance is regarded as instantaneous (or a point of time), while the time of the whole situation of writing something (i.e. a bounded situation) is

regarded as durative. Since the former cannot include the latter, a simultaneity reading is impossible. In (20a), by contrast, a clause in the progressive form (i.e. an unbounded situation) does not refer to a whole situation, but refers to a middle portion of that situation (i.e. any portion of the situation except the initial and terminal points). Since the time of John's utterance can include (or at least overlap) the time point in question, a simultaneity reading is possible.

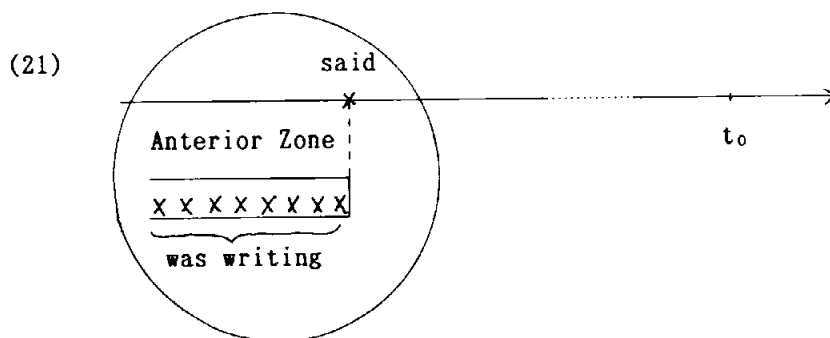
I agree with Declerck with respect to the explanation of why a bounded situation cannot bring about a simultaneity reading while an unbounded situation can. However, I do not subscribe to Declerck's view that in the case of unbounded situations (e.g. (20a)) a preterite in the complement clause represents relative past tense, whereas in the case of bounded situations (e.g. (20b)) a preterite in the complement clause represents absolute past tense; within Declerck's system, a preterite associated with an unbounded situation is a relative past tense form, while a preterite associated with a bounded situation is an absolute past tense form, despite the fact that they both appear in the complement clause. Instead, I argue that in both cases a preterite in the complement clause is a relative past tense form, representing anteriority in relation to the matrix-clause time.

Under this view, there is no problem as to bounded situations. In the case of sentences with past tense like (20b), the complement-clause time precedes the matrix-clause time. This is compatible with our claim that relative past tense expresses anteriority with respect to the relevant reference point (in this case the matrix-clause time).

Then, how can we explain the fact that sentences indicating unbounded situations (e.g. (20a)) can receive a simultaneity reading? I attribute such a reading to the nature of unbounded situations, not to the semantics of relative past tense. The semantics of relative past tense is associated with the interval stretching from a time simultaneous with the matrix-clause time into a further past (henceforth I call it *anterior zone*). Since

an unbounded situation is not delimited, it follows that such a situation prevails throughout the anterior zone established by relative past tense.

The temporal relation of (20a) is schematized as follows:



As is clear from (21), the situation of John's writing a book continues up to the time which is simultaneous with the matrix-clause time (i.e. the time of John's utterance). Hence sentence (20a) can receive a simultaneity reading.

Note, in passing, that the reason why what we call a posteriority reading (i.e. the complement-clause time follows the matrix-clause time) is not possible is predictable from the schema in (21). By virtue of the semantics of relative past tense, an unbounded situation with past tense cannot extend beyond the matrix-clause time. More precisely, whether or not the situation at issue obtains beyond the matrix-clause time is irrelevant to the truth conditions of a sentence like (20a).

The following sentences are apparently counterexamples to our approach:

- (22) a. Bruce said that Mary was pregnant.  
 b. I heard that Sally was in London.

(Eng (1987: 635))

These sentences are ambiguous in two ways: one reading is a simultaneity reading and the other an anteriority reading.

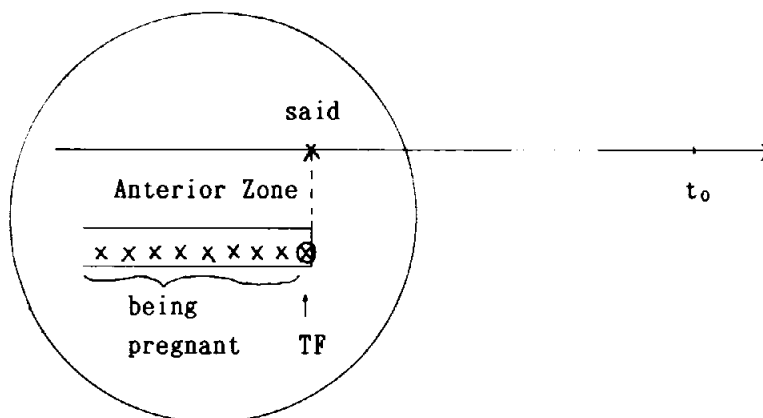
Our schema in (21) as it stands cannot explain this

phenomenon. In order to account for it, I will use the notion of *temporal focus* (TF), which is introduced in Declerck (1991). Declerck (p.c.) defines temporal focus as the time that the speaker focuses his attention on. Since this definition is too simple, I modify the definition as follows:

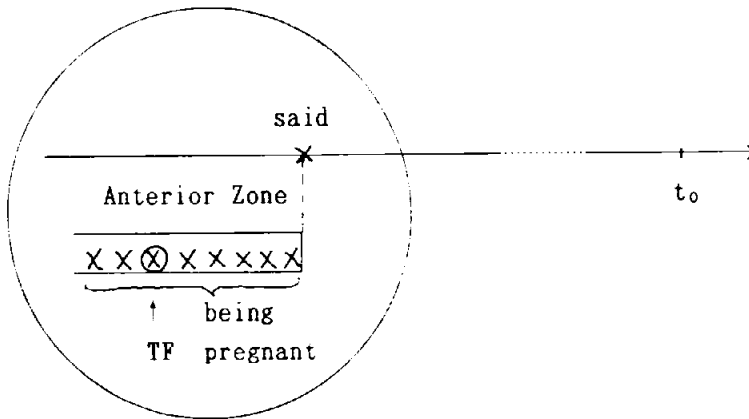
- (23) Temporal focus is a speaker's focus, which is fixed on the time point or span to which the speaker's special attention is being paid.

By adding this notion to the schema in (21), we can explain why the sentences in (22) are ambiguous. In (22a), for example, a simultaneity reading will be obtained if TF is fixed on the time point (or span) which is simultaneous with the matrix-clause time; whereas an anteriority reading will be obtained if TF is fixed on the time point (or span) which is completely prior to the matrix-clause time. Both of the readings are schematized in:

- (24) a. Simultaneity Reading:



## b. Anteriority Reading:



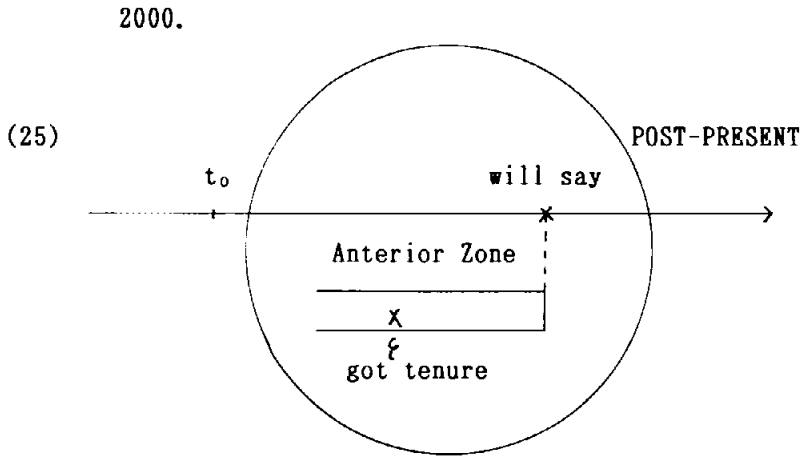
The time point (or span) indicated by an arrow is the target point (or span) on which TF is fixed, which is symbolized by a circled cross. As is self-evident from the schemata in (24), the semantics of relative past tense in the case of the simultaneity reading is equal to that in the case of the anteriority reading: the only difference between the above two schemata is the position of TF, which is not inherent in the semantics of relative past tense.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that in English both absolute and relative past tenses represent the anteriority relation: the only difference is that the former expresses anteriority relative to the speech time, whereas the latter expresses anteriority relative to a reference point, a time established in the context.

Our approach has an advantage over Declerck's in that ours can subsume what Declerck calls pseudo-absolute past tense (e.g. the preterites in (2) and (6)) under relative past tense. Thus, the temporal relation of (2a) is diagrammed in (25):

(2) a. In 2010, Ebenezer will say that he got tenure in



The situation of Ebenezer's getting tenure is bounded, so only the anteriority reading will be obtained. The semantics of relative past tense establishes the anterior zone, on the one hand, and the bounded situation (i.e. Ebenezer's getting tenure) actualizes only at a certain point (or span) in that zone, on the other. Temporal focus is thus disambiguously fixed on the situation itself.

Moreover, on our approach, we need only the semantics of relative past tense so as to explain why the complement-clause time precedes the matrix-clause time; whereas Declerck's approach needs two different kinds of factors, i.e. the semantics of absolute past tense and some pragmatic constraint. I claim that, as is clear from the schemata in (21), the semantics of relative past tense is associated only with the anterior zone which extends from the matrix-clause time into a further past, and the complement-clause situation obtains/actualizes in that zone.

Finally, by introducing the notion of temporal focus, we can account for the ambiguity of an unbounded sentence like *John said that Mary was happy*: an anteriority reading will be obtained if TF is fixed on some time anterior to the matrix-clause time, whereas a simultaneity reading will be obtained if TF is fixed on the time simultaneous with the matrix-clause time.

As far as the phenomena we have examined thus far are

concerned, we can conclude that the notion of relative past tense expressing simultaneity in a past domain is not needed.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Following Declerck, I use the term *past tense* in the sense of 'simple past.' So I do not apply the term to forms like the pluperfect and the conditional tense.

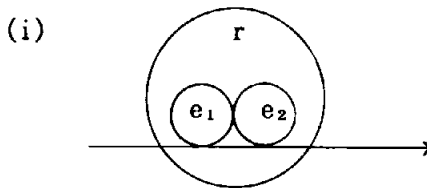
<sup>2</sup> I use the term *situation* in such a way that it can cover an action, an event, a state of affairs, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Nakau (1985, 1994) and Frawley (1992) argue for the dual structure of the perfect tense: the (whole) situation with which the perfect tense is associated consists of two sub-situations, a preceding situation and its corresponding resultative state. This position is justified in Frawley (1992: 347-348). I argue that a sentence involving *be going to* also consists of two sub-situations: one is associated with *be going to* and the other with the infinitive form following it. The reason why we regard a situation referred to by *be going to* as an independent situation is that, as is seen in Hopper and Traugott (1993), the unit *be going to* stems diachronically from the combination of the verb *go* in the progressive form with the preposition *to*. Since the verb *go* in *be going to* is originally a main verb, it can be said that *be going to* itself describes one situation.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term *actualize* in the sense of 'come to existence on the time line' or 'make something come to existence

on the time line.'

<sup>5</sup> Two situations, when combined by *when*, sometimes imply a sequential ordering of the events (e.g. (16a)). In order to explain this, Hinrichs (1986) proposes that the temporal connective *when* introduces a temporal frame (which is called a reference point in Reichenbach's terms), where two events (i.e. accomplishments or achievements) are connected to each other, as shown in:



(cf. Hinrichs (1986: 75))

The symbols *r* and *e* stand for reference point (or frame) and event, respectively. As is predictable from (i), we interpret two situations combined by *when* as happening sequentially in the same time span, i.e. the temporal frame established by *when*.

<sup>6</sup> Declerck himself notices that in this respect his reasoning is one of the possibilities coming from the phenomenon in question.

<sup>7</sup> Declerck (1989: 277-278; 1991: 119-129) distinguishes a telic situation from a bounded situation. The former is a situation which has a potential inherent end-point, whereas the latter is a situation which actually reaches the inherent end-point. Thus, the telic VP *draw a circle* can occur both in a bounded sentence (e.g. *Mary drew a circle*) and in an unbounded sentence (e.g. *Mary was drawing a circle*). He also discriminates between an atelic and an unbounded situation. An atelic situation (e.g. the situation of *Mary's loving John*) can be represented in a bounded sentence like *Mary loved John for two years*, where the atelic situation is combined with a temporal adverb which delimits a situation.



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