

# A Pragma-linguistic Analysis of the English Present and Past Tenses

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**Abstract:** This paper explores a pragmatic approach in the analysis of the English present and past tenses. The paper contends that the English present and past are best interpreted by examining not only the propositions expressed within these tenses, but also the in-built meanings expressed by the pragmatics of the context, world knowledge and word-class combinations that underpin them. Hinging on the Relevance Theory of Communication (cf. Sperber and Wilson cited in Xinyue Yao [1], this paper concludes that the value of a proposition is essentially speaker-hearer driven. From the end of the speaker, processing communication entails knowing the topic-relevance of a speaker's utterance (message). On the whole, the complexity of the English present and past as well as incompetence in their normative properties culminate into non-pragmatic use of them in discourse.

**Key words:** Pragmatics, semantics, the English present tense, the English past tense, Relevance Theory of Communication, topic-relevance, optimal relevance

## INTRODUCTION

There are different contentious views on the meaning and interpretation of tense in English. For example, Xinyue Yao [1] ponders on the spread of the event or state described by the verb and its argument in the use of the English past perfect. He notes that "the past perfect is viewed as having a single meaning, but its perfect sense (construction) interacts with sentential elements and structure." This study mainly investigates the pragmatic motivations for using the English present alongside the grammar rules that underpin their use.

## Abbreviations and Symbols

To facilitate easy referencing and analysis, this study uses certain abbreviations and symbols for concepts:

*a* (addressee);

*p* (proposition);

*ext.-n c* (Extended-now clause);

*e* (event);

= (equal to);

+/- (inference);

*s* (sentence);

*m* (meaning);

>*I* (implicature);

*I*> (explicature);

*s* \_\_\_\_ *e* (spread of event);

≠ (context);

*tr* (topic relevance);

*wk* (world knowledge).

### Definition of Terms

Terms used in this study are defined as follows:

**Addressee** (the hearer);

**Proposition** (the message predicated in a sentence);

**Extended-now clause** (any proposition spread beyond the present);

**Event** (sentential action or state-of-affair);

**Equal to** (as in mathematics);

**Inference** (a deductive process);

**Sentence** (any linguistic stretch with subject and predicate);

**Meaning** (the sense(s) of a word or linguistic stretch);

**Implicature** (meaning implied in expressions/utterances);

**Explicature** (meaning deduced from logical forms of utterances);

**Spread of event** (the time frames of a proposition/activity/state-of-affair conveyed by an utterance);

**Context** (any variable that underpin the use of language);

**Topic relevance** (the potential for an utterance to invoke societal phenomena in inference-making);

**World knowledge** (shared background awareness).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars hold the view that while linguistic meaning is not context-dependent, pragmatic meaning, is. The English present and past communicate meanings that subject the addressee into a process of inferring the pragmatic and semantic sense/representations of utterances in terms of their in-built implicatures and explicatures. It should be noted that the distinction between implicatures and explicatures – as indicated in the literature – is a contentious issue.

### Tense and Aspect in English Grammar

Ordinarily, we cannot exhaust the literature of the English grammar on tense and aspect, within the scope of this study. See Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. [2] for useful tips in this regard. Tense is marked in English verbs to show the time of an action or event. The basic tenses are the past, present and future. Some grammarians believe that there are only two tenses in English (the present and the past) because the English verb is inflected to show only the past tense, whereas to show the future tense, auxiliary verbs – not inflections – are used with the present tense which forms the nucleus of the verb; thus, the future is viewed as an “aspect” of the present and past (i.e. the present future and past future abound).

### Clauses and Sentences in the English Language

A clause is a group of words that has a finite verb. Types of clauses include noun clause (e.g. wh- interrogative clause, yes-no interrogative clause, that-clause, nominal -ing clause and to-infinitive clause). Consider a few examples (the underlined units):

- (i) How it will be done will be made known (wh-interrogative clause);
- (ii) Do you know if she will be there tomorrow? (yes-no interrogative clause).

The that-clause includes:

- (i) That he passed the examination is amazing (subject of the verb);
- (ii) I know that he passed the examination (direct object of the verb);
- (iii) Our belief is that man is born free (subject complement).

A sentence is a group of words which has a subject and predicate, although the subject may be implied (covert). Sentence types include: simple sentence, complex sentence, compound sentence and compound-complex sentence. Sentences can also be categorized according to: structure (e.g. SVO/subject-verb-object, SVC/subject-verb-complement, SVOA/subject-verb-object-adjunct); communicative function (e.g. commands, questions, statements and requests). See Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. [2] for more insights on the English sentence.

### An Overview of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a non-formalist approach to language study. For the purpose of achieving illocutionary goals, language users violate linguistic conventions.

Bosco et al. [3] submits that “conversation is a two-fold activity in which the participants form utterances that are products of shared knowledge and such utterances produce felicitous results to the communication.” Discourse situations or contexts are dynamic. Consequently, participants use language skillfully.

Language philosophers acknowledge that the goals of pragmatics, is to process language for smooth communication. Labov [4] rightly notes that “no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language.” Without speech act theory, it will be difficult to explain the principles that underpin the encoding and decoding of utterances. The normative rules of language cannot account for the intentions, attitudes, and other dynamics of human communication. According to Savas L. T. [5] “the study of illocutionary act should be acknowledged as an indispensable component of the study of meaning.” If one knows the illocutionary act performed in an utterance, one will definitely understand the speaker’s communicative intention. Accordingly, the pragmatics of language use is essentially about contextual underpinnings which generate and explain utterances. Language use is effective if inferences can easily be made by its decoders. Decoding utterances involves the making of inferences that are either assumptions or uttered expressions. When utterances are uttered, the hearers reasonably establish the rationale for working out the meanings. This study aligns with Levinson [6] who argues that “one of the motivations of research in pragmatics might then be to establish effects of the uses of language on language structure.”

The pragmatics of language use presupposes fulfilling felicity conditions. Felicity conditions are the conditions which speakers satisfy so that their language use (speech acts) can be effective/successful in terms of achieving the perlocutionary effects intended on the listeners. In any context, language has the potential to transmit message. Lyons cited in Levinson [6] lists the features that are culturally and linguistically relevant to the production and interpretation of utterances: (i) knowledge of “role” and “status” (where role covers both role in speech event as speakers or addressees, and social standing, (ii) knowledge of spatial and temporal location, (iii) knowledge of formality level (iv) knowledge of the medium (roughly the code or style appropriate to a channel, like the distinction between written and spoken varieties of a language).”

### Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning in terms of the linguistics. Just like the English present and past, lexical items from other word-class in the language have meaning(s). Alston cited in Adeyemi [7] writes:

The meaning of a word is the idea that the word brings forth in the speaker or hearer. It is assumed that in uttering a word, some idea, exists in the mind of the speaker and his uttering the word will evoke the same idea in the mind of the hearer.

Semantics is the study of the formal properties (linguistics) of language use. It begins from the stopping point of syntax and ends from where pragmatics begins. A separate discipline in the study of language, semantics has existed for decades. There are different supportive theories of **meaning postulation** discussed by Kempson [8]. The meaning of a word is dictated by the semantics or postulate in which it can occur or with which it can be associated (cf. Adegbija [9]). This theory is lexeme-dependent, and disregards the pragmatic constraints which inform language use in communicative events. Also, the theory does not have correct explanation for the relations between syntax and semantics as in sentences where meaninglessness, ambiguity and contextual use are evident. Consider:

- The hunter killed the snake;
- The snake killed the hunter.

The Meaning Postulate Theory of meaning would analyze the above sentences the same way since the words they contain are the same; but these sentences should not be analyzed equally. Fodor [10] reacts on the pitfalls of this theory.

The Componential Theory of Meaning explains meaning of lexemes on the basis of their decomposed units of reference. The theory uses the argument of Katz and Fodor (cited in Fodor [10]):

... semantic markers are the elements in terms of which semantic relations are expressed in a lexical item in a dictionary entry and are intended to reflect whatever systematic relations hold between that item and the rest of the vocabulary of the language ...

The Relational Component Theory of Meaning settles the inadequacies of Componential Analysis. For example, consider the meaning of the word “father”:

- + Animate
- + Human
- + Male
- + Adult

And added Relational Component of:

Male Parent of Y

Commenting on the inadequacies of Componential Analysis, Adegbija [9] notes that it is impossible to find a suitable word to distinguish features, e.g. between “sheep” and “goat”; “infant” and “baby”; “desk” and “table” etc. He also observes that there can be problems of uncertainty and indeterminacy about the features of a particular entry. These are evident in idiomatic and rhetorical uses of words. To fill up these vacuums, Katz [11] proposes a theory that demonstrates the scientific nature of concepts such as sense, meaning, synonymy, analyticity, and so on, by showing that they are essential components in an empirically revealing systematization of the facts about natural languages. Katz’s postulations are relevant to Generative Semantics which evolved in the late 1960s from a syntactic theory that assigns deep structures to sentences (cf. Fodor [10]). Technically, Katz’s theory is different from the Theory of Generative Semantics. They differ functionally but agree to the same semantic properties which are represented in underlying phrase markers. Just like Meaning Postulate Theory and Componential Analysis Theory, Generative Semantic Theory does not cater for contextual use of language, and so, the Theory of Speech Acts (pragmatic theories) evolved as a panacea to this age-long need for an all-encompassing theory of language use. Using the Theory of Generative Semantics to investigate the effectiveness of Speech Act Theory as proposed by Austin [12], Sadock [13] contends that a Meaning-Meaning Hypothesis is needed to ascertain where illocutionary forces and surface representations agree or disagree. Other linguists make contributions towards the struggle for a balanced theory of meaning for the analysis of natural language. They evolve novel notions relevant to research in semantics. Ruth Kempson [8] argues for a Truth Conditionality Theory of semantics – a theory which indicates logical forms from which all inferences relevant to analytical truth can be arrived at. This is aimed at pointing out the weakness of Bloomfield’s Stimulus-Response Behaviourism Theory of Meaning. She concludes:

A semantic theory ... will assign interpretation to sentences where these interpretations are for each sentence a set of conditions necessary and sufficient for the truth of that sentence.

Ruth Kempson’s submission aligns with Tarski’s Truth Condition Theory, which stipulates that the propositional content of an utterance must be true, among other things (cf. Fodor [10]). However, she acknowledges that as part of the weaknesses of this theory, it cannot assign metaphorical interpretations to sentences, neither will it establish any stylistic distinction between sentences.

Popularizing the Contextual Theory of Meaning, Firth J. R. [14] whose views dominated British Linguistics until his death, asserts that the most vital fact about language is its social function. He posits that every utterance is actualized in a culturally determined “context of situation”, and the meaning of an utterance is the totality of all the features in it that can be singled out as giving input to the maintenance of the patterns of life in the society in which the speaker lives. He views meaning as:

... a serial contextualisation of facts within contexts, each one being a function, an organ of the bigger context and all contexts finding a place in what may be called the context of culture.

## METHODOLOGY

In this section of the paper, we present the methodology, corpora (examples of the English present and past in sentences) and analyze them. For the analysis of data, this paper hinges on The Relevance Theory of Communication. The theory explains communication as an activity that necessitates the working out of the topic relevance of utterances by the addressee (cf. Sperber and Wilson cited in Xinyue Yao [1]). For easy referencing and analysis, selected samples of the English present and past are numbered progressively in this study. The major parameter for selecting the data (corpora) is “quality of pragmatic features”.

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

The following sentences are analyzed in this study:

- 1a. The wild fires in Australia reminded us about hell.
- 2a. The corruption involves even you.
- 3a. Mother Theresa saved the wounded soldiers.

In *1a*, the event (occurrence of the wild fires in Australia) is not situated within a time frame, but the past tense “reminded” makes the addressee understand the event as a past occurrence. Unlike *1a*, *1b* below does not situate the event in the past:

- 1b. The wild fires in Australia reminds us about hell.

In processing *1b*, the addressee infers a state-of-affair in which Australia is known for its usual wild fires; “usual” in the sense that it is seasonal and unpredictable. The event begins from the time of the utterance and spreads into the future. As a present proposition, *e* is existential. The addressees understand *1a* and *1b* as appropriate answers to *1c* and *1d* respectively:

- 1c. What did the wild fires in Australia remind us about?
- 1d. What do the wild fires in Australia remind us about?

Contextual nuances underpin communication and direct the linguistic inputs of the interlocutors. In processing *1a*, the addressee imagines a state-of-affair in which **there used to be** wild fires in Australia or other parts of the world, as a result of the threat of climate change. It is through the processing of communication that a speaker can make a message capture the topic of discourse. Consider *1e* in which the speaker prepares the addressee for easy inference:

- 1e. There had been fire outbreak in different parts of the world. But that which occurred in Australia was too wild to imagine. Indeed, the wild fires in Australia reminded us of hell.

The interpretation of an utterance is based on the tense that conveys its proposition (*m* = tense of *p*) and the in-built meaning of such proposition. This means that a proposition is given communicative value if the encoder makes it understandable to the decoder. In the use of the English simple present tense, a single or more meaning can be expressed or inferred depending on how the context ( $\neq$ ) directs the interlocutors. The present tense can be used to convey present, past and future phenomena. In *1a*, “reminds” is used alongside “hell” which the speaker is yet to experience or encounter. But “hell” is real beyond the present time frame of the utterance (*e* = present plus future). *If* can generate *1a*:

- 1f. During the church service my pastor proclaimed that sinners go to hell after their death.

The topic relevance of *If* to the “processor” is its being able to invoke the existentiality of a phenomenon known as hell (*tr* = +/– of *e*). English stretches (utterances) have no relevance outside context (*r* = *p* plus  $\neq$ ). Speakers try to make their utterances **easy to mean** (*i*). The use of non-performative formula (non-verbal lexical items) gives the English present tense the potential to spread the proposition beyond the present, and this is of pragmatic relevance. We contend therefore, that some non-verbal entities are **verbs in disguise** when used in sentences. If utterances are restricted to the use of performative formula, the topic relevance of such utterances will be restricted, and the inferential process will be problematic.

If in *1a*, the phrase “the tragedy” replaces “hell”, the potential of the present tense to spread *e* into the future will be hindered because the addressee will be restricted to a particular *e* in the past, for example, **the tragedy of a little boy who could not escape the fire**. Interlocutors infer what utterances mean by unfolding *tr* in  $\neq$ . This is a process of pragmatic enrichment of an utterance. Relevance is a gradable term. For example, an utterance is optimally relevant if its relevance is adequate for the processing effort of the addressee.

Inferences should be propositions within the tense of the predication that conveys the discourse topic – *2a* exemplifies

this submission vividly. However, in the use of the present tense, constructions (linguistic patterning) determines whether or not *e* begins even before the present; indeed, adverbials trigger this tendency (>*f*). *2a* suggests that there have been other involvements which excluded the “you” in the sentence. This being the case, there is a sense in which the present (simple) tense begins its *tr* from the immediate or remote past. *2a* by explicature, does not concern the past, but its implicature (>*f*) can generate *2b*:

2b. You have not been incriminated before, Ben. But this time, it involves even you.

As part of the conventional implicature (See Grice [15] for insights on the typology of implicature) of the word “even” the referent “you” is not habitually linked with the offence in question. This explains why theorists contend that working out the relevance (or optimal relevance) of an utterance has to be in tandem with the time of uttering it. Our argument is that in *2a*, two phenomena or events are inferable in the present and the past as captured in *2b* and *2c* respectively:

### Present:

2b. It (e.g. the corruption) involves you.

### Past:

2c. There were some corruption cases in the past in which you were not involved.

In using the English present and past, inferences are logically made in terms of optimal relevance to the discourse topic. The modifying element in *2a* is of pragma-semantic significance because in human communication, adverbials are not used unless they modify the verb (event/proposition). In *2a* “even” modifies *e* by depicting the status-quo of corruption which pervades the human society so much that it is difficult to find an innocent person. If *2a* is elaborated, its topic relevance will either be extended or made easy to infer. For example, consider *2d*:

2d. The corruption case, as at now, is all about the President’s role in the contract awarded to construct major roads.

World knowledge remains instrumental in processing communication for meaning ( $i = p$  plus  $wk$ ). In *2d*, topic-suggesting expressions include: “President”, “contract awarded” and “major roads”. These expressions depict a wide range of social phenomena revolving around politics and governance. These phenomena facilitate the ability of the addressee to work out the topic relevance of *2d* as expected by the encoder. In doing so, the addressee invokes the societal vices that politicians indulge in (stereotypes). By generating implicatures and explicatures from *2d*, the addressee demonstrates that in using the English present and past around the clause, both pragmatic and semantic meanings have to be inferred. The event or state being predicated exists in both the present (The corruption is ...) and the past (... the contract awarded ...). The beginning and spread of the event/state when the present tense is used in an extended clause (complex, compound or compound-complex) depends on the structure of the linguistic stretch generated. Grammatical entities (word-class) such as adverbials (e.g. “when”, in *1f*, “even” in *2a*, “as at now” in *2d*); nouns (“President”, “contract” and “roads” in *2d*); and verbs (“proclaimed” in *1f* and “awarded” in *2d*) impinge on the meaning of the present tense in different ways: quantifying over the entire temporal range, performing an extended-now function, maintaining past relevance and subsuming the time of the predication (action/state). So far, the matrixes (*1a*, *2a* and *3a*) are explained via generated sentences which can even be produced from the matrixes in naturally-occurring human communication; that is, a speaker chooses the less informative utterance when the more informative one is available (maxim of minimization).

Utterances have external relations. If there is no linguistic unit that reveals the topic of discourse, then the topic must be inferred from extra-linguistic elements of the situational context such as the real world practice of corruption in politics as depicted in *2d*. Without the larger context, a sentence can be understood as an explanation of, or comment on any discourse topic imaginable (cf. Xinyue Yau [1]).



In *3a*, it is clear that the past tense can be implied without a performative formula. For example, Mother Theresa is a famous name all over the world because of her humanitarian role during a historic war; she treated the wounds of injured soldiers. Till this day, she epitomizes love, care, hospitality and selflessness. Although *e* in *3a* is past, the wide range of phenomena encapsulated by the name “Mother Theresa” gives the name a performative attribute, potent enough to make *p* in *s* existential. Consider *3bi-iv*:

- i. Mother Theresa treats wounded soldiers.
- ii. A caring lady helps the sick.
- iii. A kind woman shows hospitality.
- iv. \*Late Mr. Trex treats wounded soldiers.

In *3biv*, an unacceptable/ungrammatical proposition is communicated because unlike Mother Theresa, Mr. Trex did not achieve the feat that makes his name eternal after his death. Mother Theresa is seemingly not ordinary, whereas Mr. Trex is. *3bi-iv* are interpreted via world knowledge. It is necessary for utterances to be processed to avoid ambiguities and enhance the flow of message in communication. To infer the meaning of an utterance, the addressee is subjected to a process of disambiguation. Moreover, an addressee is aware of the continuative potentials of propositions and the course-effect phenomena that generate and foster the interpretation of utterances. In interpreting the English present and past, an addressee demonstrates his understanding of the fact that there is link between an immediate discourse context and the remote/extra-discourse (relational) context that is invoked in the process of making inferences. In terms of technical terminology, *3biv* can be labelled as an **infelicitous** utterance. This is because its relevance or optimal relevance cannot be worked out by the addressee. However, being able to work out the relevance of *3bi-iii* is simply the effect of the historic, epoch-making feat achieved by late Mother Theresa (cause-effect phenomenon). A sentence can elaborate or comment on its discourse topic only when it has relevance. Although semantic representations are logical forms of utterances, such utterances have extra-sentential relations. The explicit content of an utterance is an **explicature** (*J*>) while the implicit content is an **implicature** (>*J*). Although *1a*, *2a* and *3a* (matrixes) are actual utterances of interlocutors, they could become utterances “referred to” by interlocutors. In this study, we analyze the English present and past as used by what Acheoah [16] refers to as **interactive participants**. The linguistic stretches of non-interactive participants are not relevant to an on-going discourse unless they are used as indirect illocutionary strategies. Conclusively, the arguments in this paper should be construed in terms of the pragmatics of using the English present and past in real human communication as in written or spoken texts. *1a*, *2a* and *3a* are not the only ways that the English present and past tenses can be used in structuring or patterning utterances or sentences. The positions of these tenses in a sentence as well as the linguistic entities they co-occur with can be varied. Acheoah [17] evolves the Illocutionary Frames Principle (IFP) to explain the use of differently constructed sentence structures to convey message in discourse.

### CONCLUSION

Using the English present and past inevitably involves making inferences from societal phenomena. The interlocutors rely on the grammar rules of the operative language as well as the extra-linguistic principles that enable them convey messages. Speakers are usually poised to make the implicit and explicit contents of their utterances understandable to their addressees because the communicative value of an utterance depends on whether or not the addressee can “locate” (infer) the world-spoken-of (relevance) of such utterances in the given context. The proposition of an utterance can be situated within different time frames (*s\_\_e*) depending on the logical form (semantics) and pragmatic features that underpin the tense used in conveying such a proposition. Thus, around the clause, meaning can be singular or plural when the English present and past are used in communication. There is no limit to the physical properties of sentences when tenses are used to convey meaning. Sentences vary in: choice of words (word-class); structure (ASVO, SVO, SVOA, SV, SVC, etc.); communicative function (statement, command, question, request, etc.);



and embedded clauses (simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, compound-complex sentence, etc.). Speakers communicate with the understanding (presupposition) that their interlocutors have knowledge of the state-of-affair to be invoked to avoid ambiguity or pragmatic failure.

On the whole, this study implies that more research in the pragmatics of using English tenses around the clause, is non-negotiable.

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