
Past Tense and Time Reference in Non-Standard English

Patrice Larroque (Université Montpellier 3, France)

Tense and time have often been closely related; hence the ambiguity of tense inflections which in English, and many other languages, are carried by the verb. S. Pinker (1994) defines tense as the

“relative time of occurrence of the event described by the sentence, the moment at which the speaker utters the sentence, and, often some third reference point: present (*he eats*), past (*he ate*), future (*he will eat*). Other so-called tenses such as the perfect (*He has eaten*) involve a combination of tense and aspect.”

We often understand that tense refers to the correlation between the form of the verb and our concept of time, but time reference applies to the sentence as a whole, and more precisely to the subject-predicate structure. The linguistic description of non-standard English can in many respects be revealing, for in this language variety tense inflections on verbs and time reference do not necessarily match, the former being in that regard often redundant. But these elements which contribute to the construction of the referential value of a sentence provide more information about the speech situation, which is itself a referential element in the sentence¹. A sentence like:

(1) “Last month this chain store make me an offer and then I wait five weeks for something else...” (B. Malamud),

shows that although the verbs are not marked for tense, we still have all the necessary information as to when the sentence refers to: the past, i.e. the actual time of occurrence of the event described by the sentence.

I therefore suggest within the framework of speech production to distinguish two levels: that of reality, in which referents have a potential existence and are unmodified by the speaker (reality somewhat corresponds to the speaker’s *here-and-now*), and that of speech (the effective production in which reality is turned into objects of discourse, using representational operations²).

The data

Non-standard English refers to a language

use which generally ascribes slightly different values to the markers it shares with the standard language and is at the same time economical regarding other markers of that system, which leads to a redefinition of the relation between all the remaining markers in non-standard English.

I will consider non-standard English in a number of examples taken from written works (novels or shortstories), but also as it appears in films, accounts, or conversations. For the latter have the double advantage of being oral, even though the spoken product in films is fictive, and of providing actual speech situations. One must, however, be aware of the ambiguity of the corpus: the presence of a “super speaker” (in novels, for example) may generate manipulations as to the intent and the situation in which the sentences are produced. This is certainly to be taken into account for text analysis, but dealing with the description of non-standard English, the super speaker’s attitude is of little importance³.

The analysis concerns sentences with past time reference so that the problems raised by the confusion between chronological and speech marks and the repercussions on the linguistic insight into the standard language can be best apprehended.

The linguistic description

In the following examples:

(2) There was a great peace next morning.

I waited until I saw the woman before going to school. Boyee said, “You know, Hat, I think **I see** that woman somewhere else. **I see** her when I was delivering milk up Mucurapo way.” (N. S. Naipaul),

(3) “Oh no, you wouldn’t remember.

...You was always too busy pullin’ little girls pigtails when **I give** you the Holy Spirit.” (J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*),

(4) “You used to give a good meetin’. I recollect one time **you give** a whole sermon walkin’ around on your hands.” (ibidem),

it is clear that the context and everything apart

from the verb signals that the event took place at a particular point of time relative to the moment when the utterance is performed. We actually know that it is before the moment of speaking. It is therefore unnecessary to analyse the verb forms to know when in the chronology the verbal happening refers to. In sentence (2), for example, *somewhere else* is equivalent to a *not here*, which, according to the *ego-hic-et-nunc* triad, can be construed as a *not now* referring to *then* in view of the context. In sentences (3) and (4), *I remember* and *I recollect* respectively mark the above-mentioned *not here/not now*. In these examples the past tense is associated with a form that denotes the speaker's attitude (cf. *you wouldn't remember; you was always too busy pullin', you used to give*).

The study of these examples actually points to the irrelevance of the verb ending *-ed* as a time reference marker. It is therefore necessary to redefine the nature of the morpheme which is not chronological.

Assuming that the verb ending *-ed* is the mark of the speaker's attitude to reality is positing a linguistic representation of reality which allows the speaker to (or not to) distance himself from the propositional content without the constraints of chronology. Indeed, one cannot possibly modify chronology, one can, however, modify one's own representation of the real world.

In sentences like:

(5) (Ted Wright tells the detective about Whisper's death)

"What did Whisper say?"

"Nothing. He looked funny as hell, standing there with the butt of the sticker sticking out of his side. Then **he flashes** the rod and puts two pills in Dan just like one, and **the both of them go down** together, cracking heads, Dan's all bloody through the bandages." (D. Hammett, *Red Harvest*),

(6) (Reno Starkey explains why he has killed Helen Albury)

"I bet you", he said, watching the red puddle grow on the floor. "It was her own damned fault. **She calls me up, tells me** Whisper's coming to see her, and **says** if I get there first I can buckwash him. I'd like that. **I go over there, stick around, but he don't show.**" (ibidem),

when we deal with narrated events, the verb does not carry the *-ed* ending although the

reported facts are located in the past. This shows that the chronological reference is elsewhere in the context (cf. the speech situation) and that the narrative is presented without the speaker's involvement or modification. The events exist, as it were, by themselves. Therefore, there is no marked discrepancy between the events and the speaker. Conversely, when the speaker's viewpoint is expressed, for instance, "*He looked funny as hell*" (5), "*It was her own damned fault*" (6), which can be described as attitudinal, the *-ed* ending signals that the speaker distances himself from the propositional content.

The same type of description can be made about the following examples:

(7) (Lieutenant Dunbar is talking with a soldier about the situation on the battlefield)

"What's going on here?"

"What's going on here? That seems to be the question all right. See, you could the major, he don't know, he's busy. He's busy trying to figure out how come **the officers' mess run out** of peach ice cream. O'course you got the general. **He come up** to see the show, though he knows there ain't no show. Now, the major he's lookin' at the general, he's thinkin' to himself 'I better do something'."⁴

(8) (Bobby has just got out of prison. His friends have come to meet him)

Ray: "I heard Carol **pinch** a baby boy. Was somethin'. Is it yours?"

Bob: "Yeah, it's mine."

Ray: "What she call him?"

Bob: "I don't know."

Ray: "You don't know?" (they laugh)

Bob: "Hey man, I don't fucking know, OK?"

Ray: "Hey man, calm down."

Bob: "**I'm locked down, she don't come** around, shit, I, I don't know nothin'."⁵

(9) (Bobby arrives at his apartment with his friends. He meets his girlfriend Carol who introduces him to Genie, a drug dealer in the neighbourhood)

Car: "Genie, this is Bobby. I told you 'bout Bobby. Bobby, this is Genie Lamp."

Gen: "Glad to meet you, Bobby."

Bob: "Glad, and your fuckin' ass!"

Ray: "Smack man."

Gen: "(It's been) a long time, Ray."

Ray: "Yeah, since you ran your ass off of Grape Street."

Gen: “**I don’t run off, I move.** That’s all.”

Ray: “**You move,** but your dope stays in my hood.”

Gen: “You’re too possessive, Ray.”

For the verbs *come* and *run out* (7), and the phrases *I’m locked down*, *she don’t come around* (8), and *I don’t run off, I move* (9), the time reference stems from elements which determine the speech situation.

Example (10) is an account of the most important fight that the speaker remembers⁶:

a) Well one was with a girl. Like I was a kid... and she was the baddest girl in the neighborhood... If you didn’t bring her candy to school she would punch you in the mouth; and you had to kiss her when she would tell you. This girl was only 12 years old... she didn’t take no junk.

b) **I go** to school. When **I arrive** this girl **says**: “Where’s the candy?”

I said: “I don’t have any.”

She says: “poww!”

So **I says** to myself: “There’s gonna be times my mother won’t give me money because we’re a poor family and I can’t take this all every time she don’t give me any money.”

So **I say** well I just gotta fight this girl. She gonna hafta whup me. I hope she don’t whup me.

I hit the girl: “poww!”, **I put** something in it.

I win the fight.

This account includes the description of the worst girl in the neighbourhood in which there is much speaker involvement. Though it is clear that the events chronologically take place in the past, it is nonetheless true that these facts are not presented neutrally. We are dealing with the speaker’s presentation of known facts which have actually taken place. This form of performance corresponds to the speaker’s modification of referents. The events are localized and appraised by him. In passage (10, a), forms like *the baddest girl*, *this girl*, *she don’t take no junk*, which can be analysed as emphatic, and the modal forms *she would punch you*, *she would tell you*, express the speaker’s attitude. They all denote the speaker’s emotional involvement. So it seems that the *-ed* marker applies more to the relation between the speaker and the propositional content, and does not necessarily refer to the chronology.

Present tense forms, except for *I said*, occur in the actual narrative (*i.e.* 10, b). Obviously, tense and time here do not correlate, since most

forms do not carry the *-ed* ending. That is why we can say that in the passage the past time reference of *-ed* forms is irrelevant. The absence of past tense inflections does not deny reference to chronologically earlier time. It is therefore necessary to look elsewhere in the context for time markers. The context then becomes all the more essential for a “past time reference” reading since the narrative deals with memories. It is therefore important to ascribe a different value other than “time-oriented” to *-ed*. In the case of *I said*, the (first person) speaker distances himself from the (first person) subject of the sentence. The speaker (the real subject) is thus transformed into an object of discourse, and the operation is marked with *-ed*. Concerning the other instances, there is no ambiguity insofar as the subject of the sentence and the speaker are not superposed. Therefore, the *-ed* marker is not temporally related.

To end with, let us analyse these sentences:

(11) **I ain’t shut** my eyes last night.⁷

(12) If **he won** at the lottery, he would be rich.

(13) Did you know **there was** a strike tomorrow?

(14) **We met** yesterday.

(15) **He intended** coming tomorrow.⁸⁸ Borrowed from R. Fasold.

In sentences (12), (13) and (15) there is a discrepancy between the speaker’s attitude and the propositional content. The *-ed* marker (*he won*, *there was*, *he intended*) signals the speaker’s anticipation which can be construed as a separation from reality (the speaker’s *here-and-now*). Regarding example (14) the discrepancy is both situational (*yesterday*) and attitudinal (*we met*). *Yesterday* codifies the situational exclusion, which entails a mismatch between the speaker’s sphere and the referential value of the sentence, the speech situation being the reference point. In example (11), in non-standard English, although there is no attitudinal discrepancy (*ain’t* does not correspond to an *-ed* type of marker, but indicates direct anchoring to the speaker), there is nonetheless a mismatch between the speech situation and the object referred to in the sentence, because of the situational exclusion

which is codified by *last night*.

On comparing these examples, we can observe that the verb is marked with *-ed* when there is a discrepancy between the speaker's attitude and the propositional content, whatever the language variety.

Conclusion

By emphasizing that verbal and non verbal (situational) contexts perfectly determine chronology, it is possible to show that the *-ed* marker is irrelevant as time reference. It is therefore important to highlight the fact that *-ed* is the mark of the speaker's involvement in reality. The traditional linguistic description system suggests a basic time-oriented value of *-ed* and a modal value when the time reference value is no longer relevant (cf. *If he now came, he intended coming tomorrow, etc.*). This must be regarded as a circum-

stantial adaptation of linguistic description to phenomena it does not study in a unifying manner. What I suggest is to bring together under the same label a form which can after all be attributed to the sole speaker generating sentences. The *-ed* marker actually refers to a distancing operation carried out by the speaker to account for items which are excluded from his speech situation, removed then from external reality, the latter being determined by the speaker's *here-and-now*. In other words, he establishes a mediation between the event and himself, and a discrepancy occurs between the facts in progress as regards reality and their linguistic reading in discourse.

Thus, non-standard English helps to highlight the attitudinal value of *-ed*, as it is optional in sentences temporally related to the past.

Notes

1. Referential values are assigned to utterances through the production and the recognition of forms.
2. Speech activity can be regarded as a representation of the extralinguistic world: it uses symbols to represent our conceptual system.
3. It is assumed that the transcriptions of non-standard speech reflect the actual performance of speakers.
4. A scene taken from K. Costner's film *Dances with Wolves*.
5. A scene taken from O. Stone's film *South Central*.
6. A story by John L. taken from W. Labov's *Language in the Inner City*.
7. Borrowed from S. Tagliamonte and S. Poplack.
8. Borrowed from R. Fasold.

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