

Pluperfect in discourse: When and why do we go back in time?



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Abstract

Contra traditional Reichenbach (1947) analysis of tense and aspect, a mere temporal precedence relation does not license a simple past-pluperfect sequence in discourse, and the use of the pluperfect is constrained by further discourse-semantic rules. This paper delineates those discourse-semantic constraints based on a quantitative analysis of naturally occurring narrative corpus examples, and formalizes them in Discourse Representation Theory [DRT] (Kamp and Reyle, 1993). We argue based on the corpus study that, contrary to the common assumption, the pluperfect does not invariably refer to a result or consequent state or ambiguous between aspectual and preterit meaning. Instead, the result state implication derives from the aspectual class of the main predicate. We further argue that the relationship between the anaphoric pluperfect sentence, which forms background and builds a side-structure of ancillary time line (Hopper, 1979; Reinhart, 1984), and its antecedent simple past event sentence, which forms foreground and propels the main narrative time forward, can be best explained by the normative-modal background of the discourse.

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1. Introduction

In traditional Reichenbach (1947) two-tiered analysis of tense and aspect, the simple past refers to an event that is included in the contextually provided reference time (Rpt), whereas the pluperfect (i.e., past perfect) indicates an event that precedes the Rpt. When the pluperfect sentence is embedded in a discourse context, the preceding sentence typically provides Rpt, and a reverse order interpretation is obtained. However, this purely temporal analysis cannot explain the oddity of (1), as pointed out by many researchers (Caenepeel, 1995; Caenepeel and Sandström, 1992; Lascarides and Asher, 1993). Although the event of John entering the room can plausibly be situated before the event of John pouring himself a cup of coffee, (1) sounds awkward.¹

(1) John poured himself a cup of coffee. *He had entered the room.

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¹ Most accounts of the pluperfect implicitly or explicitly adopt a Reichenbachian framework, and thus are subject to the same problem. A theory which requires saliency of result state (Moens, 1987; Moens and Steedman, 1988) cannot explain why (1) sounds odd either, since, both in (1) and (2), the result state of having entered the room continues when John poured himself a cup of coffee.

By contrast, (2) is acceptable even though it has the same temporal relation as (1).

- (2) John poured himself a cup of coffee. He had entered the room feeling tired, but now he was beginning to feel better.

Therefore, a temporal precedence relation alone does not license a simple past-pluperfect sequence in discourse, and the use of the pluperfect is constrained by further discourse-semantic rules.

Previous discourse-level analyses of pluperfect have tried to explain the oddity of (1) based on the violation of the informative constraint; because entering the room can be inferred from pouring a cup of coffee, the pluperfect sentence does not provide any new information and is therefore infelicitous (Caenepeel and Sandström, 1992; Lascarides and Asher, 1992). However, it is doubtful that the event of pouring a cup of coffee semantically entails or even pragmatically implicates the event of entering the room since pouring coffee can happen anywhere and need not be done in a room. Rather, the contrast between (1) and (2) seems to be related to the fact that the two sentences in (1) are thematically unrelated and thus do not hang together, whereas the pluperfect sentence in (2) is more tightly connected to the event described by its preceding sentence by providing an explanation for it (i.e., *John poured himself a cup of coffee because he was feeling tired*). Although the intuition seems robust enough, it is challenging to exactly spell it out let alone formalize it. The goal of this paper is to delineate the discourse semantic constraints imposed on the use of the pluperfect form in narrative discourse. To do so, examining naturally occurring corpus examples will be instrumental. Moreover, to make the semantic contribution of pluperfect in discourse precise, we will formalize its meaning in Discourse Representation Theory [DRT] (Kamp and Reyle, 1993).

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we will lay out some theoretical background, discussing the narrative structure and presenting our main claims about the pluperfect. The result of a corpus study described in Section 3 will support the claims made in Section 2. Section 4 proposes a Discourse Representation Theory [DRT] analysis of the pluperfect in discourse, building on Kamp and Reyle's (1993) standard DRT analysis and Lascarides and Asher's (1993) Segmented DRT analysis. Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the main findings and discussing broader theoretical implications.

2. Theoretical background: narrative structure and the meaning of the pluperfect

2.1. The alleged ambiguity of the pluperfect

A common assumption about the pluperfect pertains to its alleged ambiguity. Many linguists have argued that the English pluperfect may be interpreted as a perfect-in-the-past (aspectual meaning) or as a past-in-the-past (preterit or temporal meaning) (Comrie, 1976; Kamp and Reyle, 1993; Ogihara, 1996, among others). The aspectual pluperfect describes a result state maintained at the past reference time. The preterit pluperfect, on the other hand, expresses an event preceding the reference time. For example, Comrie (1976) claims that *Bill had arrived at six o'clock* is ambiguous between preterit and aspectual readings based on his observation that the time adverbial denotes the event time in the case of the former, and the reference time in the case of the latter. A pluperfect sentence in isolation, however, is awkward and is not normally used in natural discourse. Ogihara (1996:12–13) contends that the contrast between the two readings is clear especially in discourse. The preterit pluperfect in (3) induces a flashback effect and sustains the temporal progression.

- (3) John arrived at the airport at nine. He had left home two hours earlier. He had met a friend on his way to the airport.

He states that the aspectual pluperfect in (4) does not assert the event of Mary's arrival before the event of John's arrival, but instead describes the result state of Mary's arriving at the airport, i.e., Mary's presence at the airport at the time of John's arrival.

- (4) John arrived at the airport at nine. Mary had already arrived there. He smiled at her.

However, the distinction is not always easy to make because no independent criteria other than intuitive feel seem to exist. The “aspectual” reading of (4) is obviously triggered by the salient result state component of the achievement verb *arrive* as well as an anaphoric connection with the preceding sentence made by *there* and *already* rather than the lexical ambiguity of the pluperfect form.

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