

When tense and aspect convey modality. Reflections on the modal uses of past tenses in Romance and Germanic languages[☆]



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Abstract

This paper investigates the connection between past tense and modality in six Romance and Germanic languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, English and German). I first argue for an aspecto-temporal definition of imperfects and preterits based on the notion of 'reference point' (R) and I suggest that the different interpretations of past tenses (including the modal ones) reflect specific instantiations of R as 'topic time', 'aspectual vantage point' or 'epistemic evaluation'. Second, I offer a classification and analysis of the modal uses of the imperfects and preterits observed in the languages under investigation. Finally, I expand on the idea that the modal interpretations of past tenses correspond to pragmatic inferences that are being conventionalised and mirror the stages of 'bridging contexts' and 'switch contexts' described in [Heine's \(2002\)](#) model for semantic change.

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that past tenses may convey modal meanings in a number of languages¹ (see e.g. [James, 1982](#); [Comrie, 1985](#); [Fleischman, 1989](#); [Thieroff, 1999](#); [Iatridou, 2000](#); [Palmer, 1986](#); [Ippolito, 2003](#); [Van linden and Verstraete, 2008](#)). In examples (1)–(6), the speaker uses a past tense to express attitudinal subjectivity (ex. (1), (3), (5)) or an interpersonal relation with respect to the hearer (ex. (2), (4), (6)).

Counterfactuality

- (1) Fre Une seconde de plus [le taureau] l' éventrait.
one second of more the bull him gore-PST.IPFV
'One more second and the bull **would have gored** him.' (G. Flaubert, *Un cœur simple*)

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¹ This observation does not hold for perfective pasts (see sections 4.1 and 4.2). In the rest of the paper, when talking about 'past tenses', I will thus refer to past tenses that are not perfective unless specified otherwise.

Hypocoristic attitude

- (2) Ita **Aveva** fame la mia bambina?
 have-PST.IPFV hunger my girl
 'Is my baby hungry?' (Bazanella, 1990)

Hypothesis²

- (3) Spa *Si tuviera dinero, me **compraba** una moto.*
 If have-SBJV.IPFV money me **buy**-PST.IPFV a motorbike
 'If I had money, I **would buy** me a motorbike.' (Briz Gómez, 2004)

Politeness

- (4) Dut **Had** mevrouw nog iets **gewenst?**
 have-PRF.PST madam still something **wish**-PRF.PST
 'Madam, **would** you like something else' (A.M. Oster, *Hoe moet je kijken*)

Wish

- (5) Eng *I wish I **was** a punk rocker with flowers in my hair* (S. Thom)

Mitigation

- (6) Ger *Ich **dachte**, wir könnten uns nachmittags in der Stadt treffen (...).*
 I **think**-PST we could us afternoon in the town meet
 'I **thought** we could meet in town this afternoon' (F.C. Zöld, *Trotzdem liebe ich dich*)

Another frequent observation (e.g. James, 1982; Fleischman, 1995; Boogaart and Trnavac, 2011) is that these modal interpretations are typically conveyed by imperfective tenses as in examples (1)–(3), even though simple pasts may also be associated with modality (see examples (4)–(6)). These two observations have yielded a long-standing debate on the origin of modality in such uses, which I briefly sketch in the following paragraphs.

Most of the proposed accounts concentrate on the role of tense, advocating a direct connection between past and modality, even though there is no clear consensus on the nature of this connection. The first and most famous explanation posits a metaphorical link between temporality and modality in terms of 'temporal distance' or 'remoteness' (see Imbs, 1960; Lyons, 1977; James, 1982; Vairel, 1982; Fleischman, 1989): according to this hypothesis, the deictic distance from the speaker's now denoted by past tenses is metaphorically exploited to convey a 'modal distance', i.e., the 'non-reality' or 'low certainty' of the described eventuality. More or less explicitly in opposition to the metaphor analysis, a great number of studies have suggested an alternative explanation, based on an epistemic definition of the past tense as expressing a reality judgment of the speaker (Langacker, 1978, 1991; Cutrer, 1994; Palmer, 1986; Le Goffic, 1986, 1995; Thieroff, 1994, 1995; Adam, 1992; Touratier, 1996; Janssen, 1994; Caudal et al., 2003; Jaszczołt and Srioutai, 2011). Within this view, past tense morphology does not encode past location as a core meaning, but rather denotes a more abstract relation, namely the exclusion of the eventuality from the speaker's immediate 'reality' or 'actuality'. Accordingly, the temporal or modal readings of past tenses constitute specific instantiations of this core epistemic value, which are pragmatically elaborated by means of contextual information (e.g. the import of 'space-builders' in the case of modal uses, cf. Fauconnier, 1994 or Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005). Dahl (1997) suggests a different connection between past tense and modality, advancing that the core meaning of past tenses is temporal and that modality is a derived interpretation. For Dahl, the semantic contribution of past morphology in counterfactual contexts is to refer to a past 'choice point', that is, the point in time where "the choice between what actually happened and what could have happened is made" (p. 107). Another analysis is proposed by Arregui (2005, 2009) for the use of the simple past in hypothetical conditionals. For her, the past morphology in the *if*-clause is a case of agreement-morphology similar to the standard case of

² I will spell out in section 4 why conditionals illustrated in (3) and counterfactuals illustrated in (1) instantiate two distinct categories of uses: the epistemic uses (section 4.1) and the counterfactual uses (section 4.3). Roughly, in examples like (3), the past tense indicates that the realisation of the eventuality is very unlikely (but still possible) whereas, in examples like (1), it signals that the eventuality is totally excluded from the reality (see Ziegeler, 2000 for a similar distinction between counterfactual conditionals and 'hypothetical' conditionals). One consequence of this distinction is that conditionals like *If I was rich, I would buy a car*, which may be referred to as 'counterfactual conditionals' in the literature, will not be treated as such in the paper (I will suggest in section 4.1 that, in such conditionals, the past tense does not in fact convey a counterfactual meaning, but a meaning of uncertain realisation). According to the proposed analysis, 'counterfactual conditionals' using a simple past tense are extremely rare in languages like French and English (however not in Italian, cf. Ippolito, 2004) because those languages usually require the use of a perfect past to express counterfactuality (e.g. *If I had been rich, I would have bought a car*).

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