

Discourse time is real

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One of the differences between incremental *noch* ‘still’ and additive *auch* ‘also’ in German according to Umbach (2012) is that *noch* interacts with discourse time in a way *auch* does not. In both versions of (1), the adverb *dann* ‘then’ can be understood to operate on the event time dimension, meaning that the event of Otto drinking the schnapps happened after the event of him drinking the beer. However, only (1-a) with *noch* also has the reading where *dann* operates on the discourse, or utterance time dimension, meaning ‘I am saying that Otto had a schnapps after I said that Otto had a beer’, which does not imply any specific order of the beer and the schnapps drinking events. Discourse time is an essential parameter of Umbach’s theoretical analysis of the semantics of *noch*, as it indexes and thereby differentiates the alternatives *noch* operates on.

- (1) (Otto hat ein Bier getrunken. ‘Otto had a beer.’)
- a. Dann hat er *noch* einen Schnaps getrunken.
 - b. Dann hat er *auch* einen Schnaps getrunken.
‘Then he drank a schnapps in addition.’

But what is discourse time? In this talk I question some common assumptions about the nature of discourse time and its relation to the event time. Ever since the seminal work of Reichenbach (1947), discourse/utterance/speech time has also played a central role in the semantic theory of tense. However, in most of that work it is an abstraction far removed from the actual time stamp of a sentence being uttered. Often utterance time is assumed to be static, i.e. not changing from one sentence to the other in discourse (e.g. Kamp et al., 2011). Clearly, such a notion of utterance time is not very useful for explaining the functioning of *noch* in German, which relies on the assumption that distinct utterances have distinct utterance times. Anand and Toosarvandani (2018) assume a forward-moving but instantaneous utterance time. The instantaneity assumption is useful for the analysis of canonical present tense uses, but is an obstacle for the analysis of play-by-play present, as in (2):

- (2) Commentator at USA vs. New Zealand, 2015 Women’s Soccer Friendlies:
- a. Wambach leads it back
 - b. and now Krieger has it.
 - c. Tobin Heath goes far.
- (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kqe9n7zvnnw>, 1:40:55)

Without going too deep into the semantics of tense, in this talk I explore the idea that utterance time is the real time stamp of a sentence being produced and/or perceived. Utterance time has a specific location in real time, it has a specific duration, and the utterance times of distinct speech acts of the same speaker are necessarily distinct. This is particularly evident in live commentaries like (2), where there is a direct causal connection between the event times and the utterance times, but also in some varieties of narrative discourse, where the temporal order of

utterances is exploited as an *iconic* sign reflecting the order of the described events (Jakobson, 1971). Recently there has been a lot of progress in the theoretical understanding of the semantics of iconic signs (Schlenker, 2018; Abusch, 2020; Maier, to appear). Unlike the arbitrary association between form and content in symbolic signs, the resemblance between form and content in iconic signs is captured by a form-preserving projection function. Applied to time in discourse, that means that there is a form-preserving function between utterance times and event times. The question is which temporal characteristics of the events are preserved in the discourse time dimension. Only the order? Or can other aspects, for instance duration, be preserved as well? If we could show that a range of different characteristics of time in the content dimension can be reflected by the respective characteristics of time in the discourse dimension, this would mean that the *real* utterance time can be very informative for the temporal interpretation of discourse. In this talk I present a pilot experimental study that attempts to establish a relationship between time at content and at discourse level, going beyond the temporal order of the events.

The idea that discourse time is real, meaning that the start time, the end time, and the duration of utterances should be taken into account as parameters of the utterance context, raises a number of questions both for the theory of tense and for the theory of incremental particles. How can we explain that depending on the discourse mode (“normal” vs. narrative vs. play-by-play) tense often disregards many real characteristics of the utterance time, reducing it to a mere abstraction? Which characteristics of utterance time are relevant for incrementals and why? In this talk I discuss possible directions for future research to elucidate these questions.

References

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