

#### 4.

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*The present tense is vacuous*

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This note seeks to argue that the English present tense is itself semantically vacuous and its interpretive effect is characterized entirely by pragmatic competition with other English tense morphemes, notably the past tense.

Assume for the following that I didn't eat on any Tuesday of this month so far, and I've committed not to eat on any Tuesday of this month still coming up. Consider the sentences in (1) in this scenario (Magda Scheiner first pointed out such sentences to me).

- (1)     a. Every Tuesday this month, I fast.  
       b. Every Tuesday this month, I fasted.

The choice between (1a) and (1b) would be determined by the utterance time: Assume that the 26th is the last Tuesday of this month. From the 1st until and including the 26th, I would use the present tense (1a). From the 27th until the last day of the month, I would use the past tense (1b). How can we account for this distribution?

Consider first the meaning of present and past tense in (2) which Abusch (1997) proposes.

- (2)     PRESENT(t): presupposes that t isn't before time of utterance  
       PAST(t): presupposes that t is before the time of utterance

There are two ways (2) could be applied in (1): Since the sentences in (1) involve quantification over subintervals (the Tuesdays) of a bigger interval (this month), we could apply the tense to either the subintervals or the containing interval. Neither way, however, will yield the correct result.

The latter possibility incorrectly predicts that the past tense (1b) should never be possible, and (1a) should always be used because "this month" contains the utterance time.

The former possibility, application to the subinterval, yields the correct result for (1b): (1b) presupposes that every Tuesday of this month is before the utterance time. However for (1a), application to the subinterval of the present tense predicts the presupposition that no Tuesday of this month be before the utterance time.

This incorrectly predicts that (1a) could only be used until the first Tuesday of this month.

To get the correct result, I propose the (non-)meaning of the present tense in (3), while adopting Abusch's proposal for PAST. Assuming (3), (1a) is predicted to not carry any inherent presupposition about the utterance time.

(3)      PRESENT(t): no presupposition

So far, the new account doesn't seem to predict the presupposition observed above, that (1a) cannot be used after the 26th. However, this follows from Heim's (1991) proposal that a discourse maxim "maximize presupposition" creates scalar implicatures amongst presuppositions. More precisely, I assume the formulation in (4) (cf. Ippolito 2001).

(4)      Implicated presupposition: If a scalar alternative Y of X has more or stronger inherent presuppositions than X, X presupposes that the inherent presuppositions of Y aren't satisfied.

For the case at hand, assume that <PRESENT, PAST> is a scale. Because (1b) is a scalar alternative of (1a) with more inherent presuppositions, (1a) is predicted to have the implicated presupposition that the inherent presupposition of (1b) be false. This precisely predicts that complementarity we observed above.

It's worth noting that analogous reasoning shows the feature plural in (5a) and the features masculine and 3rd person in (5b) to be semantically vacuous.

(5)      a. For each paper, all errors are blamed on its authors (vs. author).  
          b. Every one of us should admit his (vs. her/my) errors.

#### References

- Abusch, D. (1997) "Sequence of Tense and Temporal De Re," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 20, 1-50.  
Heim, I. (1991) "Artikel und Definitheit", in A. von Stechow and D. Wunderlich eds., *Semantik, Ein internationales Handbuch der zeitgenoessischen Forschung*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 487-535.  
Ippolito, M. (2001) "Presuppositions and Implicatures in Counterfactuals", unpublished ms., Massachusetts Institute of Technology.