Introduction

I. The Meaning of Tense-Switching

If we ask why tense, aspect and modality have been such fondly pursued objects of research by linguists in the past half century (Klein [1994] noted it had been said before that it had been said before that it is impossible to read all the relevant literature, and the expansion only seems to be accelerating), the appealing response may well be worth taking seriously: that these matters in some way touch at the heart of human experience and that through studying them we may ultimately gain greater insights into our own nature. At the same time, the linguist should be sobered by the realisation that, as Evans (2013: 4) puts it, ‘[time] is one of the most, if not the most, challenging domain of enquiry in terms of understanding the relation between language, perceptual experience, conceptual representation and meaning’.

This book is a study in the semantics and pragmatics of tense-switching in Classical Greek (and beyond) from a cognitive perspective. Tense-switching is the use of different tenses to refer to the same temporal domain. In particular, I will be concerned with the alternation between the past and present tense in references to the past, as illustrated in the following example:

(1) lennox: Sent he to Macduff?
lord: He did, and with an absolute ‘Sir, not I,’
the cloudy messenger turns me his back,
and hums, as who should say ‘You’ll rue the time
that clogs me with this answer.'

(William Shakespeare, Macbeth, act III scene VI)

Throughout this book, I use boldface type to highlight relevant present tense forms in quotations. Past tense forms are underlined. Other elements of interest are italicised (but not in Greek quotations due to the publisher’s stylistic guidelines).
This use of the present tense to refer to past events (turns, hums) is one of the most obvious paradoxes in language. It seems to imply a semantic construal in which, contrary to ordinary experience, the gap between the past and the present is bridged somehow. If this assumption is correct (and it has often been challenged; see Section I.2.1), an investigation into the dynamics of tense-switching promises to reveal interesting aspects of linguistic meaning construal and ultimately raises questions about how this, in turn, relates to our non-linguistic conceptualisation of reality.

I.1.1 Cognitive Linguistics, Deixis and Viewpoint

One of the most important general insights promoted by cognitively oriented linguists has been that, as Sweetser and Fauconnier (1996: 21) put it, ‘natural language has a striking potential for making rich and extensive meaning available on the basis of very little overt linguistic structure’. For example, consider the utterance There is a house every now and then through the valley (Langacker [2008: 531–5]). Housing density is here construed in terms of time (now and then) rather than space, and of motion (through) rather than staticity. The resulting semantic ‘incoherence’ is only superficial. It seems intuitively plausible that we can meaningfully process this utterance by supplying a conceptual scenario in which we imagine ourselves to be travelling through the valley – even if there is no overt reference to a person engaged in this activity. As a case study in cognitive semantics, this book aims to illustrate the effectiveness of assuming such covert conceptual scenarios in order to explain apparent linguistic discrepancies – in this case, the use of the present tense to refer to past events.

The issue of tense-switching is part of a broader discussion concerning phenomena pertaining to deixis and viewpoint, which has surged in cognitive linguistics recently (see, e.g., Dancygier and Sweetser [2012]; Sweetser [2013]; Dancygier et al. [2016]; van Krieken et al. [2019]). A main thread in these investigations is the analysis of multiple viewpoint constructions, both in language and in gesture. A multiple viewpoint construction is in

---

* In an online forum discussion, ‘Julien’ asks: ‘Why does Shakespeare use present tenses: “turns” and “hums” to narrate a past event?’ Some responses are amusingly illustrative of the type of lazy thinking that sometimes tempts even linguists: ‘His command of tense was often Shaky’, says ‘Hot Licks’; ‘Azor Aha’ suggests that the present tense forms ‘might fit the metre better’. Website: English Language & Usage, discussion thread ‘Shakespeare [sic] use of the present tense narrating a past action’. https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/441601/shakespeare-use-of-present-tense-narrating-a-past-action, accessed 29 March 2019.
effect when different components of a single utterance are grounded in different viewpoints. An example is the so-called ‘past + now construction’ (Nikiforidou [2010], [2012]), as in the following instance:

(2) And now Tom for the first time saw his future school-fellows in a body.

(Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown’s schooldays*, chapter 5)

The paradoxical juxtaposition of the past tense form *saw* and the proximal temporal adverb *now* can be unpacked by assigning the use of the past tense to the viewpoint of the narrator and the use of the adverb *now* to the displaced consciousness of the protagonist, Tom.

Multiple viewpoint constructions, however, constitute only one part of the more general phenomenon of complex viewing arrangements (e.g., Langacker [2011]). In the default viewing arrangement, an utterance is anchored in a single viewpoint and designates a single instantiation of an object of conceptualisation. The complexity of this arrangement can be increased either by multiplying viewpoints, as in (2) under the analysis given there, or by multiplying instantiations of the same object of conceptualisation. This occurs when the distinction between an actual object and a representation of that object is blurred (see also Section I.3). Consider the following example:

(3) He *visits* with King Duncan, and they *plan* to dine together at Inverness, Macbeth’s castle, *that night.*


Here the use of the present tense ostensibly clashes with the distal expression *that night*. The resolution to this paradox must be different, I believe, from that in the case of (2). There is no particular reason to assume that the present tense here is anchored in a displaced viewpoint, as if we are present as eyewitnesses on the scene. Rather, the use of the present tense depends on the idea that the designated events *as represented in the play* are always presently accessible through the medium of the text of the play, as well as through regularly staged performances (compare Langacker [2011] on such ‘scripted’ usages of the present tense). The distal expression *that night*, on the other hand, signals that the *actual instantiation* of the designated event was on a particular day that is different from the present day of the writer of the summary (whether the event really occurred or not is linguistically irrelevant). The expression *tonight* would be infelicitous in this context, as it would mean that Duncan and Macbeth plan to dine the night following upon the writing of the summary.
The main theoretical contribution of this study to the debate on deixis and viewpoint in cognitive linguistics lies in the formulation of a principled distinction between these two complex viewing arrangements – the multiple viewpoint scenario and the multiple instantiation scenario, or ‘representation scenario’ – and in a thorough exploration of the conceptual structure of the latter type. While the multiple viewpoint scenario has received the lion’s share of attention so far, I argue that the representation scenario generally has a greater explanatory value with respect to the phenomenon of tense-switching and also sheds a different light on other deictic paradoxes (such as the ‘past + now construction’).

I.1.2 Tense and the Experience of Time

A deeper question concerning tense usage is how the grammatical construal of temporality relates to our psychological experience. One of the central tenets of cognitive linguistics is that our capacity for language is not a separate module but is grounded in other cognitive systems and faculties, such as perception, memory and categorisation (e.g., Langacker [2008: 8]). Grammatical categories depend on these systems and faculties for imposing a certain construal on the basic conceptual content that is described. For example, Langacker (2008: 105) argues that the noun category serves to construe the conceptual content conveyed by its lexical meaning as a thing, that is, a product of grouping or reification. Reification, in turn, is the ‘capacity to manipulate a group as a unitary entity for higher-order cognitive purposes’. A verb, on the other hand, construes the conveyed conceptual content as a process, which involves the cognitive operation of sequential scanning.

How does this pertain to tense? Evans (2013: 57–61, 81–2) summarises the evidence for the neurological basis for our deictic system of temporal reference, with the basic distinction being between ‘present’ and ‘non-present’. The ‘present’ is that which we experience in the perceptual moment, a fleeting ‘now’ that is refreshed every two or three seconds. The brain regions involved in remembering the past and thinking about the future are interrelated and distinct from those involved in the construction of the perceptual moment (Evans [2013: 60]). Thus, the temporal construal imposed by the present and past tenses on the designated conceptual content is grounded in pre-linguistic cognitive systems.

Now, the question with respect to tense-switching is the following: does the linguistic construal of a past event as part of the present tell us something about the speaker’s psychological experience of that event?
I.1 The Meaning of Tense-Switching

That is, does the speaker, when using the present instead of the preterite, actually fail to properly distinguish between experiencing the immediate reality of the perceptual moment and remembering what is past?

There is some evidence pointing in this direction from the study of autobiographical narratives of trauma. Hellawell and Brewin (2004) had patients diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder write detailed narratives of their trauma. Afterwards, these patients identified which sections had been written in ordinary memory periods and which in *flashback* periods (intrusive memories that are felt as current experience: O’Kearney and Perrott [2006: 82]). The results showed that narrators described events in more detail, and used the present tense more often, in flashback periods. Similarly, Manne (2002) found that in parents’ stories about their children who survived cancer, use of the *past* tense was associated with fewer traumatic stress symptoms (see O’Kearney and Perrott [2006: 88] for some other references). The correlation between the use of the present tense to refer to the past and vividness of memory is not confined to patients suffering from traumatic experiences. In a study comparing patients who had their memory impaired by unilateral temporal lobe excision or epilepsy to a healthy control group, Park et al. (2011) found that the people in the latter group used the narrative present more often and that the use of the narrative present ‘correlated positively with other measures of recollection, such as the total number of perceptual details contained in a narrative’ (Park et al. [2011: abstract]).

It would be extremely naïve, however, to assume a one-to-one correlation between tense usage and psychological experience. While the evidence suggests that vividness of recollection prompts the use of the present tense to refer to the past in the context of autobiographical narrative, this does not mean that tense-switching is always conditioned in this way. As I will show with many examples throughout this study, the present tense is often used to refer to the past in contexts devoid of symptoms of a particular vividness of recollection. In such cases, the ‘presentness’ denoted by the present tense becomes a more abstract notion than our understanding of what is actually occurring in the current perceptual moment.

This general point may be illustrated with a related deictic grammatical category: that of demonstratives. As Kemmerer (1999) points out, many languages have a bipartite division between ‘proximal’ and ‘distal’ in their demonstrative systems (*this* versus *that*). There seems to be a corresponding neurological distinction between what we experience as ‘near’ or part of our ‘peripersonal space’ (roughly, what is within arm’s reach) and ‘far’ or part of ‘extrapersonal space’. However, Kemmerer (1999: abstract) argues
that ‘the distinction between proximal and distal demonstratives . . . does not correspond to an independently established distinction between near and far space in the visual system but is instead based on language-internal factors’. For one thing, many languages have demonstrative systems with more than two categories of remoteness. Moreover, it is evident that in language use the proximal-distal distinction often does not reflect actual spatial distance (Kemmerer [1999: 51–5]). While the pre-linguistic distinction between the near and the far may have been the initial anchor for the distinction between proximal and distal demonstratives, the linguistic notions of ‘proximal’ and ‘distal’ are often more abstract in character and require complex inferences by the addressee to be properly interpreted.

In analogous fashion, the past and present tenses, in their prototypical uses, can be related to the distinction between what is immediately experienced in the perceptual moment and what is retrieved through recollection. Some ‘switched’ uses of the present tense can be accounted for in terms of a change in ordinary experience, where recollection feels like re-experiencing. In other cases, the ‘presence’ of a past event is related to more abstract notions such as discourse status or cultural familiarity. I will have more to say about these different implications of tense-switching in Section I.2.2.

I.2 Questions and Aims

Tense-switching has been a hot topic among linguists and narratologists in the past decades, and research into the phenomenon spans wide areas of space, time and genre: from European languages such as (American) English (e.g., Wolfson [1978]; Schiffrin [1981] etc.; Levey [2006]), French (Fleischman [1990]; Mellet [1998]; Carruthers [2005]), Spanish (Silva-Corvalan [1983]; van Ess-Dykema [1984]; Bonilla [2011]) and modern Greek (Thoma [2011]), to such unrelated languages as Japanese (Iwasaki [1993: ch. 3]), Wolof (Perrino [2007]) and Kala Lagaw Ya (Stirling [2012]); from the Classical Age (Lalot et al. [2011]; Adema [2019]) through the age of the New Testament (Runge and Fresch [2016]) and the Middle Ages (Fleischman [1990]) to recent times (Park et al. [2011]); and from highly literary texts (Fludernik [1992]) to fully conversational narrative (Norrick [2000]), with the space in between filled with, to name a few, performed stories (Fleischman [1986]), courtroom speeches (Nijk [2013a]) and narratives elicited in interviews (Wolfson [1978]; Park et al. [2011]).
1.2 Questions and Aims

It would be gratuitous to state that from such a diversity of investigations no consensus has emerged concerning the semantics and pragmatics of tense-switching. It may, however, be pointed out that most studies have been limited in scope – focusing, for example, on picked text passages or specific verb types, or on statistical correlations between tense usage and certain contextual features – so that the overall picture that emerges from the literature tends to be somewhat fragmented. This study certainly does not set itself the goal of presenting an exhaustive survey of tense-switching in even a single language, but it does aim at a more thoroughly integrated account of the phenomenon. While I focus mainly on Classical Greek, my account is intended as a model for the analysis of tense-switching in other languages as well (see especially Chapter 1).

There are two main aspects in which the present investigation distinguishes itself in terms of its scope. First, my account integrates three levels of linguistic analysis by focusing on the following questions:

(a) How can the use of the present tense to refer to the past be understood in terms of the semantics of the present tense? Is there a conceptual scenario (or are there several) that allow(s) for the construal of past events as being part of the present?

(b) What are the pragmatic functions of the present tense when used to refer to the past, and how are these functions derived from the semantics of the present tense?

(c) How do these pragmatic functions translate into quantifiable usage patterns?

Thus, I move from abstract semantic theorizing all the way down to empirical observation. This approach is inspired by Allan (2009, 2011), who is the rare exception to the rule that researchers tend to focus mainly on one or two of these levels of analysis. Allan’s studies, however, are limited in scope, and my account of the semantics of the present tense in relation to tense-switching (1), as well as my methodology for quantitative analysis (3), are in some respects substantially different.

Second, my account both acknowledges distinct usages of the present tense to refer to the past and unifies these under a general model. Many researchers focus on one particular usage, most often the familiar ‘vivid’ type that is common in conversational narrative (So I walk over and I say to him etc.). Others acknowledge different usages but fail to explain how exactly they are related. For example, in his Syntax and semantics of the verb in Classical Greek, Rijksbaron (2002: 22) suggests that for some uses of the present tense in narrative ‘the notion of “present” may play a part
to the extent that a “pseudo-present” or “pseudo-moment-of-utterance” is created: the narrator plays the role of an eyewitness (see Section I.2.1 for this idea of viewpoint displacement). Rijksbaron notes that this does not hold for all uses, which leaves open the question how the pragmatic function of the present tense in those other cases (such as ‘punctuating the narrative’, page 24) is derived from its semantics. An extreme response to the unsatisfactoriness of this state of affairs has been the rejection of a plurality of explanations and the adoption of a monolithic view of the praesens pro praeterito as a grammatical category (Sicking and Stork [1997: 132]). I will argue that we can in fact make a principled distinction between different usages of the present tense to refer to the past, each with its own specific conceptual scenario, pragmatic functions and conditions of use.

I will now elaborate on these points in more detail while laying out the plan of this book.

I.2.1 The Semantics of Tense-Switching

In Chapter 1, I present a general account of the semantics of the present tense with reference to its use to designate past events. Broadly speaking, there are two views with respect to this issue. Conceptualist accounts depart from the assumption that the present tense serves to construe past events as somehow being cotemporal with the here and now of the speaker and addressees. The opposing view, which may be called ‘functionalist’ or perhaps ‘anti-conceptualist’, rejects this assumption, arguing that the present tense is devoid of time-referential meaning (e.g., Wolfson [1978 etc.]; Fleischman [1990]). I begin by addressing the problems with this alternative view, thereby putting the conceptualist assumption on firm footing.

Within the conceptualist paradigm, it is most commonly argued that the use of the present tense to designate past events depends on a conceptual scenario whereby the speaker mentally displaces their present viewpoint to the past, so as to pretend to be an eyewitness to the actual past events. As I will argue, however, the present tense is often used to refer to the past in ways that contradict the idea of a displaced viewpoint. The solution to this problem lies in the recognition of a second, alternative conceptual scenario that may bridge the gap between the near and the far (see Bühler [1990: 1934]: 154–7] on spatial deixis). In this alternative scenario, the past events are mentally transported into the present in the form of a representation (compare Vuillaume [1990: especially 35]);
I.2 Questions and Aims

Gosselin [2000]; Langacker [2011]). This may be realised in different ways: we can conceive of past events as occurring in the present in the form of a play, an improvised performance, video footage or even through the medium of the speaker’s discourse (the past events are ‘present’ in the sense that they are presently being discussed).

I present four case studies from different languages and genres to illustrate the explanatory value of these distinct conceptual scenarios for specific usages of the present tense to designate past events. I argue that the displacement scenario seems to be confined to a particularly artificial style of narrative presentation, while the representation scenario is able to account for tense-switching more generally. From this point onwards I use the term ‘present for preterite’ to designate the use of the present tense that corresponds to the latter scenario.

I.2.2 Three Usages in Classical Greek

Having established a general theoretical account of tense-switching, I turn to the Classical Greek corpus in Chapters 2–4. Each chapter is devoted to a particular usage of the present for preterite (the distinction between the usages identified here was anticipated by von Fritz [1949]). I argue that each usage is associated with a specific conceptual scenario: while each involves the concept of a representation as a medium between the past events and the present circumstances, the nature of this representation differs from one usage to another. This also entails that the present for preterite carries different pragmatic implications in each case, which translate into different usage patterns.

The main variable behind the tripartite division of present for preterite usages proposed in this study is that of narrativity, which, for my purposes, may be understood in terms of narrative experientiality. In Fludernik’s (1996, 2003) sense, narrative experientiality is the degree to which the processing of a representation of past events in discourse is analogous to the processing of actual experience. I distinguish three fields on this

---

1 This idea of representation as an explanatory concept for tense-switching in Classical Greek was anticipated by von Fritz (1949: 196), who compares a certain usage to ‘the use of the present tense in the recounting of the contents of a novel’ as contents of a novel.

2 Fludernik’s theory of experientiality in representational terms (i.e., in terms of the relation between the character of narrative and the character of real experience) has been criticised. For example, Caracciolo (2012, 2014a), echoing Herman (2007: 256) (see also Herman [2009: 137–60]), argues that an important function of narratives is precisely to ‘restructure the experiential background of those who engage with them’ (e.g., Caracciolo [2012: 178]). What matters is not an objective relationship between the narrative and what is narrated but how narrative affects the consciousnesses
10 Introduction

continuum, each with a corresponding usage of the present for preterite. However, I will take care to emphasise throughout that the boundaries between these categories are fluid and that the different interpretations of the function of the present for preterite are not always mutually exclusive.

My corpus consists of the main texts of the Classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BC) in which tense-switching occurs. I discuss material from the historians Thucydides, Herodotus and Xenophon; from the canonical orators Aeschines, Andocides, Antiphon, Demosthenes, Dinarchus, Hyperides, Isaeus, Isocrates, Lycurgus and Lysias; from the dramatists Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles and Menander and finally, I use some examples from Plato. The quantitative analyses presented in Chapters 2 and 3 are confined to selected portions of this corpus.

I.2.2.1 Scenic Narrative and the Mimetic Present

Chapter 2 begins with scenic narrative, which is mainly characterised by a close relationship between discourse time and story time. That is, the time it takes for the discourse to progress is close to the time it took for events represented by the discourse to actually occur; there is thus a high degree of Iconicity between narrative experience and actual experience. In such contexts, we find the mimetic use of the present for preterite. (For the present tense and narrative mimesis compare, e.g., Wolfson [1978 etc.]; Fleischman [1990]; Kroon [2002]; Allan [2009 etc.].) An example is the following:

(4) καὶ γύνοις δρήνον ἐξώρουν Ἀλιμουτάδε, κάρτι προκόπτων ἔξω τείχους καὶ λυποθυτὴς παιεὶ ῥοπόλω μὲ τὸ λότον· καὶ γύνο πέπτω μηλαί τε βοὰν, ὁ δὲ ἀπέβλεψε θολίατιον μου.

Thinking it was morning, I set off for Halimus. And I just stoop forward out of the city walls and a mugger hits me in the back with a club.

I fall down, and I’m about to shout, but he extracted my coat.

(Aristophanes, Birds 496–8)

I argue that the mimetic present serves to highlight the present accessibility of the designated past events through the medium of a simulation or

of the narrator and addressees. While I acknowledge these complexities, I find the representational view of narrative experientiality adequate in so far as the present investigation is concerned. See further Caracciolo (2014b) for an overview of the issue.

5 For the concept of scenic narrative as opposed to summary narrative, see, e.g., de Jong (2007a: 10–12); Fludernik (2009 [2006]: 32–3); Bal (2014: 102–3).