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Back to the future

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German and English show a peculiar contrast concerning the distribution of temporal modifiers. In German (but not in English), modifiers that express an inherent *before* or *after* relation cannot occur in constructions that express the opposite temporal relation, even in cases that would result in a well-formed temporal interpretation. If an embedded clause receives a past future interpretation (i.e., an interpretation where the time of the embedded event is understood to be after the time of the matrix event but before the utterance time), past modifiers are impossible (cf. (1); the same appears to be the case in French in examples such as (1b) which was pointed out to me by Philippe Schlenker). The sentence in (1a) can be saved (in at least certain dialects) by changing *gestern* ‘yesterday’ to *so wie gestern* ‘such as yesterday’.

- (1) a. **Hans hatte schon vor einem Monat angekündigt*
 John had already a month ago announced
 dass er gestern / vor zwei Tagen heiraten werde/würde/wird
 that he yesterday / two days ago get-married will-COND/would/will
 ‘John had already announced a month ago that he would get married
 yesterday/two days ago’
- b . **1986 hat Hans gedacht*
 1986 has John thought
 dass er vor drei Jahren in Pension gehen werde/würde/wird
 that he three years ago retire will-COND/would/will
 ‘In 1986, John thought that he would retire three years ago’

Note that this problem cannot be reduced to a tense clash in these examples or a special property of indexicals. As is evident from the well-formed paraphrases in (1), past modifiers are possible in the same past future contexts in English. Furthermore, the examples in (2)a,b demonstrate that past future interpretations are in principle possible in German, however, only if the sentence does not involve a past modifier (future oriented modifiers are licit). Finally, in (2)c, we find that future indexicals can be used in clauses that are dependent on a past event. The deictic adverbial tomorrow in (2)c can only be interpreted as ‘the day after today’ and not as

'the day after the announcement was made'. This example thus shows that indexicals in principle can access the utterance time in embedded contexts in German.

- (2) a. *Hans hatte vor einem Monat angekündigt*
John had a month ago announced
dass er eine Woche später heiraten werde/würde/?wird
that he a week later get-married will-COND/would/?will
'John had announced a month ago that he would get married a week later'
- b. *1986 hat Hans gedacht/gesagt/beschlossen*
1986 has John thought/said/decided
dass er 1997 in Pension gehen werde/würde/?wird
that he 1997 retire will-COND/would/?will
'In 1986, John thought/said/decided that he would retire in 1997'
- c. *Hans hatte vor einem Monat angekündigt*
John had a month ago announced
dass er morgen heiraten werde/würde/?wird
that he tomorrow get-married will-COND/would/?will
'John had announced a month ago that he would get married tomorrow'