



5.

Susi Wurmbrand – University of Connecticut
Back to the future, Part 2

susanne.wurmbrand@uconn.edu

In Wurmbrand (2001), it is pointed out that German does not allow inherently past modifiers (e.g. *yesterday*) in future contexts, even in cases where the interpretation would not result in a tense clash (cf. the past future contexts in (1)).

- (1) *Hans beschloß vor einer Woche dass er MOD auf eine Party gehen würde.*
 John decided a week ago that he to a party go would.
 ‘John decided a week ago that he would go to a party.’

Possible/impossible modifiers (MOD):

- * *past* modifiers: *gestern* ‘yesterday’, *vor 2 Tagen* ‘two days ago’
- √ *future* modifiers: *morgen* ‘tomorrow’, *einen Tag später* ‘a day later’

The possibility of modifiers such as *a day later* and *tomorrow* in contexts such as (1) shows that a past future interpretation is in principle possible and that the problem cannot be a problem with deictic modifiers in these contexts. Furthermore, since no such restriction exists in English, it seems unlikely that the prohibition against past modifiers in past future contexts in German is caused by some semantic tense clash or the like.

Rather, I would like to speculate that the problem in (1) is a syntactic problem. As a hypothesis, I suggest that in German, sentential temporal modifiers must be licensed by an agreeing temporal head. More specifically, I assume that the tense feature of a sentential modifier must match the tense feature of T (or the modal or aspect head hosting *woll*, assuming a composite structure of the future). This yields the following possible and impossible relations.

(2)	T/Modal/Asp	MODIFIER
a.	<past>	<past>
b.	<fut/woll>	<fut>
c.	* <fut/woll>	<past>
d.	* <past>	<fut>

Past modifiers in past future contexts are then a case of (2c), illustrated in more detail in (3). The feature <*fut/woll*> of *would* clashes with the <past> feature of modifiers such as *yesterday*, and hence past modifiers are not licensed.

- (3) decided a week ago [would go *yesterday / tomorrow]
 <past> <past> [<fut/woll> *<past> / <fut>]

Furthermore, (4) shows that, as predicted by this syntactic licensing approach, future modifiers are not possible in past/perfect contexts (cf. 2d).

- (4) *In einer Woche wird Hans behaupten dass er MOD auf eine Party gegangen ist/sei.*
In a week will John claim that he to a party gone is/is-Cond
'In a week, John will claim that he went to a party.'

Possible/impossible modifiers (MOD):

- * *future* modifiers: *morgen* 'tomorrow', *in 2 Tagen* 'in two days'
√ *past* modifiers: *gestern* 'yesterday', *vor 2 Tagen* 'two days ago'

A further fact supporting this basic idea comes from the distribution of temporal modifiers within NPs (this fact was pointed out to me by N. Fitzgibbons who noticed this contrast between sentential and nominal modifiers in Russian). As shown in (5), both past modifiers in past future contexts and future modifiers in past/perfect contexts are perfectly fine when the modifiers are embedded within an NP.

- (5) a. *Hans beschloß vor einer Woche dass er auf die gestrige Party gehen würde.*
John decided a week ago that he to the yesterday's party go would.
'John decided a week ago that he would go to yesterday's party.'
b. *Hans wird in einer Woche behaupten dass er auf die morgige Party gegangen sei.*
John will in a week claim that he to the tomorrow's party gone is.
'John will claim in a week that he went to tomorrow's party.'

Under the interpretation where the nominal modifiers in (5) refer to the time of the party, (5a) is essentially synonymous with (1) (with *yesterday*), and (5b) with (4) (with *tomorrow*). The difference in grammaticality hence shows again that the problem does not appear to be a semantic problem. Assuming a syntactic account such as the one sketched above, however, the difference is expected: only sentential modifiers are in the domain of sentential tense, and therefore only sentential modifiers must match the features of the local T/Modal/aspect head.

An obvious question is why this licensing relation must hold in some languages but not in others.

References

Wurmbrand, S. (2001) "Back to the future." *Snippets* 3, 15-16.