snippets

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States and temporal interpretation in non-SOT languages

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It has been argued that in non-SOT languages a past-tense can sometimes support a simultaneous reading in indirect discourse (Barensten 1996, Sharvit 2003, 2008, Altshuler 2004). Consider Sharvit's (2008) Hebrew example (27) given under (1) below:

(1) Yosef   amar   Se-Miriam hayta   hara
     Yosef say:PAST that-Miriam be:PAST pregnant.

According to Sharvit, (1) is ambiguous between a simultaneous and back-shifted reading, where Yosef said, respectively, *Miriam is pregnant* and *Miriam was pregnant*. While I agree with Sharvit that the (alleged) pregnancy may overlap (in part) the saying time, I disagree that (1) has a simultaneous reading.

Suppose Miriam got fired and ten months later the following conversation took place:

(2)   Rachel: Isn't it illegal to fire pregnant women.
       Yosef: It is, but Miriam just got pregnant/is **now** pregnant; she was not before/ten months ago.

In this situation, Yosef's reply cannot be reported by (1), which demonstrates that a simultaneous reading is impossible for Hebrew past-under-past. The following discourse demonstrates this point further:

(3) a.   Dan cilcel   Suv ve-Suv   ba-delet   aval af exad lo   ana
           Dan ring:PAST again and-again in.the-door but NEG one NEG answer:PAST
           'Dan rang the door over and over again but nobody answered.'

    b.   hu amar   le-iSto   Se-Rina kanir'e (#hayta)
          he say:PAST to-wife.his that-Rina probably (#be:PAST)
          yeSena/ lo (#hayta)   ba-bayit
          asleep/ NEG (#be:PAST) in.the-home
          'He said to his wife that Rina was probably asleep/not at home'

(3a) suggests that Rina's (possible) situation of being asleep or not at home overlaps Dan's saying time. In other words, the embedded clause in (3b) must have a simultaneous reading; the fact that its verb cannot come in past-tense demonstrates that past-tense may only give rise to a back-shifted reading.

I conclude that the embedded past in (1) can only have the back-shifted reading. However, the pregnancy may have continued at Yosef's saying time. This, I argue, is due to its distributive property, which has to do with the situation and its subparts (Bennett & Partee 1978, Dowty 1979, 1986, Taylor 1977, Bach 1981, Hinrichs 1985).

It has been stipulated that states are true in every subinterval, while events are only true in one. This explains the following entailments noted by Reinhart (1986) and Dowty (1986):

(4) Mary ate the apple. → Mary is not eating it now.

(5) I was at home. ~ → I am not at home now.

The event reported in (4) is non-distributive and cannot obtain after (or before) its reference-time, while the state depicted in (5) is distributive and may continue beyond its reference-time and crucially, overlap its evaluation-time.

Being distributive, the pregnancy reported in (1), which must have obtained before the time Yosef uttered *Miriam hayta hara* 'Miriam was pregnant', may have continued to overlap it.

This analysis suggests an extra layer of ambiguity in SOT languages. E.g., the English sentence *John said that Mary was pregnant* (which can report scenarios of the kind in (2)) is ambiguous between a simultaneous reading, where the pregnancy overlapped John's time of saying, and the back-shifted reading, where it preceded it completely or overlapped it in part.

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