snippets

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Contents

The past is rewritten

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In a snippet from 2002 entitled *The present tense is vacuous*, Uli Sauerland argues that the present tense is vacuous, whereas the past presupposes that t is before the time of utterance. With this, Sauerland (2002) captures the contrast in (1) by accepting the semantics that Abusch (1997) gives to past morphology, but rewriting the semantics of the present tense.

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

(2) Abusch 1997
PRES: presupposes that t isn't before the time of utterance.
PAST: presupposes that t is before the time of utterance.

(3) Sauerland 2002
PRES: no presupposition (but, anti-presupposition).
PAST: presupposes that t is before the time of utterance.

This snippet seeks to argue that the semantics of past morphology in (2) and (3) needs to be rewritten in order to also capture the modal readings of the past in conditionals and futurates – namely the unlikelihood/falsity of the antecedents in (4b)/(4c), in contrast to (4a), and the uncertainty of the future reading in (5b), in contrast to (5a). Basically, while in the above, PAST is defined to vary over times (t), it needs to be able to vary over worlds (w), as well.

(4) a. If he fasts tomorrow, he will ...
b. If he fasted right now / were to fast tomorrow, he would ...
c. If he had fasted tomorrow (instead of yesterday), he would have ...

(5) a. He is fasting tomorrow.
b. He was fasting tomorrow, #(right?)

Following the idea put forward in Iatridou 2000 that the past can be "fake", but maintaining the idea that the semantics of the past needs to be unified to capture both real and fake readings, the following definition is proposed.

(6) PAST: presupposes that $\langle w,t\rangle \neq \langle w^0,t^0\rangle$

This captures the range of meanings associated with the past. Its before-now usage, its futurate usage, and its conditional usage can be straightforwardly achieved by changing the value of t^0, w^0, or both.

It is worth noting that conditional data, as in (4), suggest that the scale reflects a three way distinction: conditionals marked with zero-past (i.e. indicatives), with one-past (singly marked

subjunctives), and with two-pasts (doubly marked subjunctives, i.e. true counterfactuals). Does this mean that the indicatives are unmarked? The answer might have been easy if we had only a two way distinction – we could then find arguments for having one be the anti-presupposition of the other (cf. Ippolito 2003; Leahy 2011). This will not be straightforward for proponents of a pragmatic theory of presupposition because as it stands, it would fail to incorporate singly marked conditionals. One cannot make both the falsity inference of doubly marked conditionals in (4c) and the unlikelihood inference of singly marked conditionals in (4b) anti-presuppositions of one and the same indicative presupposition in (4a).

Having the past presuppose that the world-time pair is different from the world-time pair consisting of the actual world and time of speech ($\langle w,t\rangle \neq \langle w^0,t^0\rangle$) means that in its presence one evaluates the proposition against a set comprising of world-time pairs that are one step further away from those that contain the real world and actual time. Applying a second past presupposes that one has to go yet another step further. In its absence, however, a proposition is able to reach within the set that contains $\langle w^0,t^0\rangle$. This means that it takes two steps to get from an indicative to a counterfactual (in the strong sense): the first brings you to situations that are unlikely (4b), the second to situations that are excluded (4c).

This analysis provides a unified account of past morphology, but also shows that we can capture the fact that past morphology in conditionals is able to do exactly what dedicated counterfactual markers do – namely to exclude the real world from the context set without going back to the real past.

References

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