

# snippets

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# Restricting the English past tense

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Kratzer (1998) argues for a pronominal analysis of tense (see also Partee 1973; Sauerland 2002), but she also identifies behaviours of the English past which seem unexpected under the pronominal account. Consider (1), for example.

- (1) [You are looking at churches in Italy. There is no previous discourse when the following question comes up:]  
A: Who built this church?  
B: Borromini built this church. (Kratzer 1998)

The puzzle is that this context provides no salient reference time (RT) to which a temporal pronoun could refer, yet the past tense is acceptable. Kratzer proposes that the English simple past form represents either a pronominal past tense, or a combination of present tense and perfect aspect. She supports this proposal through a comparison with German, in which the simple past is infelicitous in (1), as expected for an unambiguously pronominal tense.

Explaining the acceptability of (1) via a present perfect reading of the past tense form runs into the complication that the English present perfect is itself infelicitous in (1), likely due to the non-repeatability of the event (McCawley 1971). Here we reinterpret the ambiguity of the English past as being between *pronominal* and *existentially quantified* tense (see Partee 1984; Ogihara 1996; von Stechow 2009 on existential tense; and Grønn and von Stechow 2016 for this ambiguity). (1) is then acceptable under the existential reading, which merely asserts the existence of some prior RT.

So far, so good. However, notice that the English simple past is not always acceptable in contexts without salient RTs. This is shown in (2), where the # applies globally to the conversation.

- (2) #[I am curious which of my friends has read *Emma* at some point in their life.]  
A: Who read *Emma*?  
B: Julia read *Emma*.

A salient RT renders this dialogue felicitous:

- (3) [There has been confusion about what our book club's chosen book was this month. Some of us read *Emma* and some read *Persuasion*.]  
A: Who read *Emma*?  
B: Julia read *Emma*.

The contrast between (2) and (3) would follow if the English past were purely pronominal after all – but that would leave (1) unexplained.

We propose the following generalization. The English past on its existential reading must have non-vacuous domain restriction. According to this, the past tense in (3) can be analyzed as existentially quantifying over times within the past month. In contrast, (2) is ruled out because there is no meaningful domain restriction: the issue here is whether the sentential subject has read *Emma* at some point in their entire lifespan. ((2) is a typical experiential context, well-known for being suited to the present perfect.)

The past tense's required domain restriction can be provided via a specific event, whose run time crucially need not be known. In (1), the speakers may have no idea *when* the church was built, but there was clearly at some point a particular building event of that church. Knowledge of a specific event also licenses the reading dialogue, as shown in (4). The phenomenon generalizes to other predicates, as shown for example in (5).

- (4) [I bought a brand-new copy of *Emma* and now I see the pages are creased. I ask my family:]  
A: Who read *Emma*?  
B: Julia read *Emma*.
- (5) Who littered?  
# *in the context*: I am curious about who has ever done anti-social things in a forest.  
*ok in the context*: I am walking in the forest and notice a piece of litter on the ground.

The ambiguity we propose here for the English past tense may be overtly spelled out cross-linguistically; there may be languages which overtly distinguish pronominal from existential tenses (see e.g., Rieger 2011 on Swahili; Chen et al. 2019 on Atayal and Javanese).

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