Mapping tense form and meaning for L2 learning – from theory to practice

1. Introduction

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, tense is one of the most difficult grammatical structures for learners to acquire (e.g. Graham 1997). It will be argued below that features inherent in the English tense system, and the creative ways in which it is used, contribute to making tense relatively opaque. The paper attempts to address this issue by answering two questions: What do learners – and their teachers - need to know about English tense? How can such complex knowledge be presented to learners in a way that engages and does not overwhelm them? A theoretical model of English tense and its practical application in teaching will be described. It is suggested that well-informed teachers and teaching materials can facilitate learners’ development of conscious knowledge (declarative knowledge) about tense through collaborative dialogue, knowledge that can then be built on to proceduralize it (Anderson 1983) in meaning focused practice.

Below, ‘tense’ (the past-present distinction) will be distinguished from ‘aspect’ (the simple-perfect-progressive distinction). Hence, in Claire had walked the streets of Istanbul with a different man, the underlined form would be described as ‘past tense, perfect aspect’, or a ‘past perfect form’, but not ‘past perfect tense’. Aspect will be touched upon only as it relates to tense. ‘Learners’ in this paper refers to EFL learners, from teenagers and upwards, who are learning the language in a classroom setting. Other terms will be defined as they first occur. (See also Appendix 1.)

The model presented is a modified version of Reichenbach’s (1947) view of English tense. It is first briefly situated in relation to those of other descriptive and pedagogic accounts. Some of the learning challenges posed by tense, and which the paper seeks to address, are then outlined. The role of conscious knowledge about grammar is discussed, as is the importance of learners investigating and talking about language, and the model of the tense system is then presented. Reference time (past or present) and sequence (before, at or after), and the aspect-tense, and modality-tense interfaces are then explored, clearing the way for an examination of speakers’ canonical as well as creative and metaphorical uses of tense. To address the validity of the current description, evidence from second language acquisition research is briefly discussed. Suggestions are then made for its use in language classrooms.

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1 Cumming 2014, p.17
and its potential is illustrated with a collaborative dialogue extract. There is finally a summary and some suggestions for further research.

2. Descriptions of English tense

The position adopted here is that grammar presents speakers with networks of meaningful choices (cf. Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). For example, when speakers use nouns, the grammar requires and enables them to make choices to do with mass/count classification, definiteness and specificity (Quirk et al. 1985), and the plural/singular distinction. Below, the choices available in the tense system will be described in some detail. One might think that nothing new can or needs to be said about tense. Reference grammars of different persuasions (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014) and pedagogic grammars and materials (Locke 1996; Parrot 2000; Coffin, Donahue and North 2009; Derewianka 2011; Thorne 2012) provide a wealth of accurate information about tense, and Bache’s (2008) Systemic Functional Grammar model arguably provides a fairly comprehensive, holistic overview of the choices available in the tense and aspect system. Nevertheless, the failure to separate tense meanings (Sections 5.1-2) from the aspctual meanings of verb forms (Section 5.4) tends to render the basic architecture of tense all but invisible.

The tense model presented here (see Section 5) focuses on the logical, temporal relationships encoded by tense. It has the advantage of clearly separating tense meaning from form, and hence tense from aspect. That initial separation then allows forms to be matched onto meanings. For the present purpose, this is a key feature as form-meaning mapping is essential in language learning (VanPatten et al. 2008).

3. Learning challenges

There are a number of reasons why acquiring English tense is cognitively challenging. Five of them are briefly discussed here.

1/ Opaqueness of input: How tense works is difficult to deduce from comprehensible input. Past participle and past simple\(^2\) often look and sound identical (the houses were built on

\(^2\) ‘Simple’ is here considered an aspect, contrasting with ‘progressive’ (see Section 5.4)
sand; they built the houses on sand), as do present simple and the bare infinitive (I swim quite well; I can swim quite well). Distinguishing finite from non-finite verbs can thus be challenging. To learners, even identifying which words are verbs can be difficult as participles with –ed or –ing may look like verbs although they are not used as such (I prefer the salted peanuts; knitting is relaxing). In addition, native English speakers may seem not to follow rules – at least not the simple, pedagogic rules to which most learners have been exposed. Learners may, for example, be warned not to ‘mix their tenses’, although in authentic input this practice is frequent, and for good reasons: *If the first reports are to be believed, Joseph Ricardo died as he had lived*.3

2/ Obscure form-meaning relationships: The relationship between tense and time is not one-to-one: Past tense can be used for present time and vice versa, for example in story telling: *She doesn’t reply, she completely ignores me.*4

3/ Natural learner tendencies: The natural tendency is for learners to focus on meaning rather than form (VanPatten 1990). Adverbials often establish the time of the situation referred to, making noticing the verb form redundant for comprehension. In speaking or writing, learners may adopt the use of time adverbials as a communicative strategy at the expense of tense.

4/ L1 transfer: The first language (L1) can hinder or facilitate acquisition of English tense. L1 may not be a tense language, or similarity of form but difference in function may cause confusion. For example, in German the present of have + past participle is, in some of its uses, a register variant of präteritum (the past simple equivalent) (for an in-depth analysis, see Klein and Vater 1998).

5/ Teaching: The use of ‘tense’ as an umbrella term for tense and aspect by teachers and in course books further obscures the workings of tense.

4. **A Language Awareness approach - the learner as investigator**

For learners other than very young children, and for adults in particular, Language Awareness (LA; conscious knowledge about language, Svalberg 2007) can play an important facilitative role in language learning, in particular if the knowledge is constructed

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3 James, 1992, p.
4 Guardian 24.08.2016.
by learners actively engaging with language (Svalberg 2009) either in specifically designed ‘consciousness raising’ (CR) tasks (Ellis 2003) or in spontaneous focus-on-form episodes (Long 1991; Swain and Lapkin 2001) within meaning-focused activities.

It is assumed by LA proponents that noticing form (Schmidt 1990) is an important first step to awareness leading to learning, but it has been shown that learners naturally attend to meaning first, and form may go unnoticed (VanPatten 1990; VanPatten et al. 2008). Teachers and tasks therefore need to direct learners’ attention to the target grammar features (Svalberg 2007, 2012b). This requires the teacher to have robust subject knowledge and an understanding of what learners should be made aware of. The description below will clarify what learners need to know about tense, and a summary is presented at the end of the paper.

The characteristics of LA as a teaching approach are discussed by Borg (1994: 62), who points out that learners in LA classrooms are investigators of language. Exploration and discovery of how the language works are essential elements, and learner autonomy is promoted. Tasks aim to engage learners both cognitively, affectively and socially (Svalberg 2007, 2009), typically requiring learners to talk analytically about language to each other (‘languaging’, Swain et al. 2009). Within a socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf and Beckett 2009), the scaffolding provided by such collaborative dialogue (Swain and Lapkin 2001) is considered to facilitate learning.

One obstacle to effective languaging might be metalanguage, both the metalinguistic terms themselves and the notions they refer to. The approach discussed here attempts to address this in three ways: by using easy, everyday terms as far as possible, by providing visual scaffolding in the form of figures and diagrams, and by allowing the learner-investigator to draw on both intuitive understanding and declarative knowledge. Before discussing the pedagogy further, the theoretical model it applies will be presented.

5. A model of the English tense system
The tense model below, which has emerged from a combination of theory, extensive analysis of authentic text, and the writer’s own pedagogic practice in both EFL contexts and language teacher education1, is a modified version of that presented by Reichenbach (1947). The latter has been much discussed and also critiqued (Comrie 1985; Declerck 1986, 2015; Carroll, Stutterheim and Klein 2003; Kibort 2009; Klein 2009).
The original scheme has been criticized for imprecision in the definition of its key constructs (e.g. Carroll, von Stutterheim and Klein 2003). Reichenbach posited that tense is expressed grammatically in the English verb system through three notions: ‘point of speech’ (S), ‘point of reference’ (R) and ‘point of the event’ (E). In this paper, S represents the moment of speech, the speaker’s present, the temporal extension of which is unspecified and can only be determined from context. It is longer in, for example, *Water boils at a lower temperature at this altitude*, or, *I am a happy kind of person* than in, *You are smiling, but it is not funny*. What matters is that the situation coincides with S. Criticism of the S construct tends to focus on the difficulty of establishing who the speaker is in texts where more than one speaker can be discerned. The perspective adopted here is that since grammar consists of networks of possible realizations of intended meanings, the speaker is the person (real or fictional) making the linguistic choices, and the moment of speech is that speaker’s present (see Section 5.1, below). E will be assumed to be a point (rather than an interval) which interacts with the interval meanings of aspectual forms (see Section 5.4) and other contextual elements. Rather than ‘event’, the term ‘situation’ is, however, favoured to make it clear that it includes states. The third construct, R, is discussed below.

5.1 Reference time

One key assumption of the modified model is that English has two tenses: present (represented morphologically by zero or –s) and past (represented by –ed). (See also Section 5.3.) R, the point of reference, is the time to which the speaker orients the situation (cf. ‘relevance time’, Niemeier and Reif 2008). In the unmarked case, present tense orients situations to S, and past tense orients situations to an R prior to S. In ‘real world’ (World) terms, time is never fixed - this ‘now’ is never the same time as this ‘now’, and so on. In ever flowing time, the speaker/writer (henceforth the speaker) is the only fixed point and serves to anchor utterances temporally. The default R is thus S, the speaker’s present, or moment of speech. Below it will also be referred to as PRESENT, in small capitals, while PAST stands for a past R.

The speaker, however, represents more than a fixed point in time. They also stand for what is ‘here’ (spatially or metaphorically), ‘true’ and ‘real’, all notions associated with present tense (e.g. general truth statements: *Water boils at 100 degrees*), in contrast to ‘there’, ‘then’, the ‘uncertain’ or ‘unreal’ which is typically encoded by past tense (e.g. *If you 
...were a bit more helpful, people would not be so hard on you). (See also Section 7.2.)

Figure 1. The speaker as the spatial, temporal, and epistemic anchor

The whole tense-aspect-modality system thus revolves around the speaker - the constant reference point in space (spatial status), and in time (temporal status), and for what is real and true (epistemic status), as illustrated in Figure 1. The first R is thus S (PRESENT). The second R also expressed grammatically on the English verb is the PAST.

Figure 2 represents PAST and PRESENT time meaning. A past R (PAST) can only be defined in relation to the moment of speech; it is the ‘then’ in contrast to the ‘now’ of the PRESENT. The binary PAST / PRESENT distinction contrasts sharply with the multitude of possible temporal locations in the World, an issue that will be returned to later.

5.2 Sequence

English verb grammar provides resources for indicating sequence of situations in relation to either R, placing them BEFORE, AT or AFTER PAST or PRESENT, as shown in Figure 3.
To describe these temporal relationships, Reichenbach (1947) uses the terms ‘anterior, simple, posterior’ and a formal notation involving E, R, and S (cf. Appendix 2). The time lines and terms in Figure 3 are perhaps more transparent; BEFORE and AFTER are semantic primitives (Goddard 2008, p.33), and AT has been preferred to the primitive ‘now’ as being time-neutral.

In Figure 4, forms have been plotted onto these meanings to show canonical usage; situations oriented to the PRESENT are realized by present tense forms, situations oriented to a PAST R by past tense forms.

With the possible exception of present perfect for BEFORE PRESENT, other form-meaning mappings than those depicted in Figure 4 are possible. Having selected the intended R and sequence point, in other words tense, the speaker also has a choice of aspect and modality. Hence, a situation AT PRESENT could be expressed by the present simple or progressive: My daughters attend/are attending the same school as their cousins, and similarly for AT PAST, attended/were attending, the difference in meaning being a matter of aspect, not
tense. There is also a range of expressions for AFTER PAST and AFTER PRESENT (i.e. future oriented to past or present time), which need not be rehearsed here, and the option of using the past simple rather than past perfect to express situations BEFORE PAST, provided the context makes the sequence of events clear, as for example in: *I never thought/ had never thought that it would succeed.*

Comrie (1985, p.78) considers that present simple and present perfect differ aspectually but not in terms of time location. The implication of Figure 4 is that they differ in their orientation to R (see also Section 5.4). Situations prior to the moment of speech can be considered either AT PAST or BEFORE PRESENT. The former is located in a completed time period (indicated by the vertical double line) and typically encoded by past simple, which Huddleston (1984) characterizes as the ‘exclusive past’. The time period of the latter includes the moment of speech and requires the present perfect, in Huddleston’s description the ‘inclusive past’.

### 5.3 Modalized tense

In addition to PAST and PRESENT, Reichenbach (1947) also posited a future R. An argument for this is that English grammar allows the expression of events BEFORE, AT and (possibly) AFTER a future time, as shown in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. Future oriented to PAST or PRESENT](image)

The figure shows WILL⁵ + Perfect as indicating a situation BEFORE a future R, and WILL + Simple for a situation AT the future R. (Progressive aspect could also be used.) Future time is, however, only one of many possible interpretations of WILL (or other modal verb), and it

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⁵ A verb in capitals signifies ‘any form of’ the verb. In this case, will/would.
is always oriented to either the PRESENT, or a PAST R.

1. When we get/got there, we will assess the situation.
   AT R

2. By the time we get/got there, the show will have started.
   BEFORE R

The following interpretation of the above examples excludes conditional or speculative contexts, and the time clauses are seen as providing a future R to which the situation described by the underlined verb group is oriented. In that case, a more precise interpretation of will assess would be AT (AFTER PRESENT) and of would assess, AT (AFTER PAST). There is no practical difference between this notation and seeing the situation as simply AFTER PRESENT or AFTER PAST. It is only when situations are located BEFORE, as in example (2), or AFTER (3), that positing a future R is necessary to explain the form: WILL + perfect infinitive for BEFORE, and WILL + going to + infinitive for AFTER a future R. The latter is very rarely used; the following is a made up example.

3. - I am going to stop smoking.
   - Sure – I know you. In a year’s time you will still be going to stop.

As usual, the relationship between verb forms and tense meanings is not one-to-one. Other modal verbs (e.g. may/might, can/could) are used in a similar way to will/would in Figure 5. Also, although the ‘present’ modal forms (will, can, may) can only refer to PRESENT, the equivalent ‘past’ forms (would, could, might) can refer to either PAST or PRESENT. In addition, the MODAL + Perfect construction can encode either past time or unreality, or both (see Section 7.2).

4. They may have helped him = It is possible that they helped him. (AT PAST)
5. They could have helped him = It was possible for them to help him (but they didn’t). (AT PAST, UNREAL)
6. It would have been nice to have more time together, but I’ve got to leave now. (AT PRESENT, UNREAL)
7. It would have been nice to have more time together, but I had to leave. (AT PAST, UNREAL)

The mapping of forms onto meanings in Figure 5, and the future R interpretation, are only possibilities and not necessarily representative of the most frequent use and interpretation of modal verb groups. In (4) above, may refers to the speaker’s epistemic judgement, and is therefore AT PRESENT, as shown by the paraphrase, while have helped (though non-finite) denotes a situation in past time. Deontic could in (5), denotes past ability and the perfect is used to mark counter-factuality. The two following examples (6, 7) illustrate that would +
perfect can refer to a counterfactual situation either AT PAST OR AT PRESENT.

To summarize, the absence of a specific tense form for future, the multiple readings of MODAL + main verb constructions, and the fact that they are always oriented to either a PAST or PRESENT R means that the future Rs are not of equivalent status to PAST and PRESENT. In addition, future R meaning is infrequent in authentic text, as shown by the relative rarity of the WILL + Perfect, and the WILL + going to + Verb constructions (Bache 2008). Their multiple readings mean that modalized verb groups present considerable learning challenges. Given the limitations of space they are, however, not discussed further here.

5.4 Tense and aspect
There is an overlap of simple, perfect and progressive aspect with tense. The compatibility (or not) of certain verb forms with points in the tense system can be explained by aspectual meanings, as shown in Figure 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Aspektual meaning</th>
<th>Temporal Extension</th>
<th>Tense interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>simple</td>
<td>boundedness; habit; fact</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td>BEFORE³, AT, AFTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfect</td>
<td>current relevance</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td>BEFORE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progressive</td>
<td>ongoingness</td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Diagram" /></td>
<td>AT, AFTER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. BEFORE PAST only

Figure 6. Compatibility of the aspects with tense meanings.

The purpose of Figure 6, and the analysis below is not to give a full account of aspect but merely to show the relationship that exists between it and tense. The second column contains brief descriptions of aspectual meanings; the third illustrates their temporal extension in relation to R; and the final column shows their compatibility with the sequence points. The boundedness meaning associated with simple aspect can apply to the situation, as in They were happy (but now they’re not) or to the time period, as in They were happy (and they still are). The term ‘fact’ in the figure is meant to indicate that simple forms are sometimes the unmarked choice. In other words, the choice of simple aspect sometimes amounts to little more than a statement of fact. In other instances, however, its boundedness meaning is an important aspectual reason for its choice, for
example, *he peeled an orange* and *he was peeling an orange* convey different realities. The characterization ‘current relevance’ for perfect and ‘ongoing’ for progressive are well-known in the literature (e.g. Comrie1976; Dahl1985) and will not be discussed further here. It is important, however, that perfect relates to a time interval from before R and (at least) up to R, while the progressive time interval coincides with R and continues into the future.

One factor making tense less than transparent to learners is the availability of grammatically correct alternatives for each sequence point, for example either simple or progressive aspect for *at* or *after* R. In addition, perfect forms can be chosen for either tense or aspect reasons, or both. This is illustrated by extract 8, and Figure 7 where the finite verb groups of a literary extract have been plotted onto a ‘tense tracking diagram’ (TTD).

8. It has been a perfect autumn day… We have occupied our time in dozing, talking, working, playing childish games ... Rolf has checked and cleaned the car. Watching his meticulous attention to every inch, his energetic rubbing and polishing, I found it impossible to believe this innocently employed natural mechanic with his simple pleasure in the job was the same Rolf who yesterday had displayed such arrogance, such naked ambition.\(^6\)

The protagonist in the extract (the fictional speaker) is writing a diary entry at the end of the day.

\(^6\) James, 1992
In the TTD, each finite verb group is placed on a new line, in the order it appears in the text, and in the column corresponding to its meaning in context. The verb groups have been connected with a solid line to make the tense flow more salient. Tense meanings encoded in the grammar (Figure 3) are represented horizontally at the top. A horizontal shift across the double line thus represents a shift in orientation. Vertically, the TTD represents the textual dimension.

Past simple could have been used throughout the extract but the choice of present perfect connects the events with the speaker’s present, contributing to a feeling of contentment in the speaker’s now. *Found* represents a change of orientation but not a temporal change as the situation referred to is no more or less distant from S than *has checked*. The effect of the past simple is to disconnect the situation from the speaker’s present, conveying something like “*I found it impossible at that time*”, and starting a past tense narrative. The past perfect in the last line is not obligatory (*displayed* would have been equally correct) but the clear marking of the situation as anterior is useful as in the subsequent text (not shown here) the speaker returns from *yesterday* to further situations of the current day, encoded by past simple. The writer’s choices therefore seem to combine considerations of aspectual meanings and tense, illustrating that perfect is particularly

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7 In this version, the TTD deals only with finite verb groups and not, for example, with time on infinitive complements.
ambiguous in that respect (Kibort 2009).

6. Order of acquisition

Before considering tense usage in more depth, and then briefly possible pedagogical applications of the tense model described, it is perhaps useful to look at some circumstantial evidence for its validity. Research on the emergence of tense morphology in L2 acquisition suggests that split past and present time lines reflect a psychological reality. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2000:169) tense acquisition occurs in the following order:

- Simple past
- Past progressive
- Present perfect
- Pluperfect

For the learner, present simple (or indeed present participle without auxiliary) is initially tense neutral, a state that can persist for a long time in some learners’ interlanguage (Svalberg & Chuchu 1998). Tense starts to emerge with the past simple (and/or past progressive) which, it must be assumed, initially signifies sequence on one time line; that is events relative to the speaker’s present only.

![Figure 8. The emergence of tense – stage one](image)

The subsequent appearance of target-like use of the present perfect (in contrast to past simple) (Bardovi-Harlig 2001) is important as it signifies the emergence of the notion of reference time (PAST R and PRESENT R), i.e. notionally two time lines (cf. Bardovi-Harlig 2001, p.251).
Figure 9. The emergence of tense – stage two

The PAST R/PRESENT R distinction is significant in that it is a ‘threshold concept’ for English Language learners (Meyer and Land 2006) preparing the way for the emergence of other forms related to PAST, namely the pluperfect (BEFORE PAST), in stage three, and would + verb for AFTER PAST.

Wulff et al. (2009) found the acquisition of tense and aspect to be highly complex, which is to be expected as both language and the learning process are complex and dynamic (Beckner et al. 2009). Hence the late emergence of present perfect is not caused by its relationship to R only. Other factors put forward in the literature include the structural complexity of present perfect (as compared to the present simple), its relatively low frequency in input, and L1 transfer (e.g. Fuchs, Götz and Werner 2016). What is being suggested here is that the significant cognitive challenge of separating past and present orientation (Figure 9) interacts with these and other factors. Some of the complexity of the acquisition of present perfect is indicated by Bardovi-Harlig (2001, p.247-8)

As learners carve out the meaning and use associated with the newly acquired form, they must also reassign part of their understanding of the simple past and present tenses to the present perfect. The process of re-association is reflected in both the underuse and overuse of the emergent present perfect.

7. Tense usage

Researchers who have tried to apply Reichenbach’s tense model to actual tense usage have come across instance which it seems unable to accommodate and have questioned aspects of its architecture (e.g. Declerck 1986, pp.307-308). The argument will be made here that these cases of apparent lack of fit also pose cognitive challenges for learners but that the tense system (Figure 3) is well able to accommodate them and that they arise from speaker’
creative use of the resources it makes available.

7.1 Present for documented fact

One such apparent anomaly, and a cognitive challenge for learners, is the use of present for what will here be called ‘documented fact’. It includes the present tense reporting of historical facts, and synopses of films and TV series, as in the following summary of an episode of ‘Neighbours’.

9. Mark's life is on the line, while Aaron's attempt to protect Paige could prove costly as her boxing opponent makes it clear what is at stake. Steph bids a tearful farewell.\(^8\)

The ‘document’ in this case is an episode of the TV series. The argument is that its current existence licenses the speaker to refer to its contents in present tense. This would not be such a compelling argument if it did not also encompass very different genres, for example the reporting in academic writing of materials from published papers and books. Citing publications in the 1980’s and 90’s, Towell and Hawkins (1994, p.36) explain:

10. Like Tarone, Ellis does not seem to believe in an underlying homogeneous competence in SLA, as Krashen does, but nor does he believe in a continuum of styles.

The ‘facts’ here are the authors’ beliefs, as documented in their publications. In this academic context, the optional use of present tense is not necessarily intended to make past situations seem more direct and engaging, as in narrative present (Section 7.2 (11)). Instead, by focusing on documented, present evidence the speaker is signaling the sources’ relevance to the current argument.

In a similar way, present tense is often used to refer to situations depicted in photos and other images. Carroll et al. (2003) asked English speakers to retell a short film (German speakers also included are not discussed here). The participants chose present tense to retell the film sequences. Since this took place after they had finished watching, the researchers felt that the present tense was not anchored in the speaker’s present. They reached the following conclusion:

English speakers adopt a viewpoint-related strategy, but this viewpoint is not the moment of speech. The temporal anchor is the now of the experiencer, that is, as the film is experienced in unfolding in front of the mind’s eye. (p.9)

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\(^8\) Radio Times 07.09.2016
An alternative and, it would seem, simpler explanation is that this is an example of present tense for documented fact, the document being the film which exists in the speaker’s present. This would then follow the same principle of tense use as film/programme synopses, and reference to published sources, rather than being in a category of its own. It demonstrates how speakers of English maximize the expressive potential of an apparently simple grammatical resource.

7.2 Grammatical Metaphor

 Speakers’ expressive needs occasionally lead to a more obvious lack of one-to-one correspondence between tense and time as they make creative use of the system’s metaphorical potential. In these terms, PAST IS DISTANT (from the speaker and what they represent) and PRESENT IS DIRECT (cf. Niemeier and Reif 2008). Hence past forms are used metaphorically for PRESENT situations to mark DISTANCE (Thornbury 2001; ‘remoteness’, Declerck 2015) and present form is used metaphorically for PAST situations to mark DIRECTNESS.

Table 1 explains what is meant here by DISTANCE. The examples in the left hand column encode PRESENT situations as DISTANT while the ones on the right are the present tense equivalents. The original examples (indicated by codes) are from the British National Corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTANCE (past form, present time)</th>
<th>Present (present form and time)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Could you please at least tell them it's quite urgent? AOF 1071</td>
<td>e. Can you please at least tell them it's quite urgent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Did you want something? HA9 2337</td>
<td>f. Do you want something?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The parents’ interests, they said, had to be considered as well as the children’s. CAR 1406</td>
<td>g. The parents’ interests, they said, have to be considered as well as the children’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. How simple life would be if it was as simple as we think! BMR 278</td>
<td>(No present equivalent.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marked
Unreal
Polite/Tentative
Impersonal

Unmarked
Real
Informal
Personal
The reason the metaphorical use works, is that past time is already a kind of distance (temporal distance). In earlier versions of this analysis (Svalberg 1986, 1995), temporal distance (PAST) was therefore included in the category DISTANT. Here, however, the labels DISTANT and DIRECT are reserved for instances where time meaning and tense from do not correspond (i.e. differ from canonical use).

Present form for present time (the rightmost column in Table 1) is normally an unmarked choice, and presentness is associated, through the speaker (Figure 1), with the real, immediate and personal. Conversely, past form for present time (the left column in Table 1) is usually a marked choice conveying the unreal (hypothetical, counterfactual), tentative, or impersonal, that is DISTANCE. Assuming that the two first examples in the table refer to present time, the past form (a, b) gives a more tentative, possibly polite, impression than the present form (e, f). One might say that the former indicates social DISTANCE.

In the third example, the speaker has the choice of past or present form to report a past assertion. The choice of past (c) could indicate that the assertion is no longer relevant at the time of utterance, or that the speaker wishes to mark their role as ‘reporter’, taking no responsibility for what is reported. Hence it could simply indicate past time, or it could refer to present time but less personal involvement (distance from the truth). The interpretation in Figure 10 is the latter; the past form of the reported utterance is assumed to be oriented to the present, thus indicating DISTANCE. This could be the case if, for example, the reported utterance was from an interview which took place earlier the same day, giving the reporter a choice of tense.
The final example (d) in Table 1 illustrates past forms oriented to the present in a counterfactual utterance (distance from reality). Both the (c) and (d) examples thus illustrate epistemic distance.

In a similar manner, speakers use present tense forms metaphorically for situations oriented to the past to achieve an effect of directness or immediacy. The narrative present is a well-known example of this, and fairly frequent in colloquial story telling. The following example is from a report in a national newspaper. The interviewee recounts an incident on a flight where she was suspected of terrorism related activities.

11. “I asked her ‘where are we going, can you explain where you’re taking us?’ She doesn’t reply, she completely ignores me. We’re told to walk down the stairs – at the bottom we can see there’s armed policemen,” Maryam said.9

The choice of present forms in the example is marked in the sense that it conveys something other than present time. It makes the events seem more immediate. In contrast to distance, the use of present tense for past time can be called direct. In a TTD, verb groups with this function would be shown as oriented to the past.

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9 The Guardian, 24.08.2016
7.3 Displacement

Speakers’ expressive needs extend beyond real and actual time. Speakers can choose to move the moment of speech to an imagined past or future, or undefined, time, sometimes explicitly stated (‘time travel’ and ‘imagine prefixing’, Klein 2009, p.11). “It is 2040. You are...”; “Imagine that you are a on a space ship. You are going ...” Situations are then seen from that fictitious point in time, as if it were the actual present. This is a manifestation of our ability to conceive of, and talk about, situations beyond what is here, now and real, a cognitive faculty which has been called displacement (Hockett 1960). The anchor in such contexts is still the speaker but he/she discursively establishes a R other than his/her actual present. The following extract is from a science fiction novel.

12. Early this morning, 1 January 2021, three minutes after midnight, the last human being to be born on earth was killed in a pub brawl in a suburb of Buenos Aires…

In the example, was killed is AT PAST, which in turn is prior to a fictional future moment of speech, the narrator’s PRESENT. This use of tense draws creatively on the tense model established in Figure 3, without any need for its modification.

8. Pedagogic implementation

Despite the opacity of tense in input, it is likely that learners of English generally achieve a good understanding of the intended time reference in context; as mentioned above, there are often other clues to it than verb forms, for example time adverbials. Consequently learners

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10 James, 1992
may fail to even notice the forms of verbs. For their productive skills (written or spoken output), however, noticing leading to accurate form-meaning mapping is essential. The issue is how teachers and teaching materials can scaffold the required learning, not least because the cognitive load of grammatical metalanguage and explanations can become overwhelming. The tense system itself, however, is very simple and visual illustrations such as Figure 3 and TTDs require the use of only a minimum of metalanguage. This section will discuss how they might be used in the classroom.

### 8.1 The time line fallacy

The time line is a common explanatory device in language classrooms, and it is also used by researchers. Kibort (2009, p.1392) states: “Following Comrie (1985: 2-3) and many other authors, I assume that time can be represented as a straight line, with the past represented conventionally to the left and the future to the right. The present moment is represented by a point on that line, labelled S (mnemonic for ‘speech time’).” While that is entirely reasonable, it will be shown below that there is an important difference between representing time (a feature of the World) and representing tense (a feature of the grammar). The problem is revealed by the following attempt to plot the time of situations in the example on a single time line. Times are numbered in the order they are referred to in the sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>T3?</td>
<td>T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12. The temporal relationship of a future situation to past and present situations.

In Figure 12, S indicates the speaker’s present. There is no doubt that past tense *was* (T2) must come before *seems* on the time line, and that T3 (*would make*) is after T2. What we cannot know, in the absence of more contextual information, is where T3 should be placed in relation to S. If the utterance above was followed by “Well, it hasn’t” we could infer that T3 should be placed before S. If, on the other hand, it was accompanied by “Well, it isn’t going to”, then we
would assume that T3 should follow S. Pragmatically, this ambiguity is unlikely to matter. As an awareness raising device in the classroom, however, the time line is flawed in that it fails to show that grammatically *would make* is only related to the past R and not to S. In other words, that *was* (T3) establishes a past R to which *would make* is related.

The example below demonstrates the lack of explanatory power of the single timeline also in regard to present perfect.

---

I *have been* to Vienna a few times. Last time *was* three years ago. I *had just graduated.*

---

Figure 13. The temporal relationships of situations realized by past and present perfect.

As discussed above, the present perfect is relatively difficult to acquire and so it is important to make its tense meaning clear. In Figure 13, *have been* (T1, or at least the beginning of the time period to which it refers) comes first, as it stretches the furthest into past time. It is followed by T3 (*had graduated*), followed by T2 (*was*). This accurately reflects the sequence of events in the World but fails to explain why a present tense form (present perfect) is used for a situation anterior to other situations encoded by past tense.

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Figure 14. The temporal relationships of situations in the past and present perfect revisited.

The two time lines (Figure 14), in contrast, are able to show that T1 (*have been*) is oriented to S only, and is thus present tense (before present), while T2 (*was*) and T3 (*had graduated*) are both oriented to a past R established by *last time*, and therefore encoded by past tense (at
PAST and BEFORE PAST, respectively). The fact that the situation in the present perfect started before either of the past tense situations, is understood by the context but not marked on the verb. While the explanation above is far too involved for most language classrooms, the visual representation of the two time lines is simple and accessible.

8.2 TTD analysis

As discussed earlier, learners in LA classrooms are investigators of language. After some initial modelling by the teacher, learners can carry out TTD analyses of appropriate texts in small groups. They can use their intuitive understanding of text to collocate verb groups in the right place on the TTD, and then reflect on their solutions and arrive at a group consensus. In the process they will pay attention to grammatical form.

Depending on learner level, a teacher might want to start with text only in present tense for present time, or past tense for past time, and gradually introduce texts which deal with both, as in the following example, and Figure 15.

13. Friday 1 January 2021
Early this morning, 1 January 2021, three minutes after midnight, the last human being to be born on earth was killed in a pub brawl in a suburb of Buenos Aires, aged twenty-five years, two months and twelve days. If the first reports are to be believed, Joseph Ricardo died as he had lived. The distinction, if one can call it that, of being the last human whose birth was officially recorded . . . had always been hard for him to handle . . .

Friday 15 October 2021
I am writing this entry sitting in the glade of a beech wood, my back against a tree. It is late afternoon and the shadows are beginning to lengthen but, within the grove, the warmth of day still lingers. I have a conviction that this is the last diary entry I shall make, but even if neither I nor these words survive, I need to record this day. It has been one of extraordinary happiness and I have spent it with four strangers . . .

The TTD in Figure 15 shows the PAST orientation of the first extract, with situations realized by past tense forms. Learners’ attention can be drawn to the common pattern of a story line in the PAST, with speaker commentary (are to be believed; can call) using present tense forms. The second extract is set entirely in the PRESENT, as the narrator talks directly to the reader, describing situations oriented to his moment of speech, using present tense forms.

11 Both from James, 1992.
The absence of a strict one-to-one correspondence between meaning and form is apparent in a couple of places and can make for useful discussion points in the classroom. In extract 1, the time reference of *whose birth was officially recorded* is ambiguous. If it refers to the recording event (as the analysis assumes), then it is equivalent to *whose birth had been officially recorded* (BEFORE PAST) but it could also refer to the result of the recording (AT PAST). In extract 2, *shall make* is clearly marked as future (AFTER PRESENT) by the modal verb, but in *if neither I nor these words survive*, there is no modal as *will/shall* does not mark future in conditional clauses (though *will* can express other meanings in such contexts). Thus even an apparently simple text can draw learners’ attention to useful points of tense grammar, in a meaningful context. Texts for TTD analysis can be chosen from any genre, to illustrate a range of unmarked as well as creative and metaphorical uses of tense.

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**Figure 15. Tracking tense in the The Children of Men text 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAST</th>
<th>PRESENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BEFORE</strong></td>
<td><strong>AT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Extract 1)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was killed</td>
<td>are to be believed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>died</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had lived</td>
<td>can call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was recorded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had been</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Extract 2)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>am writing</td>
<td>shall make survive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are beginning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lingers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shall make</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have been need</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have spent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8.3 Collaborative dialogue

In LA classrooms learners are encouraged to investigate and talk about language. To facilitate such activities, teachers’ subject knowledge is as important as their knowledge of pedagogy. Studies by Svalberg (2012a) and Svalberg and Askham (2014, 2015), investigated the use of cognitively challenging CR tasks to help student language teachers enhance their knowledge about English grammar. The tasks on which small groups of participants worked included TTD analysis. The research focus was not specifically on tense but on the student teachers’ collaborative construction of knowledge more generally. Nevertheless, the following brief extract of four students, all non-native speakers of English, helping each other complete a TTD analysis of a literary text (14) illustrates the kind of collaborative dialogue such tasks can facilitate.

14. They rejoiced at having me back and made a great fuss, and it was not long before I felt as though a piece of ice were melting inside of me, as though I were some frozen substance on which the sun had shone - that life warmth of the tribe which I had lost for a time in a land 'whose fishes die of the cold'. My ears had become used to their voices, my eyes grown accustomed to their forms.

The students have analysed a series of verb groups oriented to the PAST when they come across the clause: ‘whose fishes die of the cold’. They discuss its form using the terms they have learnt (AT PRESENT, BEFORE).

1. Jessica: *die*
2. Mia: this *die*
3. Amelia: *die* is at present
4. Olivia: at present yes.
5. Jessica: yes why here it can be followed by at present time?
6. Olivia: I thought
7. Jessica: you know before - then we used the past participle and then we use this time the present tense. - why?
8. Amelia: Actually it use quotation - it used quotations here - *whose fishes die* - it’s like a
9. Jessica: oh yeah yeah - quotations here - *whose fishes die*
10. Amelia: it’s like a set phrase
11. Jessica: oh yeah that’s ok

Jessica wonders how PAST reference can suddenly be followed by PRESENT (turns 5 and 7) - *past participle* (7) is probably meant to be *past perfect*. Amelia notices the quotation marks (8) and concludes that *die* is part of a *set phrase* (10), which seems to satisfy Jessica (11) and

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12 Tayeb Salih, 1969, p.1
the rest of the group as they then move on to discuss the next verb group (not shown here). The TTD analysis has given the student teachers the opportunity to notice tense form in context, discuss it using simple metalanguage supported by a visual representation of relevant meanings, and collaboratively reaching a conclusion.

9. Conclusions

For knowledge about the target language grammar to be useful to learners it needs to be accurate (avoiding ‘false language awareness’, Svalberg 2001; Berry 2015) and accessible. The purpose of the paper was to arrive at a description of how English tense works that had both those qualities. It was argued that to fully master English tense, learners need to understand:

1. The basic tense architecture (including reference point and sequence; Figure 3)
2. Canonical uses of tense
3. Aspect and Modality interfaces
   a. How aspecural verb forms map onto tense meanings
   b. How modalized verb groups map onto tense meanings
4. Creativity, metaphor, and displacement:
   a. Present for documented fact
   b. Uses of tense for DISTANCE and DIRECTNESS
   c. Displaced and imaginary time

It was suggested that visual representations, such as Figure 3 and TTDs, can scaffold learners’ knowledge construction allowing them to actively investigate tense use in authentic text, while drawing on both passive understanding of time relationships and noticing of form, with a reduced need for teacher explanation.

Although TTD analysis formed part of the author’s earlier research into student teachers’ engagement with language (Svalberg 2015), its learning effects still require empirical investigation. Subtopics which would also warrant further study are the tense-aspect and tense-modality interfaces, the DISTANT/DIRECT dichotomy, and the ‘documented fact’ category, and to what extent learner awareness of each facilitates the development of appropriate language use in given genres and registers. It is possible that TTD analysis could be a useful tool also in the analysis of literary text for research purposes.

Some of the limitations of the paper are due to space restrictions. Both theoretical issues and pedagogical applications could have benefitted from more in depth treatment.
Much more could have been said, for example, about aspect and modality in relation to tense and about the learner as investigator.

Acknowledgements
I am grateful to anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Any remaining shortcomings are entirely my own.

Text sources

References


Appendix 1

Explanations of key terms and abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>The simple/progressive/perfect distinction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>The metaphorical use of present tense form for past situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>The metaphorical use of past tense form for present situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Time (E)</td>
<td>Here: Sequence point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moment of Speech (S)</td>
<td>The time of utterance; the speaker’s present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Time (R)</td>
<td>The time (past, present or future) to which a situation is oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>The temporal relationship of a situation to R; the BEFORE/AT/AFTER R distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Event or state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>The person (actual or fictional) making the linguistic choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Semantically: The past – present reference time distinction Formally: Specific verb forms signalling this distinction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2

The reference and sequence points encoded by English tense grammar (notation adapted from Reichenbach 1947).

\[ (...) = \text{Reference Point/ R} \]
\[ S = \text{Moment of speech/ Speaker’s present} \]
\[ E = \text{Event/situation} \]
\[ X(Y) = X \text{ at } Y \]
\[ X^Y = X \text{ before } Y, \text{ or } Y \text{ after } X \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notation</th>
<th>Sample realization</th>
<th>Temporal interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E(S)</td>
<td>take</td>
<td>AT PRESENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E^(S)</td>
<td>has taken</td>
<td>BEFORE PRESENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S)^E</td>
<td>will take</td>
<td>AFTER PRESENT (future in the present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E(E^S)</td>
<td>took</td>
<td>AT PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E^(E^S)</td>
<td>had taken</td>
<td>BEFORE PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E^S)^E</td>
<td>would take</td>
<td>AFTER PAST (future in the past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E(S^E)</td>
<td>will take</td>
<td>AT AFTER-PRESENT (future)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E^(S^E)</td>
<td>will have taken</td>
<td>BEFORE AFTER-PRESENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S^E)^E</td>
<td>will be going to take</td>
<td>AFTER AFTER-PRESENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E((E^S)^E)</td>
<td>would take</td>
<td>AT AFTER-PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E^((E^S)^E)</td>
<td>would have taken</td>
<td>BEFORE AFTER-PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((E^S)^E)^E</td>
<td>would be going to take</td>
<td>AFTER AFTER-PAST</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table adapted from Svalberg 1991)