

TEMPORAL DEIXIS IN NARRATIVES

Jacques Moeschler

Department of linguistics

University of Geneva

1. Introduction

This paper is about some peculiarities of temporal deixis (indicated in French by temporal adverbs like *maintenant*, *aujourd'hui*, *hier*, *demain*, etc.) in narratives, that is, either in sentences which clearly are narrative, because of the presence of the *passé simple* tense in French, or in sentences which express the subjectivity of a third person point of view through represented speech or thought (*style indirect libre*), indicated by the presence of the *imparfait* tense in French¹. Its purpose is to give a general account of the co-occurrence of a past temporal reference indicated by past tenses and temporal deictic adverbs which imply reference to the speech situation. Examples (1) and (2) are illustrations of such a co-occurrence within a narrative sentence and within represented speech and thought:

(1) Le malheur diminue l'esprit. Notre héros eut le malheur de s'arrêter auprès de cette petite chaise de paille, qui jadis avait été le témoin de triomphes si brillants. **Aujourd'hui** personne ne lui adressa la parole; sa présence était comme inaperçue et pire encore. (Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*) (from Vuillaume 1990, 9)

¹ I remind the reader that English preterit corresponds either to the *passé simple* (V-a) or to the *imparfait* (V-ait) in French. By convention, I will consider the *passé simple* as a narrative tense, whose main effect is to trigger temporal ordering, whereas the *imparfait* is typically not narrative. These definitions are purely conventional: one of the main problem of the tense-aspect system in French is due to the large number of counter-examples these hypotheses have to face. Cf. Moeschler (to appear) for a general survey of the temporal ordering problem in French.

[Unhappiness diminishes wit. Our hero had the misfortune to stop by that small straw-bottomed chair, which, formerly, had seen so dazzling triumphs. **Today**, no one **spoke** to him; his presence was somehow unnoticed and even worse.]

(2) Elle se promena dans son jardinet, passant et revenant par les mêmes allées, s'arrêtant devant les plates-bandes, devant l'espalier, devant le curé de plâtre, considérant avec ébahissement toutes ces choses d'autrefois qu'elle connaissait si bien. Comme le bal lui semblait loin! Qui donc **écartait**, à tant de distance, le matin d'**avant-hier** et le soir d'**aujourd'hui**? (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*) (from Banfield 1982, 67)

[She walked in the garden, pacing up and down the same paths, stopping before the flowerbeds, before the fruit tree wall, before the plaster *curé*, considering with astonishment all these things from her past that she knew so well. How far away the ball already seemed to her! Who then **set** the morning of **the day before** at such a distance from **this very evening**?]

These examples should be semantically anomalous, because of the clash in temporal reference indicated respectively by past tenses, whether narrative or not, and by temporal deictics like *aujourd'hui* and *avant-hier*. In other words, these utterances must be interpreted from two different points of view, one responsible for the past temporal reference (which is not deictic), and the second for the present and/or past deictic reference. In this paper, I shall discuss the main hypotheses developed in order to resolve this contradiction, either for the narrative sentences or for the represented speech and thought sentences, and I propose a common and general account of the data.

2. The classical explanations

There are two main treatments of these “paradoxical” sentences, the first one concerning deixis within narrative sentences and the second one concerning deixis within represented speech and thought.

2.1. Deixis within narrative sentences

Let us first formulate clearly the problem, again with example (1) repeated here under (3):

(3) **Aujourd'hui** personne ne lui **adresa** la parole.

[**Today**, no one **spoke** to him.]

In order for this sentence to be consistent, *aujourd'hui* should refer to a past moment cotermporal with the event described by the narrative sentence (*personne ne lui adressa la parole*). The problem arises not because such an interpretation is not possible (in fact it is), but because the interpretation of a temporal deictic like *aujourd'hui* presupposes a speaker and a hearer, a speech point and a location; yet as such, a third person narrative sentence does not refer to nor imply such participants and points. So it should not be possible to interpret sentence (3) because there is no possibility to assign an interpretation to context dependant variables in narrative sentences.

The classical explanation of these narrative sentences has tried to assign reference to the deictic variables, *via* two main theoretical frames. The first one, due to Fauconnier (1984), has an advantage against the second one, due to Vuillaume (1990, 1993): it is a particular application of a general principle, the *principle of identification*, which explain the pragmatic connection between two objects, whereas Vuillaume's explanation is a general hypothesis about fiction. We will now examine these two approaches.

2.1.1. *Transfers within mental spaces and narratives*

Let us begin with Fauconnier's explanation. In his theory of mental spaces, the connection between a trigger (*déclencheur*) and a target (*cible*) *via* a pragmatic connector is the application of a general principle, the *principle of identification*, which allows to refer to an object *b* via the description of an object *a*, as in (4)²:

² I give here the precise definition by Fauconnier, which unfortunately introduces a confusion between objects (belonging to the ontology) and the representation of objects (which is the subject of his theory of mental states):

"If two objects *a* and *b* are linked by a pragmatic function F ($b = F(a)$), a description of *a*, d_a , can be used to identify its correspondent *b*" (Fauconnier 1984, xx).

- (4) Plato is on the top shelf.

In this example, *Plato* do not refer to the individual described by the proper name *Plato*, but to the books written by Plato. In other words, reference to a book through the description of its author is possible *via* a pragmatic function (a pragmatic connector in Fauconnier's terms) which links authors and the books they have written.

How could this general principle account for sentences like (3)? The core of the explanation is a general hypothesis on narratives, defined as "parcours" (trip). There are thus, besides levels of reference in a narrative like *text*, *reading* and *situation*, in which the narrative is read and interpreted, two main levels, which are pragmatically connected and are defined as mental spaces: the narrated universe (*univers raconté*) and the "parcours". The first level, the narrated universe, is called the temporal level, and is made of events, whose participants are third person referents, whereas the second level, the trip, is called the spatial level and is deictic and spatial, and includes a speaker (the narrator) and a hearer (the reader). A systematic relation links the temporal level and the spatial level because of the principle of identification. In (5), deictic reference indicated by *here* is acceptable within a narrative because *here* identifies a point in the "parcours", and because there is a one-to-one relation between a moment in the narrated universe and a location in the "parcours":

- (5) Max souleva son poignard; **ici** les choses se gâtèrent...

[Max raised his dagger; **here** things went from bad to worse...]

Thus spatial deictic markers in narratives receive a simple explanation: deixis is possible because the "parcours" level (deictic and spatial) is correlated to the temporal level (non deictic and temporal).

What about temporal deixis in narratives? The trigger is a point on the temporal level, i.e. an event, which is connected to a point at the spatial level, which has as a final target a moment at the temporal level.

As stated before, this explanation has a very general explanatory power: it does not appeal to *ad hoc* principles (the principle of identification is independently

motivated); moreover, it is motivated because space-time correlation is uncontroversial. The only question this explanation does not answer is why it is supposed to work like this. In other words, if Fauconnier's hypothesis is correct, why should we use a temporal deictic to refer to a moment if the target of the last connector (from the spatial to the temporal level) is the same as the source of the first connector (from the temporal to the spatial level)³?

2.1.2. Two types of fiction

In the perspective of literary studies, Vuillaume's explanation is very classical. It is based on the idea that reference is made, in sentence like (3), to two levels of fiction, called respectively *principal fiction* and *secondary fiction*. In the principal fiction, events occur in the past with third persons. So temporal reference is mainly a problem of principal fiction. But there is in all fictions a secondary fiction, which can be explicitly mentioned, and whose participants are the narrator and the reader. This second fiction has also its own dating system, which is not event dependent, but which is deixis dependent. So, in a complex narrative sentence like (6):

(6) **Au moment où nous entrons**, Chaverny, abusant de sa victoire, **entassait** des manteaux, des douillettes, des mantes de femmes sur le corps de ce malheureux bossu. (P. Féval, *Le Bossu*)

[Just as we **are coming** in, Charveny, taking advantage of his victory, **was piling** up cloaks, quilted overcoats, women's mantis on that unfortunate hunchback's body.]

the expression *Au moment où nous entrons* refers to the narrator and to the reader as they enter the room where Chaverny is acting, which means that the secondary fiction is cotemporal with the principal fiction, and the author can express this cotemporality with a present tense deictic (*entrons*). Thus the "paradox" of (3), repeated again,

³ The trigger of the first connector must be identical with the target of the second connector in order to ensure temporal consistency.

(3) **Aujourd'hui** personne ne lui **adressa** la parole.

[**Today**, no one **spoke** to him.]

is resolved and explained. *Aujourd'hui* does not refer to the moment where the narrator wrote this sentence, nor to the moment where the reader reads it: it refers to the moment where nobody talks to Julien Sorel; and this is possible because *aujourd'hui* refers to a moment of the secondary fiction which is cotemporary with a moment of the principal fiction.

This explanation has a positive consequence: it gives an answer to the question “why is it the case?”, because it is functional. It is functional because the necessity of the secondary fiction comes from the necessity for the reader to be guided by the narrator in the principal fiction. But this function is secondary relative to another one: because of the secondary fiction, past events are lived by the reader as if they were present to him.

Nevertheless, this theory of fiction is too simple. It is an illusionist theory of fiction, because events should be perceived and interpreted as if they were an illusion, and because it does not in fact explain anything. In order to explain temporal deixis within narratives it should explain why the author makes these choices. But saying that the author intends to guide the reader is no more than an *ad hoc* explanation: the hypothesis of the existence of a secondary fiction does not seem to come from any other reason than the necessity of accounting for temporal deixis in narratives. This is all the more obvious given that the secondary and principal fictions are cotemporal, just as in Fauconnier's the temporal and spatial level are in close correspondance as far as time is considered. Moreover, just as Fauconnier's hypothesis, it gives no answer to the second type of temporal deixis, that is, temporal deixis adverbs within represented speech and thought.

2.2. Temporal deixis within represented speech and thought

Let us examine now a very strong hypothesis on represented speech and thought (Banfield 1982 and 1995). Banfield's hypothesis is that represented speech and thought sentences are unspeakable sentences, that is, sentences without speakers. Her hypothesis is that language can be used both for communication and for expression, and that sentences in represented speech and thought do not

communicate a thought, but express subjectivity. Thus it possible for a third person pronoun to express subjectivity. Hence, the linguistic paradox which makes it possible to express subjectivity apart from the first person pronoun and to use past temporal deixis in such sentences receives an elegant solution. Subjectivity is expressed by the first person pronoun when there is one, but can be expressed by a third person pronoun, if no first person pronoun occurs. For any Expression, i.e. any sentence expressing subjectivity, there is one and only one Subject of Consciousness (*the 1 E/ 1 SUBJECT principle*). For time, the explanation is the same: each Expression must be associated to a single Now, which by default is cotemporal with Present, and which can be cotemporal with Past in represented speech and thought. This correlation between subjectivity and time is not only motivated in theoretical terms (i.e. via *the* distinction between communication and expression), but is linguistically and syntactically motivated. Thus according to Banfield, represented speech and thought is characterized both by the possible co-occurrence of present time deictics and past tense and by the fact that the subjectivity is expressed through the third person.

Thus, this analysis of represented speech and thought gives a very sophisticated answer to the paradox embodied in sentences such as (2), repeated here under (7):

(7) Comme le bal lui semblait loin! Qui donc écartait, à tant de distance, le matin d'**avant-hier** et le soir d'**aujourd'hui**? (Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*)

[How far away the ball already seemed to her! Who then **set** the morning of **the day before** at such a distance from **this very evening?**]

Here the possibility of a question, as well as the past tense and the temporal deictic adverbs (*avant-hier* and *aujourd'hui*) is due to the expression of the subjectivity of a third person, Emma Bovary, who is expressing her regrets (*Comme le bal lui semblait loin!*) and her doubts (*Qui donc écartait, à tant de distance, le matin d'avant-hier et le soir d'aujourd'hui?*). The temporal adverbs are Emma's because the sentence expresses her subjectivity and thought as present for her, though they belong to a past narrative configuration.

This approach, which is linguistically motivated, has been challenged by A. Reboul (cf. Reboul 1992 and Moeschler & Reboul 1994, chapters 12 and 16) within a radical pragmatic framework, Relevance Theory. The arguments given by Reboul against Banfield

are the following: (i) represented speech and thought is a matter of interpretative effect: the “world” is accessible for the reader only through the feelings and thoughts of a character; thus represented speech and thought is not necessarily a matter of linguistic encoding, but also a matter of inference; (ii) hence reported speech and thought leads the reader to an identification with the character, however much he or she may disapprove of the thoughts expressed. Let us examine these two objections briefly.

(i) Banfield’s theory predicts that reported speech and thought (as an interpretative effect) is linguistically marked through syntactic properties. The problem is that this is not always the case, that is, the syntactic properties of represented speech and thought are not necessary conditions for this interpretative effect to occur. In (8), no linguistic indication allows us to infer whether the proposition *il la retrouverait bientôt, et finirait par être son amant* has to be attributed to the narrator or to Frederic, that is, has to be interpreted as a narrative sentence or as represented speech and thought sentence:

(8) Il [Frédéric] s’y montra gai. Madame Arnoux était maintenant près de sa mère à Chartres. Mais il la retrouverait bientôt, et finirait par être son amant.

[There, he (Frédéric) appeared happy. Madame Arnoux was now with her mother in Chartres. But he would soon meet her again and would finally become her lover.]

If the argument is consistent, it implies that there is no one-to-one relation between the syntactic properties of a given sentence and the interpretation of that sentence as represented speech and thought.

(ii) The second argument is based on Banfield’s hypothesis that reported speech and thought cannot be expressed by anything but the third person, that is, subjectivity is in communication expressed by the first person, and in expression by the third person. Reboul has nevertheless shown that subjectivity could be expressed by all singular personal pronouns (cf. Moeschler & Reboul 1994, chapter 12, 338-9). Reboul’s hypothesis is that represented speech and thought allows identification in a specific sense. The reader is invited to identify with a person (which can be represented by a first, a second or a third person) because he is only presented with the information available to that person: this has the pragmatic result that the reader identifies with the character to whose knowledge he has only access.

These objections thus make Banfield’s elegant explanation difficult to maintain. But neither they nor Banfield’s analysis give any account of Fauconnier’s and Vuillaume’s examples, that is, of examples of temporal deictic adverbs within narrative sentences. So we are faced with partial approaches of a phenomenon which implies narrative as well as non narrative sentences.

3. Narratives, temporal deixis, and the descriptive/interpretive use of language

What should a global approach of temporal deixis within narratives be ? There are several alternatives I will sketch, before arguing briefly for a last option. The problems are the semantic ambiguity of temporal deictic adverbs, the role of their occurrences in narratives and the nature of their interpretation.

(i) One solution that first comes to mind is to explain the particular uses of temporal deictic adverbs through their semantic meaning. In other words, temporal deictic adverbs like *aujourd'hui*, *maintenant*, *demain*, *hier* have two semantic meanings: the first, deictic, has as reference point R the speech point S (notation: R,S, cf. Reichenbach 1947), whereas the second, non-deictic, has a reference point R distinct from the speech point (notation: R–S). In this approach, the paradoxical dimension of narrative use of temporal deictic adverbs is ruled out: no specific principles, either grammatical or pragmatic, are required to explain examples (1) and (2).

This approach belongs to what Horn (1989) calls the *ambiguist theory*, which implies that deictic adverbials as *aujourd'hui*, *maintenant*, etc. are semantically ambiguous. The main problem faced by the ambiguist approach is that the burden of the proof is on the side of its defenders, as ambiguity should not be postulated in an *ad hoc* way. In other words, linguistic arguments should be found in order to give empirical evidence for the ambiguist thesis. The opposite theory, which Horn calls the *monogulist theory*, claims on the contrary that temporal deictic adverbs, as all types of deictic markers, are not ambiguous semantically, and that the difference in meaning is pragmatic, that is, it is a difference in use. Along these lines, the question of the meaning of temporal deictic adverbs is partially solved, but not the particular uses of these adverbs within narratives. If temporal deixis adverbs are not ambiguous, their uses in narrative contexts could be explained by the second option, which give a central role to narrative contexts.

(ii) The second solution explains the use of temporal deixis adverb *via* a theory of narratives within a monogulist theory. Vuillaume's description is of this kind, but it is not a strong version of the monogulist theory (it is in fact a weak ambiguist theory). One major difficulty is that the solution proposed should work for narrative sentences **and** for represented speech and thought. One concept which could help is the one developed by Genette (1972) in his theory of narratology, that is, *focalisation*. *Focalisation* is linked to the question *who is seeing?*, and belongs to the category of *mode* (whereas *voice* is the category responsible for the question *who is speaking?*). Following Sthioul (1995), it is possible to distinguish three types of focalisation in narratives:

- (a) a narrative sentence is **not focalised** when no specific center of perspective is identified; typical narrative sentences, which make time advance, are not focalised;
- (b) a narrative sentence is **internally focalised** when the center of perspective is a third person, that is, when it expresses a represented speech and thought;
- (c) a sentence is **externally focalised** when no explicit center of perspective is given, but when it is left to the reader to infer that the scene is perceived from a specific point of view.

Banfield's cases of represented speech and thought are thus internally focalised: it means that what is seen (or represented) is seen (or represented) from the point of view of a third person explicitly mentioned in the narrative. External focalisation can be exemplified by example (9), in which no explicit point of view is described, but where the reader has to infer that the scene is perceived from a particular point of view.

(9) Il **dessina** donc un cercle autour de lui avec un grand bâton, **respira** trois fois profondément et **lut** une des formules magiques du livre. Bientôt, à la place du petit garçon, il y *avait* un vieil homme à longue barbe.

[He drew a circle around himself with a big stick, breathed deeply and read one of the magic formulae in the book. Soon, where the little boy had stood, there was an old man with a long beard.]

(R. Graves, *Le grand livre vert*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979)

The last sentence is externally focalised: someone is seeing what happens, and the whole scene is perceived from this external point of view⁴.

The problems raised with the category of focalisation is that it is not, at first sight, of a great utility: narrative sentences in French with the *passé simple* are generally described as non-focalised: their main narrative property is, as defined earlier, to make time advance, that is, to change the reference point. Thus, if a sentence like (3) were a true narrative sentence because of the *passé simple*, it should not be focalised:

(3) **Aujourd'hui** personne ne lui **adressa** la parole.

⁴ Cf. Moeschler (to appear) for a general account of these kinds of narrative sentences implying changes in time of reference and Reboul (ed.) (to appear) for a reference book on the topic of **evolving reference**.

[Today no one **spoke** to him.]

Nevertheless, the question “*from which point of view* does the described event occur at the speech point?” remains relevant, and should imply a focalised analysis. The traditional answers (as Vuillaume’s or Fauconnier’s) localise this point of view in the **reader**: it is because past events are relived in the present by the reader that the event point is seen from a reference point identical with the speech point. But in the focalisation approach, there is no place for him: when focalised, a narrative discourse is focalised from the point of view of a participant of narrative, and the reader is not such a participant. Thus when a sentence like (3) is not an example of represented speech and thought, that is, when it cannot be internally focalised, the only answer is that it is **externally focalised**: someone is seeing, who can represent temporally the event described as a narrative event.

(iii) The third solution would give an answer to the cases of temporal deictic adverbs within narratives, but is not constrained by narrative, and is based on the distinction between descriptive use and interpretive (or echoic) use. This distinction, introduced within Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986) as an extension of the classical use/mention distinction, has a very general explanatory power: it accounts, for instance, for the difference between literal and non-literal speech, assertion and irony, request and question, etc. It has also, recently (cf. Carston 1994), been used to give a general treatment of negation, and more precisely of the distinction between descriptive and metalinguistic uses of negation (cf. Moeschler 1995 for a synthesis).

What should the basis of such an approach be? The main hypothesis is that temporal deictic adverbs can have descriptive and interpretive uses. By definition, they have descriptive uses when the context in which they are used implies an identity between R and S: in these cases, they are used literally and temporal reference, if not anchored in the speech situation, gives rise to a false assignment of value to temporal expressions. On the contrary, temporal deictic adverbs have interpretive uses when the identification between R and S gives rise to a semantic contradiction; in this case, temporal reference must be understood non-literally, and the use of temporal deictic adverbs is echoic in the sense that the speaker (author within narratives) reports someone’s temporal identification of the event as deictically anchored in the narrative situation. Thus, a sentence such as (3) should have the following pragmatic interpretation:

(10) PAST ("TODAY" (nobody speaks to him))

where "TODAY" has to be understood as the interpretive use of TODAY.

So, whereas the descriptive use of the temporal operator TODAY is interpreted through the procedure semantically associated with TODAY, relative to the situation of communication, the interpretive use of TODAY is interpreted through the same procedure, which, however, is applied to a description of *another* situation of communication (thus, this is a monogist hypothesis). It implies that when the temporal operator TODAY which binds the event E is interpretively used, it refers to an event described as if the point of view from which it is perceived could have been modified by a deictic operator. In other words, the external focalisation of (3) could be described as follows:

(10) The event E ("nobody speaks to him") is perceived from a point of view, that is, a subject of consciousness external to the scene, which anchors the event deictically; the author is reporting interpretively this linguistic form within a narrative sentence.

4. Conclusion

Some problems remain unsolved within the third solution, problems which should be discussed more precisely. These problems are the following:

- (i) What is the difference between the interpretive use solution and the monogist thesis?
- (ii) What is the difference, if any, between the interpretation of temporal deictic adverbs within narrative sentences and within represented speech and thought?
- (iii) How does this non-narrative explanation account for the systematic difference in verbal tenses in French between narrative sentences (*passé simple*) and represented speech and thought (*imparfait*)?

To make a long story short, my answers are the following:

- (i') The descriptive/interpretive use distinction implies a monogist approach, since the difference is not a (semantic) difference in meaning, but a (pragmatic) difference in uses.
- (ii') There are no differences in uses between the interpretation of temporal deictic adverbs within narrative sentences and within represented speech and thought: in both situations, interpretive uses are the case.

(iii') The difference between French *passé simple* and *imparfait* verbal tenses is a question of temporal order. By default, narrative sentences are marked by the *passé simple* tense and make time advance, whereas sentences containing the *imparfait* tense are non-narrative and do not make time advance.

5. References

- Banfield, A. (1982), *Unspeakable Sentences. Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, Londres, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Banfield, A. (1995), *Phrases sans paroles*, Paris, Seuil.
- Carston, R. (1994), "Metalinguistic negation and echoic use", *ULC Working Papers in Linguistics* 6, 321-339.
- Fauconnier, G. (1984), *Espaces mentaux*, Paris Minit (partial English version in Fauconnier, G., *Mental Spaces*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1984).
- Genette, G. (1972), *Figure III*, Paris, Seuil.
- Horn, L.R. (1989), *A Natural History of Negation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Moeschler, J. (1995), "La négation comme expression procédurale", ms.
- Moeschler, J. (to appear), "Time in evolving reference. Temporal sequencing, tenses and focalisation", in Reboul (ed.).
- Moeschler, J. & Reboul, A. (1994), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de pragmatique*, Paris, Seuil.
- Reboul, A. (1992), *Rhétorique et stylistique de la fiction*, Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy.
- Reboul, A. (ed.) (to appear), *Evolving reference and anaphora: Time and Objects*, Amsterdam, Benjamins.
- Reichenbach, H (1947), *Elements of symbolic logic*, New York, Free Press.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1986), *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- Sthioul, B (1995), *Imparfait et focalisation*, Mémoire de DES, Université de Genève.
- Vuillaume, M. (1990), *Grammaire temporelle des récits*, Paris, Minit.

Vuillaume, M. (1993), "Le repérage temporel dans les textes narratifs", LANGAGES 112, 92-105.