Tense as temporal centering

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Abstract
Since the pioneering work by Reichenbach (1947), much research has argued that English tenses are anaphoric to an aforementioned reference point. This is sometimes construed as an aforementioned time (e.g. Partee 1973, 1984) and sometimes as an aforementioned event (e.g. Kamp 1979, 1981, Webber 1988). Moreover, some researchers draw semantic parallels between tenses and pronouns (e.g. Partee 1973, 1984, Stone 1997, Kratzer 1998), whereas others draw parallels between tenses and anaphorically anchored (in)definite descriptions (e.g. Webber 1988, Moens and Steedman 1988; see also Kamp and Reyle 1993).

A competing approach views tenses as purely indefinite temporal descriptions, indexically anchored to the speech time but not anaphoric to prior discourse. On this view, tenses introduce new times into discourse. Any relation to aforementioned times or events is a by-product of independent pragmatic processes that establish discourse coherence, because coherence relations may imply temporal relations. For example, causal relations (such as Result or Explanation) imply that the cause event precedes the resulting change. Parallel relations (e.g. Elaboration or Contrast) typically imply temporal overlap or proximity, with no particular temporal order (e.g. Comrie 1981, Lascarides and Asher 1993, Kehler 2002).

In this talk, I first survey some parallels that have been drawn between nominal and temporal discourse reference and the competing accounts of these parallels. I then draw a new parallel, between grammatical tense systems and grammatical centering systems for nominal discourse reference, using evidence from Polish, which has both. I propose that in languages with grammatical tense systems, verbs have temporal arguments for reference times, in addition to nominal arguments for subjects and objects. Grammatical tense markers saturate the reference time argument with a top-ranked temporal anaphor. This refers to an aforementioned time (PST, FUT), or the time of an event (PRS), that is currently top-ranked in the center of attention or top-ranked in the background. Similarly, in pronominal argument languages (e.g. Polish), grammatical person markers saturate the subject and/or object argument with a top-ranked nominal anaphor, which refers to an aforementioned individual (3SG, 3PL), or a participant in an event (1SG, 2SG, …), that is currently top-ranked center-stage or top-ranked in the background.