

## DISCURSIVE ROLE OF PAST TENSES. A TEXT ANALYSIS.

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### Abstract

The article discusses the meaning and usage of the principal past tense forms in English from a discursive perspective. Analysing short excerpts from a fictional narrative, the author argues that English past tenses in narratives have, besides their primary temporal-aspectual function, an important role in marking the type and the prominence of the past event or situation within a textual complex.

“Where can we hide in fair weather, we orphans of the storm?”  
(Waugh: 235)

Narration is thought to be the most universal genre, because all cultures have storytelling traditions. It is claimed (Hatch 1992: 167) that there even exists a universal narrative template including the following components:

- (i) abstract (a sort of title for the story);
- (ii) orientation (world setting - time & space and participants);
- (iii) goal;
- (iv) problem (it prevents an easy attainment of the goal);
- (v) resolution (it shows the goal finally attained);
- (vi) coda (conclusion with a possible moral).

One of the simplest ways of developing a past narrative is by telling the story as a chain of events which are represented by the sequence of verbs connoting discrete actions<sup>1</sup>:

(1)

**I looked** in at my wife, **found** her sleeping, and **closed** the door between us; then **I ate** salmon kedgeree and cold Bradenham ham and **telephoned** for a barber to come and shave me.

‘There’s a lot of stuff in the sitting-room for the lady,’ **said** the steward; ‘shall I leave it for the time?’

**I went** to see. There was a second delivery of cellophane parcels from

<sup>1</sup> All excerpts are taken from Waugh (1993); BR stands for *Brideshead Revisited*.

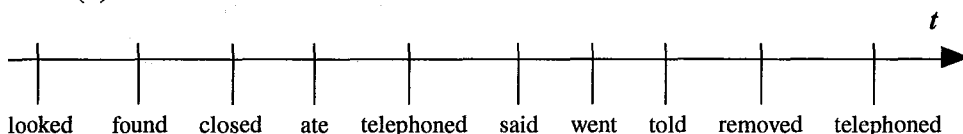
the shops on board, some ordered by radio from friends in New York whose secretaries had failed to remind them of our departure in time, some by our guests as they left the cocktail party. It was no day for flower vases; I **told** him to leave them on the floor and then, struck by the thought, **removed** the card from Mr Kramm's roses and **sent** them with my love to Julia.

She **telephoned** while I was being shaved. 'What a deplorable thing to do, Charles! How unlike you!'

BR: 225

The events in (1) - *looked, found, closed, ate, telephoned, said, went, told, removed, and telephoned* - form a narrative string which represents the (linear) historical order of events as shown in (2).

(2)



We know, however, that a good storytelling does seldom follow the linear, historical sequence of events; the story weaves backwards and forwards, and it may digress from the main story line in order to describe some background details. This is often mirrored in the use of complex grammatical structures (tense and aspect forms, dependent clauses, copulative structures). Hence verbal forms have apart from their temporal role also a discursive function. In discourse analysis (Cook 1989: 14), verbal forms are known as cohesive devices (establishing formal links between sentences and between clauses). Beaugrande & Dressler (1994: 80) state that they are devices which "overtly signal relations within or among events and situations of the textual world".

In addition, if the standard model of narration consists of a focal event (the planet) surrounded by peripheral events (the satellites), which can be simultaneous, anterior or posterior to the focal event (Miklič 1993: 305), then one of the roles of verbal tense forms is to signal these relations.

In the paper, we will try to establish how past tense forms can be used as a discursive (i.e. connective) device. In particular, we will be interested in their role as markers of different situations (simultaneity : anteriority; markedness : unmarkedness; foreground : background), and how the story develops through their usage.

**Past tenses** most commonly refer to "past time via some past point of reference, especially in fictional narrative and description, where the use of the past tense to describe imaginary past happenings is a well established convention" (Biber et al. 1999: 454). Within the past time reference, English distinguishes three principal forms: (i) PAST INDEFINITE, (ii) PAST PROGRESSIVE and (iii) PAST PERFECT.

The function of THE PAST INDEFINITE is to show that "the event/state must have taken place in the past [...] and that the speaker or writer must have in mind a definite

time at which the event/state took place” (Quirk et al. 1999: 183). From a discursive perspective, it represents a situation having its completion or occurrence simultaneous with the past time reference stated or implied within the line of narration. Furthermore, it marks the most prominent (i.e. most important) events of the narrative (the foreground).

The meaning of THE PAST PROGRESSIVE “can be separated into three components, not all of which need be present in a given instance: (a) the happening has DURATION, (b) the happening has LIMITED duration, (c) the happening is NOT NECESSARILY COMPLETE” (Quirk et al. 1999: 198). The (past) progressive “generally has the effect of surrounding a particular event or point of time with a ‘temporal frame’” (Quirk et al. 1999: 209). While two past indefinite forms usually mark the time sequence, the past indefinite and the past progressive show time-inclusion. As Hatch (1992: 167) points out, narrative situations marked with the past progressive form are viewed as ongoing (time-inclusion) and parallel (in the background) to the major story line.

The past progressive can also be used to express speaker’s/writer’s attitude (emotional relation) towards a particular action. In such cases, it is devoid of its semantic component of temporariness and imparts a subjective feeling of disapproval to the action described.

THE PAST PERFECT usually “has the meaning of ‘past-in-the-past’, [...]. More technically, the past perfective may be said to denote any event or state anterior to a time of orientation in the past” (Quirk 1999: 195-196). Since past tense forms are relative forms (i.e. depend on the reference point), it is not surprising that they often occur in dependent clauses (adverbial, complement and relative clauses), where the main clause provides the anchor for interpreting the time reference. However, as argued by Kovačič (1994: 86), the reference point for a particular past perfect form need not be within a sentence, it can also be expressed or implied by the contexts. The role of past perfect forms in the narrative (Hatch (1992: 167)) is to present old background information for the story line<sup>2</sup>:

(3)

She [Julia] **had made** a preposterous little picture of the kind of man who would do: he **was** an English diplomat of great but not very virile beauty, now abroad, with a house smaller than Brideshead, nearer to London; he **was** old, thirty-two or -three, and **had been** recently and tragically **widowed**; Julia thought she would prefer a man a little subdued by earlier grief. He **had** a great career before him but **had grown** listless in his loneliness; she **was not** sure he **was not** in danger of falling into the hands of an unscrupulous foreign adventuress; he **needed** a new infusion life to carry him to the Embassy at Paris. While professing a mild agnosticism himself, he **had** a liking for the shows of religion and **was** perfectly agreeable to having his children brought up Catholic; he

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<sup>2</sup> Kovačič (1994: 84) describes these situations as “preceding, preparatory events (“the cause of the main event”)”.

**believed**, however, in prudent restriction of his family to two boys and a comfortably spaced over twelve years, and **did not demand** as a Catholic husband might, yearly pregnancies. He **had** twelve thousand a year above his pay, and no near relations. Some like that would do, Julia thought, and she was in search of him when she met me at the railway station. I was not her man. She told me as much, without a word, when she took the cigarette from my lips. BR: 165-166

In the text above, we have a very illustrative example of the interplay between the past indefinite and the past perfect form. While the events in the indefinite represent the focus of the narration, the perfect form conveys additional, background information (cf. analysis in (4)):

(4)

**Foreground**

he **was** an English diplomat [...] he **was** old, thirty-two or -three,

He **had** a great career before him,

**Background**

She **had made** a preposterous little picture of a kind of man that would do:

and **had been** [...] **widowed**.

but **had grown** listless in his loneliness.

Passage (5) contains all three principal past tense forms: the indefinite marking the foremost events in the story line, the perfect describing anterior situations providing background information, and the progressive denoting parallel or coextensive situations. (6) represents its discursive analysis in terms of the prominence criterion:

(5)

I **went** up and out as we **steamed** slowly down the river to one of the great glass cases where the passengers **stood** to watch the land slip by. 'Such a lot of friends,' my wife **had said**. They **looked** a strange crowd to me; the emotions of leave-taking **were** just **beginning** to subside; some of them, who **had been drinking** till the last moment with those who **were seeing** them **off**, were still boisterous; others **were planning** where they would have their deck chairs; the band **played** unnoticed — all were as restless as ants. I **turned** into some of the halls of the ship, which were huge without any splendour, as though they had been designed for a railway coach and preposterously magnified. I **passed** through vast bronze gates on which paper-thin Assyrian animals cavorted; I **trod** carpets the colour of blotting paper; the painted panels of the walls were like blotting paper, too — kindergarten work in flat, drab colours — and between the walls **were** yards and yards of biscuit-coloured wood which no carpenter's tool **had ever touched**, wood that **had been bent** round corners, invisibly **joined** strip to strip, **steamed** and **squeezed** and **polished**; all over the

blotting-paper carpet **were strewn** tables designed perhaps by a sanitary engineer, square blocks of stuffing, with square holes for sitting in, and upholstered, it seemed, in blotting paper also; the light of the hall **was suffused** from scores of hollows, giving an even glow, casting no shadows — the whole place **hummed** from its hundred ventilators and vibrated with the turn of the great engines below.

BR: 212-213

(6)

**Foreground**

NARRATIVE STRING 1:

I **went** up and out as we **steamed** slowly [...] [...] where the passengers **stood** to watch the land slip by.

They **looked** a strange crowd to me;

**were** still boisterous;

the band **played** unnoticed — all were as restless as ants.

NARRATIVE STRING 2:

I **turned** [...], I **passed** [...]; I **trod** [...] [...] — between the walls **were** yards and yards of [...] wood

**Background – simultaneous**

??

the emotions of leave-taking **were** just **beginning** to subside;

with those who **were seeing** them **off**

others **were planning** where they [...]

**Background - anterior**

‘Such a lot of friends,’ my wife **had said**.

some of them **had been drinking** till the last moment

which no carpenter’s tool **had ever touched**, wood that **had been bent** [...] **joined** [...], **steamed** and **squeezed** and **polished**; [...]

Some forms in excerpt (5) need further discussion:

- (i) [...] as we steamed slowly down the river - as is clear from the context, the event of *steaming* is in progress at the reference point denoted by

*went*. The progressive would, therefore, be expected. There are two possible answers why the indefinite form is used. First, it is possible that the author wanted to present the two events (*went*, *steamed*) as belonging to the same level of prominence (i.e. both a part of the main story line). A potential counterargument for such an analysis may be the fact that *steamed* occurs in the adverbial (subordinate) clause of time indicating an ongoing process at the time of the event in the main clause (*went*). As such it should be syntactically as well as semantically less prominent. Second, and more likely, it is a well-known fact that when a predicator in temporal clauses introduced by *as* is a durative verb, it usually occurs in the indefinite form<sup>3</sup>. The choice of the indefinite in the above example is thus stylistically and not narrative-internally explainable<sup>4</sup>.

- (ii) where the passengers stood to watch [...]; the band played unnoticed – the choice of the tense form in these two clauses is crucial; the author merely wants to present the two events as two completed entities with no reference to their internal structures (here: duration). The notion of progressiveness is, nonetheless, obtained through the inherent semantic meanings of both verbs. If the progressive were used with these two events, it would signal their peripheral role. In that case, they would be inferior to the event *went*. A closer look at these three events reveals that from this perspective they are of equal rank; they represent unrelated actions designating three independent story lines: [*I went*]<sup>1</sup> – [*passengers stood*]<sup>2</sup> – [*the band played*]<sup>3</sup>.
- (iii) [...] others were just beginning to subside: - the use of the progressive is in this case essential to express the gradual development of the process<sup>5</sup>.

Another interesting function of the perfect form is to remind the reader of a previously described situation. If we follow the story of the *vast bronze gates on which paper thin Assyrian animals cavorted* (introduced for the first time on p. 212 (cf. example (5)) through the novel, we can observe that it is always reintroduced by the perfect form conveying the what-happened-while-we-were-away information<sup>6</sup>:

(7)

- a) The great bronze doors of the lounge **had torn** away from their hooks and **were swinging** free with the roll of the ship; regularly and, it seemed, irresistibly, first one, then the other, **opened** and **shut**; they **paused** at the

<sup>3</sup> Some additional examples:

(i) "Despite the chill, damp air, Phillip was sweating heavily beneath his light windbreaker as he waited impatiently for his call to work through the telephone circuits.

(ii) Tom could see her in tears as she wrote it." (Biber et al. 1999: 822)

<sup>4</sup> This example confirms that the verbs as cohesive devices cannot be solely analysed on the grammatical level, but special attention should also be paid to the lexical meaning (Burazer 2000: 182).

<sup>5</sup> With punctual verbs the indefinite form denotes a single instantaneous event, never the process (Comrie 1976: 42-43).

<sup>6</sup> The other trigger is the definite article.

completion of each half circle, **began** to move slowly and **finished** fast with a resounding clash. There was no real risk in passing them, except of slipping and being caught by that swift, final blow; there was ample time to walk through unhurried but there was something forbidding in the sight of that great weight of uncontrolled metal, flapping to and fro, which might have made a timid man flinch or skip through to quickly; I rejoiced to feel Julia's hand perfectly steady on my arm and know, as I walked beside her, that she was wholly undismayed.

BR: 227

- b) After luncheon the last hardy passengers went to rest and we were alone [...]

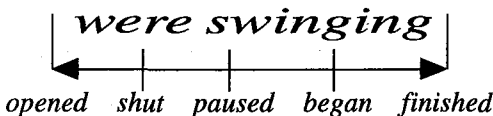
The bronze doors of the lounge **had been fixed**, but not before two seamen **had been** badly **injured**. They **had tried** various devices, lashing with ropes and, later, when these **failed**, with steel hawser, but there **was** nothing to which they could be made fast; finally the **drove** wooden wedges under them, catching them in the brief moment of repose when they **were** full open, and these **held** firm.

When, before the dinner, she went to her cabin to get ready [...] and I came with her, [...]

BR: 230

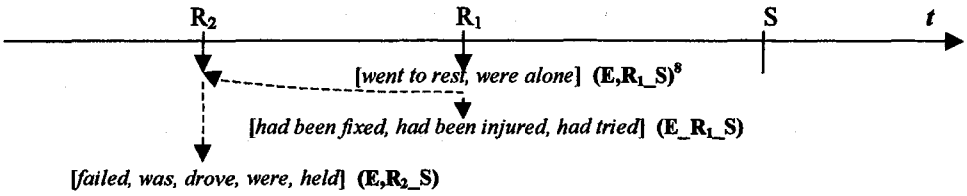
c)	<p><b>Foreground</b></p> <p>[...] <b>opened</b> and <b>shut</b>; they <b>paused</b> at the completion [...] <b>began</b> to move.</p>	<p><b>Background - simultaneous</b></p> <p>[...] and <b>were swinging</b> free with the roll of the ship;</p>	<p><b>Background - anterior</b></p> <p>The great bronze doors of the lounge <b>had torn</b> away [...]</p> <p>The bronze doors of the lounge <b>had been</b> <b>fixed</b>, [...]</p>
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In (7a) the events *opened, shut, paused, began* and *finished* represent a sequence of single, completed, more or less punctual actions which is repeated as a whole (i.e. a unit) over a period of time. These punctual actions stand for different points of the process *were swinging*:



It is noteworthy to discuss the use of tenses in (7b) in terms of the reference point. The entire paragraph has a function of a flashback. The initial three perfect forms do not only signal anteriority; they also set the new reference point. Once the anteriority is established, it is safe to use the past indefinite form again<sup>7</sup>:

(8)



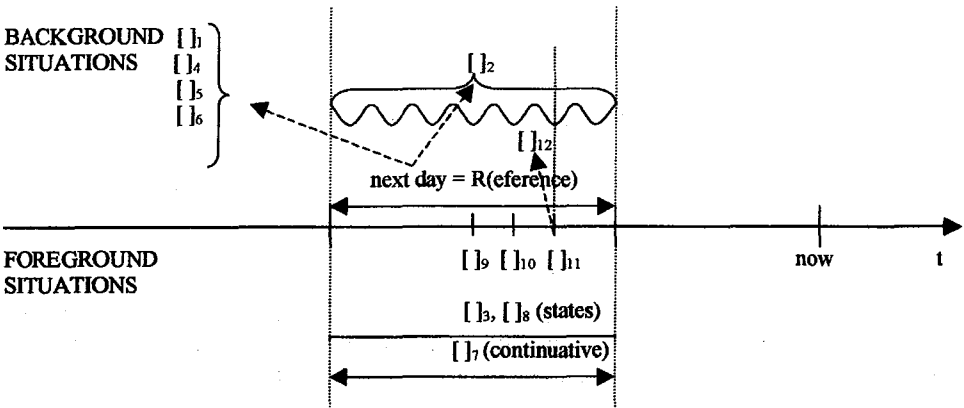
The passage in (9) and its analysis in (10) offer an insight into the complexity of the interaction between the three past tense forms:

(9) Next day the wind [**had again dropped**]<sub>1</sub>, and again we [**were wallowing**]<sub>2</sub> in the swell. The talk [**was**]<sub>3</sub> less of seasickness now than of broken bones; people [**had been thrown**]<sub>4</sub> about in the night and there [**had been**]<sub>5</sub> many nasty accidents on bathroom floors.

That day, because we [**had talked**]<sub>6</sub> so much the day before and because what we had to say needed few words, we [**spoke**]<sub>7</sub> little. We [**had**]<sub>8</sub> books; Julia [**found**]<sub>9</sub> a game she liked. When after long silences we [**spoke**]<sub>10</sub>, our thoughts, we [**found**]<sub>11</sub>, [**had kept**]<sub>12</sub> pace together side by side.

BR: 234

(10)



<sup>7</sup> The indefinite form is obligatory, since it denotes events which are simultaneous with the newly established reference point. If the perfect form were used instead of the indefinite, it would trigger another anteriority.

<sup>8</sup> E = event; R = reference point; S = point of speech; , = simultaneous; \_ = anterior



The progressive form can also be used to express speaker's/writer's emotional involvement in the course of action. In the text below, the writer describes the pre-War situation in England. Following the string of narration in the beginning (*was summoned – interviewed – put*), there are two progressive forms (*were becoming, was being got*). While they could be accounted for as gradual ongoing processes at the reference point, their essential role is to mark writer's annoyance with the state of affairs. There are some other lexical items present in the text that call our attention to such an interpretation of the progressive form (*the coming 'Emergency', that dark office, taboo, a monster with sightless face*).

- (11) I **was summoned** to the War Office, **interviewed**, and **put on** a list in case of emergency; Cordelia also, on another list; lists **were becoming** part of our lives once more, as they had been at school. Everything **was being got** ready for the coming 'Emergency'. No one in that dark office spoke the word 'war'; it was taboo; we should be called for if there was 'an emergency' — not in case of strife, an act of human will; nothing so clear and simple as wrath or retribution; an emergency; something coming out of the waters, a monster with sightless face and thrashing tail thrown up from the depths. BR: p.299

In conclusion, I cite two additional excerpts from the novel to stimulate some future research on the subject matter, and to motivate the reader to carry out some individual discourse analysis.

- (12) 'Do you remember,' said Julia, in the tranquil, lime-scented evening, 'do you remember the storm?'  
'The bronze doors banging.'  
'The roses in cellophane.'  
'The man who gave the "get-together" party and was never seen again.'  
'Do you remember how the sun came out on our last evening just as it has done today?'  
It had been an afternoon of low cloud and summer squalls, so overcast that at times I had stopped work and roused Julia from the light trance in which she sat — she had sat so often; I never tired of painting her, forever finding in her new wealth and delicacy — until at length we had gone early to our baths and, on coming down, dressed for dinner, in the last half-hour of the day, we found the world transformed; the sun had emerged; the wind had fallen to a soft breeze which gently stirred the blossom in the limes and carried its fragrance, fresh from the late rains, to merge with the sweet breath of box and the drying stone. The shadow of the obelisk spanned the terrace.  
I had carried two garden cushions from the shelter of the colonnade and put them on the rim of the fountain. There Julia sat, in a tight little gold tunic and a white gown, one hand in the water idly turning an emerald ring to catch the fire of the sunset; the carved animals mounted over her

dark head in a cumulus of green moss and glowing stone and dense shadow, and the waters round them flashed and bubbled and broke into scattered flames.

BR: 249-250

- (13) Rex's public life was approaching a climacteric. Things had not gone as smoothly with him as he had planned. I knew nothing of finance, but I heard it said that his dealings were badly looked on by orthodox Conservatives; even his good qualities of geniality and impetuosity counted against him, for his parties at Brideshead got talked about. There was always too much about him in the papers; he was one with the Press lords and their sad-eyed, smiling hangers-on; in his speeches he said the sort of thing which 'made a story' in Fleet Street, and that did him no good with his party chiefs; only war could put Rex's fortunes right and carry him into power. A divorce would do him no great harm; it was rather that with a big bank running he could not look up from the table.

BR: 268

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