

## Conclusion

In this study, I have put forward a cognitive account of tense-switching, that is, an account that is based on the presupposition that the meaning behind the variation between the past and present tenses lies in the particular conceptual structure evoked by each. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.2, many scholars have thought that the flexibility of use of the present tense forces the linguist to drop the entire assumption that the present tense designates present time reference. For example, Fludernik (1991: 386) argued that ‘specific uses of the present tense (such as the historical present tense) cannot be explained as “signifying present relevance”, “lifting past events into the present of the speaker’s reporting” and the like’. I hope to have made a convincing argument that not only is it theoretically possible to explain the use of the present tense to refer to the past in terms of present time reference but that such an approach yields a deeper understanding of the phenomenon than one that focuses purely on functional aspects and ignores the conceptual dimension.

As I explained in the Introduction, I have aimed at a more ‘holistic’ account of the phenomenon of tense-switching than has been offered in previous studies. This meant, first, integrating three levels of linguistic analysis (moving from semantics to pragmatic functions to observable usage patterns) and, second, acknowledging distinct usages and unifying these under a single abstract conceptual scenario. In this light, let me present a brief review of the main argument of this book.

First, the construal of spatio-temporally distal entities as proximal can be facilitated by two distinct conceptual scenarios (Chapter 1). In the *displacement* scenario, the speaker assumes a fictive ground in a distal scene. In the *representation* scenario, the speaker assumes that distal entities are immediately accessible from the ground in the form of a representation. Essentially, the construal of a displaced ground is achieved by the pretence of the speaker to be limited by the constraints associated with an actual on-the-scene *report*. This involves, among other things, a high degree of

temporal iconicity in the description of the events, as well as the use of the adverb *now* to move forward narrative time. In the scenario where the speaker is describing what is happening in a (virtual) representation, on the other hand, the constraints associated with the report mode are lifted and *narrative editing* becomes possible (temporal compression, distal temporal adverbials, et cetera). The stronger the degree of narrative editing, the further we move away from the displacement scenario.

Second, within the world of the representation scenario, different kinds of representations may form the conceptual basis for the use of the present tense to designate past events. In Chapters 2–4, I have distinguished three conceptual scenarios, each with its own underlying representation, pragmatic implications and usage patterns. The parameter that lies at the base of this distinction is, again, the degree of *editing* in the description of the designated events.

In scenic narrative (high experientiality, low editing) we find the mimetic present, which conveys the pretence that the past events are presently being simulated or re-enacted. This is reflected especially in the predilection of the mimetic present for verbs denoting concrete events, for first person marking (reflecting the speaker's engagement with the events in the narrative) and for certain aspects of grammatical 'simplicity' (clause-initial position of the verb, singular rather than plural endings, et cetera). Moreover, the pretence of re-enactment usually goes hand in hand with communicative dynamism, that is, newsworthiness and discourse relevance.

In summary narrative (low experientiality, high editing), we find the diegetic present, which highlights the immediate accessibility of the designated event in the medium of the discourse. Its pragmatic function is to signal to the addressees that they are to update their mental model of the discourse in the light of salient developments. The diegetic present has an affinity with certain attention-management strategies (in particular, proliferation of subordinate clauses and the use of the particle  $\delta\eta$  ['then', 'so'] to mark discourse progression), subordinate clauses that cue an imminent change in the narrative dynamic and, to some degree, heavier coding material for the subject.

And finally, in non-narrative discourse (complete cancellation of narrative experientiality) there is the registering present, which evokes a 'record' of the designated event. The pragmatic function of this use is to signal that the designated event is well-established in shared cultural memory, which serves both to elevate the status of this event (giving it an 'official' or 'canonical' air) and to underline the legitimacy of the speaker's assertion.

The account of tense-switching developed here is intended to be valid not just for Classical Greek but for other languages as well. In Chapter 1, I discussed material from different languages and genres to illustrate the general viability of my approach. As for the three specific usages described in Chapters 2–4, the mimetic use (Chapter 2) is easily paralleled in other languages (which is why it has so often been recognised), and I have discussed material from the comedy show *Seinfeld* that was rather comparable to some of the passages we find in Classical Greek. The discourse-as-representation scenario (Chapter 3) is the basis for discourse deixis in language generally. With respect to the representation of past events in narrative, this scenario is related to the ‘story-play’ scenario (Chapter 1, Section 1.4) in the sense that in both cases, past events are construed as presently accessible in the present story as represented by the discourse. We may compare how Thucydides begins the second book of his *Histories* with how Thomas Hughes inaugurates a new phase in Tom Brown’s life:

- (1) ἄρχεται δὲ ὁ πόλεμος ἐνθένδε ἤδη Ἀθηναίων καὶ Πελοποννησίων καὶ τῶν ἑκατέρους ξυμμάχων.

From here then begins the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians and the allies of both.

(Thucydides, *Histories* 2.1.1)

- (2) The second act of Tom’s life may now be said to have begun.  
(Thomas Hughes, *Tom Browns’ schooldays*, chapter 3)

In (2) the representation scenario is more specific, as the story is here conceived in terms of a play (‘the second act’); but it is easy to see how the boundary between this scenario and the more abstract idea of the discourse itself as a representation is fluid. Finally, registering usages of the present (Chapter 4) are common in modern languages as well, especially in chronological tables (Section 4.3, example [17]).

From a methodological point of view, I have tried to show how the claim that certain conceptual scenarios underlie tense-switching can be translated into specific hypotheses. These hypotheses (pertaining, for example, to clause complexity, discourse connection and coding material for the subject) can, most obviously, be transferred to later Greek authors (such as Polybius and Plutarch) and, with some modifications, to Latin as well; but they may also turn out to be relevant for modern languages. For one thing, it will be worthwhile to further investigate the interaction between tense usage and elements of depiction (Chapter 2, Section 2.3),

which is hard to do with only written material. Attention-management strategies are another example. In Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2, I discussed a specific attention-management strategy in which the speaker asks the audience a rhetorical question of the type *Then what do they do?* or *Then what happens?* There is a strong tendency for the present for preterite to be used in such questions and in the following narrative assertion (e.g., Demosthenes, *Against Aristocrates* [23] 157 τί δὴ **συμβαίνει** παραυτὰ [‘so what **happens** immediately?’]). I noted a parallel in English in P. G. Wodehouse, *Psmith in the city*, chapter 27. A character is telling a story explaining why certain cricket players could not make it in time for a match. He uses the past tense for about two paragraphs and then switches to the present at the following point: *What **happens**? Why, Willis, who fancies himself as a chauffeur, **undertakes** to do the driving;* etc. It may well be worth investigating whether tense-switching tends to occur at such questions in English literature, conversational narrative and other genres.

Finally, let me return to the question of the relationship between time, conceptualisation and linguistic meaning, with which I started this book. I want to guard against two misunderstandings that may arise regarding the conceptualist approach I have adopted. First, there is no one-to-one mapping between the conceptual scenarios described here and the psychological reality of individual language users. These conceptual scenarios are idealised models that aim at maximal explanatory value for the linguistic phenomena discussed in this study. Through conventional usage, the present time value of the present for preterite may fade into the background, with its pragmatic connotations becoming more and more entrenched. The reason I have put so much emphasis on the conceptual side of things is that it needs to be explained where these pragmatic connotations come from in the first place. I have argued that to do this, we need to depart from the assumption that the present tense designates present time reference. Moreover, while the conceptual scenarios will not be activated by every language user each time the present for preterite is encountered, I do think it is plausible that the scenario can be ‘unpacked’ when it is consciously attended to; that is, the present tense has not become so meaningless that language users will fail to note the paradox of it referring to the past, and they may intuitively arrive at an explanation for this phenomenon similar to the ones given here. Diachronic investigations (Steadman [1917] and Zeman [2013] are rare examples; von Fritz [1949] offers some interesting suggestions) and language questionnaires may shed more light on these issues.

Second, the conceptual stance adopted here does not imply essentialism – as if there were a monolithic concept of the ‘present’ that is evoked by each and every use of the present tense. As I pointed out in the Introduction (Section I.1.2), we should not expect there to be a straightforward correlation between grammatical categories and basic cognitive categories (such as between proximal and distal demonstratives in language and ‘near’ and ‘far’ in perception). A language user who employs tense-switching is not, generally speaking, experientially confused about the concepts of the ‘past’ and the ‘present’. The types of proximity facilitating the uses of the present for preterite discussed in this study (simulation, discourse proximity, being ‘on record’) are all conceptually distinct. However, they can be unified in terms of a more abstract, discursive understanding of what ‘presence’ means – in the same way as we understand that a generic statement such as *The sun rises each morning* concerns the present somehow, even if it does not describe an event that is actually going on at the time of the utterance. This abstract understanding of time is, presumably, subject to cultural differences, and a promising avenue for further research would be to compare present for preterite usage cross-linguistically and see if differences correlate with the cultural (un)availability of different types of representation. To give just one suggestion, it would be interesting to see if more ‘document-minded’ people (Chapter 4, Section 4.4, note 35) are more prone to registering usages of the present for preterite than those that rely mainly or solely on oral transmission. This line of enquiry is wide open and promises to reveal exciting new insights into the relationship between language and conceptualisation.