Divorcing events from times: an argument from narrative metalepsis

1. Introduction. The core observation of event semantics (e.g., Davidson, 1966; Parsons, 1990) is that grammar is sensitive to event individuals, paralleling spatial individual entities. An underlying assumption of this approach is that events are uniquely located in time, boiling down to defining events by the time they occupy. I provide natural language data that challenges this assumption, and argue that it is unmotivated by temporal logic. I propose that a single event can be felicitously asserted to move along the temporal domain, akin to a spatial entity moving in the spatial domain.

2. Data and former research. *temporal metalepsis* is a literary device that involves a transgression from the narration into the story (Gennete 1980; Bücking, 2022). Consider (1), where (1-a) anchors the time of going-up-the-hill in the past, while (1-b) asserts it to be the temporal frame for the present time of narration, forming a temporal paradox.

(1) a. The coach was climbing up the hills.
     b. While the coach is making its way up to the hills, let us piece together the memories of the days when I often visited these parts. (Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*)

A simple theory of tense that assumes tenses to locate events with respect to the speaker would predict (1-b) to be infelicitous. One potential method for explaining the discrepancy is using a covert context-shifting operator (e.g., Schlenker, 2003) that forces (1-b) to be evaluated as though it were uttered at a different time; in this case, the time of going-up-to-the-hills. This approach can predict the use of present tense morphology for describing the going-up-to-the-hills. However, what (1-b) asserts is that two temporally distinct events overlap: the *past* event of going-up-to-the-hills, and the *present* event of narration. A context-shifting operator does not predict this overlap.

Eco (1994) and Bücking (2022) analysed the paradox in temporal metalepsis by appealing to different narrative layers. The clause stating the coach's going up is interpreted as occurring within the fictional world, and the main clause describing the narration is interpreted as occurring in the real world, as uttered by the author. Altshuler & Haug (2024) show that this explanation is implausible for first-person examples as in (1-b). The pronoun *I* must pick out the protagonist sitting in the coach and hence, both clauses must be in the same ontological layer. Instead, Altshuler & Haug argue that the paradox is part of the semantic assertion. The reader resolves the temporal mismatch pragmatically, yielding a cinematic effect. While I accept this as the only plausible analysis for (1), it leaves us with the claim that (1) entails the contradiction in (2): the duration of the going-up event e is both before ($\prec$) and during ($\circ$) the narration time t.

(2) $e \prec t \wedge e \circ t$.

Since the felicity of (1) is empirically verified, and since contradictions are known not to be felicitous, this conclusion is undesirable.

3. Proposal. Let us suppose that events can change their temporal location. This supposition takes seriously the space–time analogy that underlies event semantics, as spatial objects are assumed to have the ability to move in space, such that the following is not a contradiction: x is left of y at t_1 and x is right of y at t_2, where $t_1 \neq t_2$. Applying this to events, we can restate (2) as in (3). Namely, (1-a) and (1-b) are evaluated at different times, and the temporal location of the event e is different at each time.

(3) $[\![(1\text{-a})]\!] = 1$ iff $e \prec t$ at $t_1 \wedge [\![(1\text{-b})]\!] = 1$ iff $e \circ t$ at t_2 where $t_1 \neq t_2$

This supposition independently holds in natural language, as observed by McTaggart (1908): the mutually exclusive predicates PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE can hold of the same event e as long as they hold of it at different times. While the different predicates can only be *true* of the same event with the passage of time, it is nevertheless the case that events can admit incompatible temporal predication without yielding a contradiction.

4. Viability. The argument that events can be asserted to hold at different temporal locations is not costly, but rather a weak cancellation of the unmotivated bias according to which events are defined by the time they occupy. Further, it poses no difficulty for the (i) definition, (ii) individuation and (iii) ordering of events. (i) The accepted definition of events, especially following Kamp (1979), assumes them to be spatio-temporal primary entities. Thus, they exist in space and time but are reducible to neither, and are not required to be definable by the time interval they occupy. (ii) As discussed by Davidson (1969) and Eckardt (2000), temporal identity is not a sufficient condition for individuating events. Instead, two events are identical iff they have the same causes and effects. Individuating events independently of their temporal location poses difficulties no different in nature from those posed by the individuation of physical entities independently of their spatial location. (iii) The ordering of time and events is independently assumed not to be linear (e.g., Anscombe 1964, Prior 1969, Kamp 1979). Kamp showed that the exact temporal location of events is underdetermined, and a different linear extension is posed for each utterance, in line with the current proposal.

5. Conclusion. I argue that divorcing events from the temporal domain can predict natural language data which cannot be accounted for otherwise. The cinematic effect in (1-b) is therefore triggered by the narrator's asserting the past going-up-the-hill event to occur in his present. Although this utterance is false, this falsity is contingent rather than analytic. (1-a) and (1-b) are evaluated at distinct times, and therefore no contradiction arises when each predicates e differently. This approach enhances the treatment of events as temporal objects, paralleling spatial objects in their movability along an independent domain. This discussion may extend to well-known puzzles regarding constraints on tense distribution, in particular when embedded under attitude verbs. One recurring issue is de re temporal reference, which is challenging to derive due to the temporal relations that hold between the subject and the event (Abusch, 1988; Heim, 1994; Altshuler & Schwarzschild, 2013). Treating events as separate from the temporal grid, as proposed here, may extend to a new understanding of de re event reference and what it means to be acquainted with events, and potentially illuminate these outstanding problems.

References

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