IMPERFECTS ARE PRONOMINALS

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The imperfect tense has been frequently characterized as a relative tense meaning "present in the past". From this hypothesis we consider in this essay that: (i) the value of the imperfect must be delimited by means of two different temporal elements, to be exact, by means of a present situated under the scope of a past; and (ii) this past behaves in a similar way as pronominals and is subject to Principle B of Binding Theory. The idea of each of these temporal elements being the head of a functional category is defended in the last part of this paper.

0. In the linguistic tradition of the Romance languages the imperfect tense has been frequently characterized as a relative tense meaning "present in the past", that is to say, as a tense which denotes a temporal interval overlapping the temporal interval denoted by another past tense.[1] In a fragment such as (1), the action of listening to the radio would be a present action with regard to the past action of entering.

(1) En Joan entrà a l'habitació. L'Antoni escoltava la ràdio.

   'Joan entered the room. Antoni was listening to the radio.'

It is not strange, then, that some linguists have considered from a pragmatical-textual perspective that the features which oppose the imperfect and the present tense are the phoric character in the first and the deictic character in the second (see, for example, Houweling (1985), and Lo Cascio (1985)). Following this line of argument, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the temporal correlation established in (1) between the imperfect and the simple past is similar to the phoric relation existing between a pronominal and its antecedent,

and that the imperfect behaves in a similar way as pronominals. Consequently, this correlation must be subject to *Principle B of Binding Theory* (Chomsky (1981) and (1982)).

1. According to this principle, the pronominal type is characterized by being free -not bound-in its Governing Category (henceforth GC), in its sentence, in this case.[2] This can be observed in (2), where binding and coreference relations are expressed in terms of coindexing and the GC of the pronominal *el 'him, it'* appears in brackets:

(2)   a.   Tots buscaren el llibre$_i$ però [ningú no el$_i$ trobà].

            'Everybody looked for the book$_i$ but [nobody found it$_i$].

    b.   *[En Joan$_i$ no el$_i$ veurà].

            '[Joan$_i$ will not see him$_i$].

Example (2a) is grammatically correct because the pronominal *el* is coreferential with a NP which does not belong to its GC. Example (2b), on the other hand, is ungrammatical because the pronominal is bound within its GC.

Likewise, this kind of relation can be observed in the imperfect. We have rewritten example (1) in example (3a). Here the simple past is placed outside of the GC of the imperfect and, as a result, it may be the temporal antecedent of the imperfect. In example (3b), it is not possible to establish a temporal correlation between the imperfect and the first -or the second- simple past. The reason is that, in this context, the simple past is, in fact, within the GC of the imperfect.

(3)   a.   En Joan entrà en l'habitació. [L'Antoni escoltava la ràdio]

            'Joan entered the room. [Antoni was listening to the radio]'

    b.   [Buscava el llibre que comprà quan estigué a Londres]

            '[He was looking for the book that he bought when he was in London]'.

It is interesting to note that in example (3b) the fact that the correlation is not possible is not related to the imperfect appearing before the simple past, but rather to the simple past being within the GC of the imperfect. In fact, the cataphoric relation may exist both in the case of the pronominal and in the case of the imperfect, if Principle B is respected:[3]

(4) a. [Quan el$_i$ veiérem arribar] tots anàrem a saludar en Joan$_i$

'[When we saw him arriving] we all went to welcome Joan'

b. [Quan preparava el sopar] sentí un soroll estrany

'[When he was preparing dinner] he heard a strange noise

In (4a) the pronominal *el* is coreferential to the NP *en Joan*. In this same way, in (4b) the imperfect indicates a simultaneous event with the one in the simple past.

2. The parallelism existing between the imperfect and the pronominal type can be corroborated by another fact directly related to the preceding one. In example (5) the pronominal *el* in the embedded sentence may or may not be bound by the subject NP in the main sentence:

(5) En Joan$_i$ diu que ningú no el$_{\{i/j\}}$ convidà

'Joan$_i$ says that nobody invited him $_{\{i/j\}}$'

The fact of being or not being bound by the NP *en Joan* will obviously depend on the context of the discourse in which this sentence is inserted and, more exactly, on the element working as a conversational topic. A similar performance may also happen with the imperfect. In (6),

(6)   L'Enric digué que ell vivia amb els seus pares i que per la nit no podia sortir tant com

nosaltres

'Enric said that he was living with his parents and that he could not go out at night as

much as we did'

the most common temporal interpretation is one in which the imperfects refer to events that are

simultaneous to the past action of saying, that is, the simple past is the temporal antecedent of

the imperfects. In spite of this fact, the imperfects, in a suitable context, might have another

value. This is exactly what happens, for instance, in a fragment such as in (7).

(7)   Després començàrem a parlar de l'època en què ens coneguérem a la Facultat. L'Enric

digué que ell vivia amb els seus pares i que per la nit no podia sortir tant com nosaltres.

'Then we started talking about the time when we met at the University. Enric said that he

was living with his parents and that he could not go out at night as much as we did'.

In this context, it is perfectly correct to consider that the imperfects indicate simultaneity with

regard, not to the time denoted by the simple past of *digué 'said'*, but to the time denoted by the

NP *l'època en què ens coneguérem a la Universitat 'the time when we met at the University'*.

Therefore, this NP functions in example (7) as the antecedent of the imperfects.

3.   Up to now we have been dealing with the actual syntactical similarities between the

pronominal *el* and the imperfect. There is nevertheless a semantic difference which needs to be

further addressed: coreference. It has already been pointed out above that a pronominal denotes

the same reference as its antecedent and that this coreference can be expressed in terms of

coindexing. In the case of the imperfect it is slightly more complicated. This tense does not

denote exactly the same temporal interval as its antecedent: it better indicates a temporal interval

that overlaps the one of its antecedent. To solve this problem of coreference and coindexing,

we will go back to an idea frequently used in the logical descriptions of the verbal tenses. This

idea consists of considering that the imperfect tense, since it has the value of "present in the past", is logically interpreted by means of two different temporal elements: a present situated under the scope of a past, as shown in (8).

(8)   Imperfect = (PAST (PRES))

The simple past, on the other hand, since it is a tense that indicates past time only, would act in reponse to the following interpretation:

(9)   Simple past = PAST

From this point of view the temporal correlation established between simple past and imperfect would be represented in the following way:

(10)   ... $PAST_i$ ... $(PAST_i$ (PRES)) ...

The PAST which represents the simple past would function as the antecedent and would be coindexed with the PAST in the imperfect. The fragment in (1), consequently, corresponds to the temporal interpretation illustrated in (11):

(11)   En Joan $PAST_i$ entrar a l'habitació. L'Antoni $(PAST_i$ (PRES)) escoltar la ràdio
       'Joan $PAST_i$ enter the room. Antoni $(PAST_i$ (PRES)) listen to the radio'

On the other hand, the coreferential interpretation of example (3b), like that of example (2b), would be ungrammatical, because the PAST of the imperfect is within its GC.

(12)   [$(PAST_{\{i/*j\}}$ (PRES)) buscar el llibre que $PAST_j$ comprar...]
       '[He $(PAST_{\{i/*j\}}$ (PRES)) look for the book that he $PAST_j$ buy...]'

Finally, the fact that the imperfects in example (6) may indicate simultaneity with regard to the simple past in the main sentence or to any other temporal element does not create a problem either. In a similar way to what happens with the noun pronominal in (5), PAST of the imperfect may or may not be bound by the PAST in the main sentence:

(13)   L'Enric PAST$_i$ dir que ell (PAST$_{\{i/j\}}$ (PRES)) viure amb els seus pares i que per la nit

no (PAST$_{\{i/j\}}$ (PRES)) poder sortir tant com nosaltres

'Enric PAST$_i$ say that he (PAST$_{\{i/j\}}$ (PRES)) live with his parents and that

he (PAST$_{\{i/j\}}$ (PRES)) cannot go out at night as much as we did'

4.   The analysis of the imperfect tense adopted here is perfectly compatible with Reichenbach's proposition. It is well-known that this author delimits the value of the different tenses as being derived from three temporal entities: the point of speech (S), the point of reference (R), and the point of the event (E). From this point of view, the meaning of the imperfect could be described in the following way:
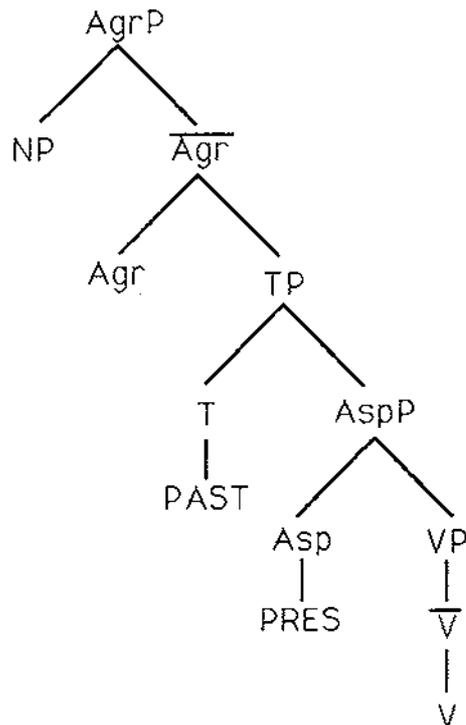
(14)   R before to S, E overlapped to R.

Our characterization of the imperfect tense appears clearly similar to that one. In our proposition, PAST gives account of the relationship established between R and S, since it indicates precedence with respect to the point of speech. PRES(ent), on the other hand, gives account of the relationship between R and E, since it shows that the event is simultaneous to the referential point in the past.

Before finishing this essay, we should not fail to analyze the syntactic status of the elements PAST and PRES(ent), which have served to interpret the imperfect tense. First of all we consider that these elements are the heads of two different functional categories. In order to distinguish these two categories, we will fall back on the hypothesis made out by Johnson (1981) and picked up in catalan by Branchadell (1990). According to Jonhson, the relationship
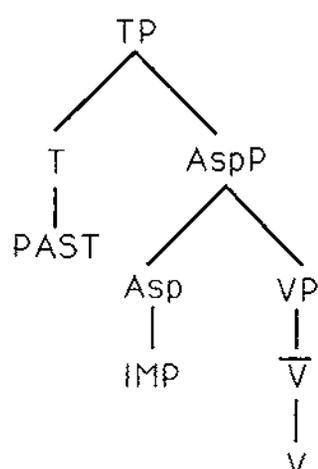
established between the point of speech and the point of reference defines the semantic category of the tense; the relationship between the point of reference and the point of the event delimits the semantic category of the aspect. Taking into account that in our proposition PAST reports on the first relationship and PRES(ent) on the second, it is possible to conclude that a sentence with imperfect would have the following D-structure:

(15)

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                    AgrP
                   /    \
                 NP      Agr‾
                        /    \
                     Agr      TP
                            /    \
                           T      AspP
                           |     /    \
                        PAST   Asp     VP
                                |       |
                              PRES      V‾
                                        |
                                        V
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This treatment might seem somewhat surprising, since in it we hold that a temporal element as PRES(ent) is the head of the functional category of Aspect. An alternative treatment, and more in accordance with linguistic traditions, would be to consider that in the D-structure, the imperfect tense is a past in relation to tense and an imperfect in relation to aspect:

(16)

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                    TP
                   /  \
                  T    AspP
                  |    /  \
                PAST  Asp  VP
                      |    |
                     IMP   V̄
                           |
                           V
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If this hypothesis were to be adopted, an interpretative rule should be postulated. According to it, the imperfect feature would be interpreted at LF as present if the sentence with the imperfect tense were to appear within a narrative context:

(17) D-structure: [TP PAST [AspP IMP...]] → LF:[PAST [PRES...]], if the sentence is embedded in a narrative context.

In this context PAST would behave as a pronominal and would have a temporal antecedent outside its GC.

5. In conclusion, considering that the imperfect has a similar syntactical performance to the pronominals allows us to describe the correlations that this tense establishes with other temporal elements. More than that, in some languages, like Catalan, it is possible to consider that the pronominal type is made up of two different subtypes: the noun pronominals -e.g. *el-* and the temporal pronominals -e.g. the PAST of the imperfect-.

Notes

[1] For this characterization in Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese, see, respectively, Bello (1841: § 35), Badia Margarit (1962: § 204) and Sten (1973: 96). For the opposition existing between relative and absolute tenses, see Comrie (1985).

[2] The GC for a is the maximal projection containing both a subject and a governor of a (cf. Chomsky (1986: 169)). Adopting the sentence structure of (i),

(i) $[_{AgrP} SN [_{Agr'} AGR [TP ... T ...]]]$

the GC of T will be the minimal AgrP containing T, since Agr governs TP and the head of TP - T- and AgrP has a subject.

[3] The cataphoric relationship is subordinated as much to syntactical restrictions as to discursive restrictions. These restrictions will not be analyzed in this paper. Rigau (1981: § 5.2.2.) may be consulted for further information.

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